Novice teachers’ perspectives on mentoring: The case of the Estonian induction year

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ABSTRACT

This study explores Estonian novice teachers’ perspectives on relationships with mentors and experiences of mentoring and mentors’ tasks during their first year of teaching. The induction year with mentoring as one of the support structures was introduced into Estonian teacher education a few years ago. Experiences indicate that this is a valuable support, but there are areas of mentoring that need to be developed. The data are based on thematic interviews with sixteen novice teachers in the second half of their first year of teaching, i.e. the induction year. A content analysis revealed that the novice teachers experienced support for personal development and professional knowledge development, feedback, collegiality, reciprocity of the relationship, mentor availability and mutual trust as components of the mentor–mentee relationship. The study identified undeveloped potential in mentoring related to three main areas: 1) facilitation of reflection, 2) mentor training, and 3) integration of mentoring into the school community as a whole. The last area also includes matters pertaining to socialization and school leadership.

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1. Introduction

The Estonian Teachers’ Standard (Opetaja V. Teachers’ Standard, 2005) emphasizes the creation of an attitude and understanding of the teacher as a reflective practitioner and a life-long learner. The goal of facilitating life-long learning and reflection among teachers is also in line with the visions of the recent policy paper Improving the quality of teacher education (2007). This paper outlines development needs in European teacher education. The Estonian Induction Year and Mentoring Projects as responses to these mandates are means of creating much-needed support for novice teachers’ professional development. Teacher education in Estonia has for some years focused on developing support structures for novice teachers in the early stages of their career. In 2004, the induction year program was initiated in Estonia as part of European teacher education. The induction year is an attempt to meet, simultaneously, the challenges facing teacher education and the teaching profession.

In Estonia, there is a shortage of new teachers entering the profession, especially in rural areas (Statistical Yearbook, 2007). A challenge is how to increase the attractiveness of the teaching profession. It has been difficult to recruit students to teacher education (Kõrghariduse riiklik koolitustellimus, 2008). The problem is particularly noticeable among subject area teachers. Several explanations have been offered, among them lack of prestige of the teaching profession in society and low salaries. Other reasons have been sought in the way teacher education is structured. Subject area students interested in teaching begin studying pedagogy in the fourth year of their studies, that is, in the first year of Master’s studies after completing a Bachelor’s degree in a subject area. This means that prospective teachers may be “lost” due to the long wait actually to get into pedagogical studies and teacher education (Eesti Õpetajahariduse strateegia, 2008). As a consequence of the lack of new entrants into the teaching profession, the work force is ageing, and this will soon result in the retirement of those experienced teachers on a large scale. Another challenge is how to support the teacher education students throughout their studies and early career challenges as they enter the profession (Õpetajate puudus üldhariduskoolides, 2004).

The Estonian induction year is an attempt to meet these challenges. Pre-service, induction year and in-service teacher education form a unified entity including support structures that continue all the way to in-service training (Eesti Õpetajahariduse strateegia, 2008; Eisenschmidt, 2006). In order to encourage prospective
students to enter teacher education and the teaching profession, support systems can send a positive signal. Research (Rots, Aelterman, Vlerick, & Vermeulen, 2007) indicates that support structures influence the decision of teacher education graduates to enter the teaching profession. One such support is the use of mentoring during the induction year. We believe that the fact that mentoring is available to novice teachers in their induction year could send a positive signal to students considering teacher education.

In order to provide data upon which to build improvements in mentoring, this study was aimed at understanding novice teachers’ experiences of mentoring during the induction year. The results are intended to inform mentors and educational planners, to provide them with insights into novice teachers’ experiences and to allow them to explore further the boundaries of the induction year support structure and the mentor’s role. It is beyond the scope of this study to draw conclusions about the relationships between recruiting potential applicants to teacher education and providing mentoring support in the induction year. Yet, encouraged by the research of Rots et al. (2007), indicating a relationship between support structures and entry into the teaching profession, we believe that mentoring could be a means of tackling this difficult situation and making entry into teacher education more attractive by providing professional development support in the early stages of a teacher’s career. This could have an impact on novice teachers’ appreciation of their professional knowledge and contribute to a more positive public image of the profession, raising its attractiveness. Therefore, it is vital that experiences gained from mentoring are documented and used to inform policy making and practice.

2. Mentoring and the Estonian induction year

To become a teacher today, a Master's degree is required. It is estimated that between 75 and 80% of comprehensive school teachers have a university degree in pedagogy. The remaining percentage includes teachers who have lengthy teaching experience and education other than a degree in pedagogy (cf. Kõrghariduse riiklik koolitustellimus, 2008). Teacher education is provided in the form of degree studies regulated by the Framework guidelines for teacher education (2000). These framework guidelines set out general and special requirements for teacher education, induction year, i.e. the first year in service, and in-service training throughout the career. Teacher education for all school-levels consists of three parts: (1) general studies (comprising 25% of the program of study); (2) specialty studies (25% of program of study); and (3) pedagogical studies, including foundation studies in educational science, psychological and didactic studies, and practical training (50% of program of study). The general studies focus on the development of the teacher’s overall cultural, communicative, and social competencies, whereas specialty studies provide subject-related knowledge and skills based on current requirements for the profession. An important aspect is to provide the skills for combining this knowledge with an understanding of the human being and the surrounding environment and society. The foundation studies in educational science, psychological and didactic studies, and practical training aim at providing the teachers with skills to apply the content-related, didactic and psychological knowledge. This means that graduates have the knowledge and skills to organize and manage the classroom, as well as team work skills.

After the first stage in 2004, involving all novice teachers who started working in comprehensive schools, the induction year was extended to involve pre-school and vocational school teachers in 2005. The purpose of the induction year program is to support novices in becoming members of the teaching community and their adjustment to the organization, and to promote the development of their professional skills through reflection. In Estonia, the responsibility for the induction year program is shared among four stakeholders: (1) school principals, whose responsibility is to facilitate an environment that supports the novices’ professional development and to appoint mentors; (2) mentors, who work directly with the novice teachers, supporting their professional development and socialization in a school context; (3) novice teachers themselves, who are ultimately responsible for maintaining professional development; and (4) university induction year centers, where mentor training and seminars of the support program for novice teachers (10–15 novices per group) take place. The first launching of the induction year in the entire country included evaluation of the implementation model and empirical analysis. The outcomes of the evaluation enabled identification of strengths and weaknesses in the Estonian induction year model.

Supporting novice teachers’ professional and personal development, and adjustment and socialization to the school organization emerged as the most crucial objectives of mentoring (Eisenschmidt, 2006).

Research shows that the induction year of Estonian novice teachers is a period of adaptation into the school organization, and they focus on the novice teacher’s maturing with challenges in the classroom (Poom-Valickis, 2007). During the first quarter of the school year the novice teachers are occupied with questions concerning teaching, including lesson planning, using different teaching methods and assessing student learning. After the first months the focus shifts towards class management, and finally towards the pupils’ needs and their learning, implying development of knowledge structures and the maturing of pedagogical thinking. Mentors visit their mentees’ classes at least twice each academic term in order to observe and analyze the novice teacher’s work and professional growth in collaboration with the mentee. The induction year finishes with an evaluation of the novice teacher’s performance in terms of the competencies described in the teacher’s professional standard (Opetaja V. Teachers’ Standard, 2005).

Eisenschmidt’s (2006) findings support those of Furlong and Maynard (1995), according to whom the induction year is a learning process during which the novice teachers develop their teaching strategies, competencies and professional identities. The Estonian novice teachers appeared to adjust to the school during the first year in service, but their level and depth of their understanding of the school as an organization may not have been markedly high. The school environment appears to be a central factor influencing judgments concerning professional skills such as collaboration, self-analysis and professional development. School leaders in schools with a co-operative school culture value highly the induction year as a time for learning. Mentors are appointed by school principals, who generally take substantial care in considering potential mentors’ personal characteristics, participation in supervisory training, and prior experience of mentoring. The schools receive guidance material meant to support the principals in the selection of mentors. Mentors lacking formal preparation are offered training. The emphasis and actual realization of the mentoring relationship in practice depends on the school context, the attitudes towards mentoring and leadership of the school, and the personal and professional qualities of the mentor.

In Estonia, focus is on developing schools as learning organizations, and school leaders’ competence is regarded as crucial. The induction year is one opportunity to reinforce and support development towards teachers’ workplace learning and cooperation inside the school community. This is a national priority, and since 2006 a self-evaluation system that supports this goal has been implemented.
3. Mentor-supported induction

Mentoring is a means to facilitate professional development and provide emotional support to the novice members of the school community (Little, 1990; Wang & Odell, 2002). A number of studies have addressed the characteristics, skills, and competencies of mentors. Based on prior research, Harrison, Dymoke, and Pell (2006) summarise the required skills of mentors as guiding, leading, advising, and supporting; coaching, educating, and enabling; organizing and managing; and counseling. Rippon and Martin (2006) identify approachability, teaching credibility, professional knowledge, authority and motivational skills as important characteristics of the mentor. According to McNamara's (1995) study, school-based mentors were one of the main influences on novice teachers' actions in the classroom. The reasons why novice teachers regard their mentors as significant providers of support included mentor characteristics such as being encouraging and positive; providing a consistent source of help and support; being easily accessible, available and organized; and providing subject matter expertise (Harrison et al., 2006). A good mentor is someone with whom to cooperate and discuss pupils' work; a role model for the planning, organization and delivery of the teaching; a good listener, flexible, someone who enables reflection, creates opportunities, and recognises novice teacher's pressure points (Harrison et al., 2006).

Harrison et al. (2006) have identified best practices in mentoring. These include embracing challenge and risk-taking within a supportive school environment, with a systematic implementation of the induction phase and strong emphasis on professional development. In addition they propose two goals for mentoring: 1) a long-term relationship which facilitates development in terms of career aspirations and psycho-social functions, and 2) a short-term relationship which facilitates the accomplishment of particular competences and standards. In the Estonian induction year emphasis has been on the latter type of relationship with focus on the competences of the novice teacher. However, the psycho-social aspect of the support cannot be overlooked in a short-term relationship since the novice teachers' development during the first year in service appears to be a holistic process, as proposed by Poom-Valickis (2007). Schaverien and Cosgrove (1997) provide an illuminating example of a process in which the mentor supports the mentee during the experience of questioning the basis of her teaching and a growing need for concepts and theoretical knowledge. The mentee identifies the underlying principles of her teaching, and eventually articulates her own practical working theory.

Mentoring may be pursued with different types of goals and objectives in mind, and it may be approached from various perspectives. Gold (1996) identifies on the one hand a personalized approach to mentoring, where the novice teacher is encouraged to develop his or her self-efficacy and to come to terms with personal and professional needs as well as learning to address these, and on the other hand a technical and experiential approach, which focuses on technical skills and relies on an apprenticeship model of learning where the mentor is considered the key person. Wang and Odell (2002) define the approaches in terms of a humanistic, situated apprenticeship and a critical constructivist approach. Each, with its roots in major conceptions of learning, considers the goals of mentoring, the role of mentors, mentors' expertise and mentor training (Wang & Odell, 2002). The humanistic perspective focuses on helping novices to overcome challenges on a more personal level, and to feel comfortable in the teaching profession. Mentoring with a situated apprentice perspective emphasizes the adjustment to the school culture and the prevailing norms of teaching, and supports the development of techniques and skills necessary in a particular context. The goal of mentoring in the critical constructivist perspective is to transform teaching by engaging novice teachers and mentors in collaborative inquiry with equal participation.

Also Orland-Barak and Klein (2005) identify three approaches to mentoring: a therapeutic, an apprenticeship, and a reflective approach. In the therapeutic approach emphasis is on personal growth, which can be facilitated through a common understanding of the mentee's experiences. The apprenticeship or instructional approach regards mentoring as a modelling of various behaviors to be developed by the mentee. The mentor's role is primarily instructive and prescriptive. The reflective approach is characterized by an inter-subjective process, in which the asymmetrical relationship between the mentor and the mentee is acknowledged, but is harnessed to facilitate dialogue and development on multiple levels. Mentors tend to move from a more prescriptive approach of telling, coaching, and guiding towards a more reflecting approach (Harrison, Lawson, & Wortley, 2005), which may be indicative of a conscious shift based on scaffolding. Sometime tensions and conflicts between a mentor's perception of his or her mentoring and the actual realization of the mentoring in practice are inevitable. Mentors' representations of mentoring convey a more collaborative and democratic view than the prescriptive and controlling forms exhibited in practice (Orland-Barak & Klein, 2005).

Norman and Feiman-Nemser (2005) distinguish between “educative mentoring”, technical advice and emotional support as forms of support for individualized professional development. In the educative approach mentoring addresses the varying and changing needs of novice teachers while encouraging the mentees to go beyond the mere accumulation of teaching methods and practical hints in order to reflect on the foundations of their own pedagogical thinking and how that affects their teaching and their pupils' learning. Exploring values, principles and one's own experience can help the novice to create his or her working theory, which informs the teacher in daily work. The meanings one attaches to the teacher's work are influenced by the individual's ability to identify the core task and to explore the underlying values and principles that underpin the work.

In addition to a time of intensive personal and professional competence development, the novice teachers' induction year is a process of adjustment and socialization into the profession, the organization and the school culture (Lacey, 1987). Newcomers may function as catalysts for scrutiny of the current state of the school community. During the induction year the novice teacher forms collegial relationships, acquires membership in the teaching profession, consolidates knowledge, acquires skills, and accepts or rejects the norms and values of the school. Socialization takes place on two levels simultaneously: (1) socialization into the organization (workplace), and (2) socialization into the profession. These processes can be influenced by the behaviors, opinions and attitudes of more experienced teachers, but also the newcomer with a fresh perspective may help to raise awareness and question the status quo. The mentor's task is to facilitate the novice teacher's socialization into the existing school culture and simultaneously to encourage the novice to question existing practice (Achinstein & Athanases, 2005). Similarly, McNamara proposes that while teacher education needs to be rooted in practice it must also extend and transcend current conceptions of what is considered good practice. The mentor can function as a bridge between the novice teacher and the organization, facilitating the novice teacher's socialization into the community, but ultimately the roles mentors adopt depend much on school culture (Stokking, Leenders, Jong, & Tartwijk, 2003).

In our study, we have mainly utilized Orland-Barak and Klein's (2005) approaches to mentoring described above as an analytical...
tool for understanding the novice teachers' experiences of the approaches taken by mentors in the Estonian induction year context.

4. Method

The aim of the study was to analyze novice teachers' experiences of mentoring and their mentors as a support during the induction year. Mentoring in the Estonian induction year has been in place for 4.5 years, and at this point feedback on the experiences of novice teachers is important for further development of the support structure. A qualitative approach was chosen in order to interpret mentoring experiences in terms of the meanings the novice teachers themselves bring to it (cf. Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) instead of imposing pre-established program criteria. The meanings each novice teacher gave to the different aspects of mentoring were personal and interwoven into the contexts in which they were experienced. In investigating the novice teachers' experiences our aim was broader than just assessing a set of program criteria. The approach we utilized allowed us to go beyond mere program criteria and identify unexpected outcomes.

The study utilizes a thematic, semi-structured interview with volunteering novice teachers. The sixteen novice teachers interviewed, all female, were in their first year of work as full-time teachers in 2004–2005 at different school-levels. Interviews took place between February and April in the induction year. The aim was not to generalize, but to identify the diverse range of mentoring experiences of novice teachers. The main criterion for sampling was to interview as diverse a group as possible. The heads of the university support program were asked to provide the names of novice teachers who, according to their intuitive assessment, varied in confidence and attitudes towards their professional development. This was simply used as a guideline for diversity for the heads to go by when identifying candidates for the interviews. This kind of recruitment strategy may potentially lead to over-representation of respondents with positive experiences. In order to avoid such a phenomenon, it was necessary to emphasize that diversity in respondent characteristics as well as experiences was desired. From a pool of names provided by the heads, novice teachers representing different school-levels (primary school, basic school, and gymnasium), teacher education institutions (Tallinn University and Tartu University), areas of specialization (subject teachers and primary school teachers), and geographical locations (rural areas and cities) were approached. The desirable sample size was set at 15–20. In order to involve teachers representing as many combinations of the background variables as possible, approximately sixteen teachers would need to be interviewed. Sixteen potential candidates were thus approached with an interview request, and all sixteen agreed to participate. An overview of the interviewees is presented in Table 1. The option of additional data collection provided the opportunity to complement the data, but the reappearance of certain themes indicated that a saturation point had been achieved.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to increase the likelihood of valid and reliable interpretation of the data (cf. Kvale, 1996). The interviews, all made by the second author, lasted approximately sixteen teachers would need to be interviewed. Sixteen

The data consisted of the novice teachers' interviews, addressing their perception of the mentor and their relationship with the mentor, the topics discussed with the mentor, and the type and adequacy of the support received from the mentor. The novices were asked to rely on their own experiences from their relationship with a mentor in their responses. An inductive content analytical procedure was applied in order to interpret the data to produce meaning. The categories of the meanings given to the novice–mentor relationship by the novice teachers themselves. In content analysis, the researcher's intention is to describe phenomena in a condensed and general form by producing categories or concepts that describe the phenomena (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Weber, 1985). Content analysis is particularly suitable for analyzing unstructured, qualitative data, such as diaries, narratives, and reports. The procedures of content analysis were deemed appropriate as the data were elicited through broad interview questions, rendering the information fairly unstructured. The questions were general in nature in order not to steer the responses. The interviews contained much information about the novice teachers' experiences of the induction year, but for the purpose of this article, sequences related to experiences of the mentor or mentoring were chosen for interpretation. The main questions presented to the novice teachers were: Who is a mentor in your opinion? What are the roles/tasks/characteristics of a mentor? What kind of help do you expect? What kind of support did you get from the mentor? Was the support you received adequate? Interviewees were encouraged to elaborate on each question, and help questions were used to facilitate a dialogical situation. The units of analysis consisted of interview excerpts that contained references to mentoring and appeared to form a coherent thought or idea. The expressions were then abbreviated into condensed descriptions, which were grouped together according to thematic un-predefined categories. Once formed, the categories were related to the approaches to mentoring identified by Orland-Barak and Klein (2005).

The second author made the initial data analysis by selecting sequences from the interviews describing the novices' experiences of mentoring. The first author identified themes in these extracts, and formed categories based on what appeared to be the core issues (i.e., provision of feedback, reciprocity, availability and mutual trust etc.) These were verified by the second author to assure the reliability of interpretations (cf. Kvale, 1996). For those categorizations on which the authors disagreed, negotiation was pursued until consensus was reached. The first author, who made the initial categorization participated neither in recruiting participants nor in interviewing. She had no contact with the participants at any stage before, during or after the research. In this way the first author had only the interview data to rely on, which may serve to provide, if not an objective, at least an external perspective on the data.
The interviews evolved around the themes of mentor characteristics, nature of the mentoring relationship and interaction, and common problems or questions in which the mentors’ advice was sought. From these themes, the following five categories of support emerged (number of times brought up in the interviews within parenthesis): personal development and professional knowledge support (20), feedback (9), collegiality (7), availability and trust (7), and reciprocity (7). In ten cases out of sixteen the novice teachers described the mentoring relationship mainly as positively supportive. Five novice teachers reported that the relationship was not sufficiently supportive. According to these novice teachers, what they lacked most of all was feedback and support in the daily practice of teaching. One of the teachers, however, could be characterized as a lone rider neither seeking help nor expecting much support from others. In one case the mentor was experienced as overbearing.

5.1. Personal development and professional knowledge support

The personal development aspect of the mentoring relationship surfaced in diverse ways in the novice teachers’ interviews. Mentoring could be seen primarily as support for personal development, even separated from the professional knowledge aspect. Triin’s is one example of a mentoring relationship with a therapeutic approach in terms of Orland-Barak and Klein (2005). Triin says:

My mentor is a very supportive person. She gives me strength and inspiration. She has helped me to grow as a person. That was the most important thing for me. Actually it was just encouragement. We didn’t talk about teaching.

The statement that she did not talk about teaching with her mentor is likely to refer to the professional knowledge aspect of teaching not being an issue in her mentoring relationship. It appears that Triin had not yet incorporated reflection and personal development as aspects of teaching, but merely sees them as something related to personal development. Another example of a therapeutic mentoring relationship is the case of Krista and her mentor. Krista expressed the necessity of connecting on an emotional level, but saw simultaneously the mentor’s role as an open one. She was able to find other resources for working through issues of professional knowledge development and daily work in the classroom. No doubt, the additional resources will have expanded the perspectives available to her in working out her own solutions to various challenges. Simultaneously she appears to have been missing an apprenticeship approach in the mentoring relationship.

She [the mentor] gave me support in everything. The only thing I missed was the support in class teacher activities. I didn’t know how to prevent difficult situations. … At the beginning of the school year you don’t know which person is the one to turn to for help, but that is the most important time to ask questions about subjects and teaching. In my opinion, the mentor’s role isn’t just to provide moral support. One day I found a better person for that, and I think it is normal to use other people’s support too, psychologists’ or teacher colleagues’. This person has to be on the same emotional level as you are. One of the primary school teachers, Meriliin, described her mentor as a “second mother”. The relationship between the novice teacher and the mentor appears as a very close one. While striving for emotional connection and maintaining a mentoring relationship that could perhaps be characterized as a therapeutic one, it is necessary to maintain focus on professional development as well, including professional knowledge acquisition and socialization into the school context. Providing sufficient support on all levels while helping the novice teacher to maintain and increase her independence is a delicate balance. There may of course be a risk of a “motherly” relationship being overbearing. At the same time it should be noted that both Meriliin and her mentor were primary school teachers mostly teaching younger children, and thus the mentor may have modeled in the mentoring relationship the kind of teacher role that she exhibited when teaching her young pupils.

In another teacher, Softi’s, interview the importance surfaced of the mentor having the ability to reflect upon his or her own experiences during the early career as a means of finding a common platform for relating to and connecting with the mentee. Softi acknowledges the asymmetrical nature of the mentor–mentee relationship, and points out that “the mentor is a person who hasn’t forgotten that time when she needed a mentor herself”. Softi’s case conveys the image of a novice teacher looking for a mentoring relationship based on a reflective and a therapeutic approach (cf. Orland-Barak & Klein, 2005), but who does not experience the relationship developing to its full potential in terms of an “educative” relationship. Softi’s development appears to depend at least as much on her ability to regulate her learning as her mentors’ actual support. The mentor makes herself available, but does not persuasively offer guidance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>School-levels primary, basic and gymnasium</th>
<th>Teacher education institutions:</th>
<th>Area of specialisation:</th>
<th>Geographical location:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Triin</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>TU</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Krista</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>TLU</td>
<td>Primary school teacher (all subjects)</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Meriliin</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>TU</td>
<td>Primary school teacher</td>
<td>City</td>
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<td>4 Soft</td>
<td>Gymnasium</td>
<td>TU</td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>City</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Lotte</td>
<td>Gymnasium</td>
<td>TU</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Tiina</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>TLU</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Outra</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>TLU</td>
<td>Primary school teacher</td>
<td>Rural</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 Heli</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>TU</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>City</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 Mari</td>
<td>Gymnasium</td>
<td>TU</td>
<td>Primary school teacher</td>
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<td>10 Linda</td>
<td>Primary</td>
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<td>Primary school teacher</td>
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<td>11 Hanna</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>TLU</td>
<td>Primary school teacher</td>
<td>City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Nina</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>TLU</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Rural</td>
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<td>13 Maie</td>
<td>Gymnasium</td>
<td>TU</td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>City</td>
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<td>14 Kertu</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>TLU</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Rural</td>
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<tr>
<td>15 Kadri</td>
<td>Gymnasium</td>
<td>TLU</td>
<td>Gymnastics</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Reili</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>TU</td>
<td>Primary school teacher</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The need for professional development support from a more experienced colleague may be stronger at the beginning, with a shift in focus as competence is gained. An apprenticeship or instructional approach to mentoring (cf. Orland-Barak & Klein, 2005) may be what is needed in order to support positive socialization and to establish a good model for professional work. Kadri was supported by an instructional approach at the very beginning of her induction year:

I went to school before the school year started and I met my mentor. She explained to me what I should do.

Eventually, the novice teacher has to begin to rely on her own judgment instead of expecting directive instructions from the mentor. Too much direction could have detrimental effects on the novice’s developing identity as a teacher (Rippon & Martin, 2006). The role of the mentor needs to be attuned to the actual needs of the mentee.

A different experience is that of Lotte, who experienced the mentoring relationship through its felt absence in her daily work at a city gymnasium. On the one hand, this novice teacher appears not to have been ready yet for the degree of independence that her mentor appeared to expect from her. On the other hand, the mentor clearly did not pay attention to Lotte’s need for feedback and support.

Mentor? That is what I lack most! ... Of course my mentor helps me if I ask her. But she doesn’t explain things to me. It is like “go and find out for yourself”. I would like to have more encouragement and moral support.

This quotation may also be interpreted as an example of different levels of sophistication in reflection and reasoning of the mentor and the mentee. Bullough, Young, Hall, Draper, and Smith (2008) suggest that difficulties arise when mentees display more sophisticated reasoning than the mentor. The mentee may welcome a reciprocal relationship and a reflective approach, while the mentor adopts a prescriptive approach, or remains indifferent, as appears to have been the case with Lotte’s mentor. The relationship may also include ambiguous experiences, as is demonstrated in the following quote. Tiina experienced her mentor as supportive, even overbearing at times, but the support did not seem to match the real needs of the novice. Yet the mentor was able to facilitate reflection in the novice teacher. For this mentoring relationship to develop to its full potential, a more educative approach (cf. Norman & Feiman-Nemser, 2005) and understanding of the novice’s needs would have been necessary.

My mentor makes me think, provides me with evaluation, and asks questions. Sometimes she forces me to think how I could have done things differently ... One thing that disturbed me was the excessive support she gave me in my classroom. When there was a problem she just got up and asserted herself. I couldn’t do anything. Sometimes my mentor took over the class and started to give the lesson on her own.

Despite the reflective components (“My mentor makes me think”, and “asks questions”), this relationship clearly exhibits signs of prescriptive mentoring, i.e. an instructional approach in the terms of Orland-Barak and Klein (2005). Rippon and Martin (2006) point out that if support structures are on the one hand removed too quickly the novice teacher may be reluctant to ask for help, as this could be seen as a sign of weakness. If, on the other hand, the support continues indefinitely, as in the case quoted above, it may have a detrimental effect on the novice teacher, who may interpret the excessive support as a lack of recognition of professional growth. In general, the novices wished for support in developing their own understandings. Against such expectations it can be a frustrating experience if not enough room is allowed to let the novice arrive at his or her own interpretations and develop his or her own understanding about the foundations and value basis of teaching.

5.2. Provision of feedback

The importance of positive reinforcement is demonstrated by the urgency with which positive feedback from the mentor, even when limited in scope, was brought up in the novice teachers’ interviews, as illustrated in the quotes from the two primary school teachers Auli and Heli:

She makes suggestions after visiting my lessons ... She gives me advice on methodology. Mostly I get positive feedback. My mentor has also said that she has learnt a lot from me too. She values my optimism and cheerfulness and is very pleased with me.

She said I’m very accurate and always on time.

...It is like “go and find out for yourself”. I would like to have more encouragement and moral support.

The feedback may or may not have been very significant or important in terms of the novices’ personal or professional development, yet small, positive remarks appeared to have been anchors for a developing teacher identity. An assurance that some things were done right may have had a comforting effect in the midst of the day-to-day encounters in the classroom. Particularly the first quote from Auli exhibits a sense of reciprocity, which provides a fruitful ground for a reflective approach in mentoring. It is essential that the dialogue following the mentor’s visits to Auli’s class evolved into reflection on what kind of views about teaching and learning the methods suggested by the mentor were based upon and how these may have fit in with the mentee’s personal understanding of teaching and learning. Without such discussion, there is risk of the methods turning into a “bag of tricks” without a real vision of how they are expected to facilitate the pupils’ learning.

The following quote from Sofi illustrates a case in which the mentor did not take an active role in providing feedback, but provided targeted support when specific questions were raised by the novice teacher. This works for self-regulating individuals, but may not be sufficient for individuals, such as Meriilli (second quote), who need more direction or reinforcement.

I haven’t received any direct feedback. I got very specific answers to very specific questions.

I would like her to visit my lessons more often and analyze my teaching skills.

Meriilli appears to seek an instructional approach in her mentoring relationship. She looks to her mentor for direction and expects her mentor to analyze her teaching, and does not realize that in order for her to develop her teaching, she needs to analyze and reflect upon her practice and behavior herself. Essentially, she needs to arrive at the understanding that her mentor can only help her in analyzing her teaching, but she must herself commit to reflective practice in order to develop as a professional. In contrast, Tiina, having a more reflective approach, begins to analyze the situation that has prompted critical feedback.

She [the mentor] gives me both sides – both positive and negative things. Even if I feel bad afterwards I start to think about the lessons and analyze the problem.

It is vital that mentors realize the necessity of providing not just feedback, but also a model for how to provide and receive critical feedback constructively.
5.3. Teacher collegiality

The novice teachers described experiences of how the mentor facilitated their socialization into the school community by introducing them to colleagues and talking about the newcomers in a positive tone in discussions with colleagues. The sharing of contextual knowledge, such as rules and school-specific practices, was mentioned as an important form of support. For instance, Maie, a gymnasium mathematics teacher, appreciated the mentor’s effort to establish a place for her in the school community. The appreciation by others of her as someone contributing with valuable work in the school was vital for her as a novice developing a teacher identity:

She [the mentor] helped me to fit in the teacher community and introduced me to other colleagues … she tries to make other people realize my worth.

The feelings of being valued as a colleague and appreciated as a professional are important in shaping the novice teacher’s identity and view of themselves as part of a community. The mentor may even have been the main and perhaps the only connection which the novice teacher had in the community, as the quotes from Mari and Heli indicate, and this could negatively influence their views of themselves as members of a community of teachers:

I like to work on my own, and I don’t ask questions very often. If I do I will get support. Actually, sometimes I get nothing. One of the supporters is my mentor.

I don’t have close relationships with my colleagues. I get support only from my mentor.

The limited number of collegial relationships may or may not have been a voluntary choice. In either case, more attention should be paid to the mentor’s role as a supporter of the novice teacher’s socialization into the school community as a whole. One aspect of the mentor’s tasks is to support novice teachers’ adaptation to the school as an organization (cf. Poom-Valickis, 2007). In order to fulfill this aspect of the task, the mentor needs to adopt a holistic approach, taking into consideration the wider school context in which the novice functions. Thus, mentors could to a greater extent use different strategies to support the novices’ socialization into the school context. One strategy could be to bring the novice teachers’ innovative ideas to the teachers’ attention, as in the case of Kertu, a basic school teacher in a rural area:

My mentor tried to make other people see my worth and value. When she heard that I had some good ideas she started a discussion in the teachers’ room.

Newcomers bring fresh perspectives and even innovative ideas to the school context. These could be utilized as valuable input for school development.

5.4. Mentor availability and mutual trust

The mentor was often perceived as someone who is available and who can be trusted with various questions and concerns. The experiences of Heli, Auli, and Linda, as the following quotes imply, are positive and encouraging ones. The first quote conveys a sense of on-going dialogue and a reflective approach to mentoring.

If I have any questions I can always turn to her [the mentor].

The interviews of primary school teachers Heli and Auli are the ones which most clearly display the idea of a long-term relationship in the terms of Harrison et al. (2006). The mentoring relationships appear to facilitate development in terms of career aspirations and psycho-social functions, in addition to the accomplishment of particular competences and training standards.

Experiences in sharp contrast are loneliness and isolation. One of the city-school teachers, Hanna, felt left alone to deal with the difficulties she experiences with her class. She felt that both her mentor and the community of colleagues had abandoned her to deal alone with the challenges. In the quote below she identifies shortcomings in her performance, and describes the lack of support and understanding from her mentor:

My mentor keeps telling me that I was too kind and gentle. But how can you be different when nobody has told you how to act in front of the class?! … When she visited my lessons everything was fine. The children even behaved. She couldn’t have seen the problems I had. They say that eventually you have to be on your own. I needed help. Nobody told me how to make rules on the first day of September.

The importance of sharing professional knowledge and accepting newcomers into the community becomes all the more emphasized in situations such as the one described above. The socialization process is important as it involves the transfer of tacit knowledge including norms and values.

Another teacher, Reili, described how her mentor shared her experiences, but refrained from providing direct feedback. This may be a way to support reflection without imposing the mentor’s views. However, the balance between a “gentle push” and too much or too little direction is a delicate one. Mentoring requires good interpersonal skills and empathic ability. The following quotation shows how Tiina received clear instructions from the beginning concerning the expectations of the mentor. This is likely to have helped clear away misunderstanding at the beginning, but it appears that expectations and values were not open for discussion and negotiation, as they should be in a reciprocal relationship:

My mentor told me her expectations and the norms at the very beginning. My mentor has a very strong personality, and there were times when I felt that she tried to push through her own opinions. Usually we discussed those things but still I felt pressure from her side.

Here the mentor expects her mentee to absorb and replicate the knowledge she as a mentor passes to her. In this case the apprenticeship approach does not include the opportunity of a mutual learning process. The pedagogical approach appears to be in sharp contrast with educative mentoring (Norman & Feiman-Nemser, 2005) in which the mentor encourages the mentee to reflect on his or her teaching approach.

5.5. Reciprocity

Reciprocity could take the form of conveying emotions and attitudes, as in Nina’s case:

We have intense cooperation. My mentor said that she has learnt a lot from me too. Optimism and happiness. I’ve tried to follow her advice and pay attention to the things that she has pointed out.

5.5.1. Opportunities for novices to contribute

Or it could take the form of sharing materials or advice. The actual nature of the sharing, despite a relationship described in positive terms, was not always evident, as in the case of Linda:
There can be no better person for that job. She [the mentor] is very supportive... She shares materials with me and gives really useful advice.

The novice teachers appreciated the sharing of viewpoints and working with the mentor on tasks directly related to classroom practice. The sharing of materials and practical hints may be useful for the novice teacher, but if these are not open for discussion they are shared merely as a reproductive practice and we can scarcely talk about reciprocity. One of the most concrete descriptions of a reciprocal relationship came from Auli. The collaboration included planning of teaching and working together with the pupils' parents.

We have very close cooperation. One particularly good thing is that we (the novice and the mentor) both have classes for beginners. Therefore, we have the same topics, the same subjects and the same work plans. We have planned many events, parent meetings, etc., together.

The fact that this mentor-mentee pair teaches the same level pupils appears to help both parties to take full advantage of mentoring. It allows both parties to focus their cooperation on tasks that they concretely benefit from. Pairing mentors and mentees according to the grade level taught is not always possible in practice, but it may be an ideal situation worth striving for. This goal gains further support when we consider Auli's entire interview. Overall, among the novice teachers, Auli appears to be the teacher exhibiting the most reflective relationship with her mentor. The spirit of working things out together runs throughout the interview, not only with regard to solving problems as they arise but also as a mutual agreement and a way of working together.

6. Discussion

Tasks identified for mentoring in the Estonian induction year are supporting school development and the novice teachers' adjustment to the school as an organization; observing and supporting the professional development of the novice teacher; providing feedback; and supporting novice teachers' self-analysis and reflection (Eisenschmidt, 2006; Poom-Vallick, 2007). Similar topics emerged in the interviews with novice teachers in this study. The agreement between the tasks of the mentor and the novice teachers' experiences indicates that the focus in mentoring generally is on core issues, and that the guidelines outlined in the induction year program are realized in practice. Nevertheless, development needs related to three main areas were identified: 1) facilitation of reflection, 2) mentor training, and 3) mentoring in the school community as a whole. The last area includes matters pertaining to socialization and school leadership.

Self-evaluation and reflection as conscious elements in the mentoring relationship surfaced in rare cases. The Estonian Teachers' Standard (Õpetajate V. Teachers' Standard, 2005) emphasizes the need for supporting teachers as reflective practitioners and life-long learners. A constant dialogue between one's interpretations of previous and current experiences is necessary in order to analyze the underpinnings of one's behavior and thinking (McAlpine, 1993; McAlpine & Weston, 2000) and is an essential component of professional growth. The mentor, if taking an educative approach, is in a key role in raising novice teachers' awareness of the importance of reflection as conscious and intentional activity. What could be the reasons for the difficulties in fostering reflective thinking in novice teachers? The data showed that some mentors appeared to adopt an instructive approach to mentoring, which may not encourage reflection and allow enough room for the novice teacher to develop his or her practical theory and approach to teaching and learning. This again is an essential part of professional knowledge development. Without addressing the competence aspect of a teacher's professionalism, personal and socialization support are not sufficient to facilitate development in a holistic way. Future teachers need to become expert learners themselves and be able to conceptualize how expertise is developed. If teachers are not able to understand how they learn and make use of their knowledge, they are unlikely to be able truly to support the learning of their pupils (Poulou, 2005). Thus, mentoring should support the novice teachers' development both as teachers and learners.

In mentor preparation focus needs to be directed towards developing reflection skills and knowledge about teachers' professional development. It is vital that mentors analyze their own work, question their practices, and develop themselves professionally. As demonstrated by the data, mentors adopting a consistently reflective approach in terms of Orland-Barak and Klein (2005) were not too common, which leaves hopes for improvement. Therefore, to encourage educative mentoring (cf. Norman & Feiman-Nemser, 2005), teacher education institutions responsible for mentor training need to support prospective mentors in developing a holistic view of mentoring. Considering the demands on mentors, teacher education programs may benefit from including a leadership component in their curricula.

The third area in need of development is related to mentoring as an activity concerning the school community as a whole. The mentor could be in a position to exercise leadership in terms of creating and maintaining a learning community. The induction year program and mentoring provide schools with the opportunity to scrutinize their culture. First, does it welcome newcomers? There were cases in which the adjustment appeared to be merely an adaptive process without opportunities for critical analysis of existing ideologies, principles, models, and practices. Mentors could clearly have an important role in facilitating the novice's socialization and his or her becoming a fully fledged member of the community. Second, does the school culture embrace new perspectives and ideas? Mentoring and support to novice teachers' professional development depends on school culture. Is the community open to critical analysis, reflective practice, and learning? A recent survey of the Estonian Induction program confirms that perceived mentor support correlates with collegial support. Mentoring appears to be more efficient in schools where the whole organization supports the novice (Eisenschmidt, Poom-Vallick, & Oder, 2008). Bullough et al. (2008) point out that unless institutions commit to mentoring, it will remain as uncritical support, materials and practical hints, without either the mentor or the mentee questioning the underlying principles of their teaching and their expectations on what kind of learning they hope to facilitate in their students. Without reflective practice there is a risk of acclimatisation and contribution to the support of prevailing routines without questioning existing ideology (Franke & Dahlgren, 1996). The fact that some teachers felt that the mentor was their only contact, or one of few contacts with colleagues at the school indicates that the schools may not have a particularly collaborative culture, and teachers are left alone to deal with challenges. Attention needs to be directed towards school leaders as it is in their interest to promote a collaborative culture in which knowledge is shared and developed together.

Mentoring as a school-based professional learning approach for novice teachers could even be an essential part of leadership education.

Uncited reference

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