Dialogical Mentoring in the Supervising of Student Teachers´ Practice

Sirpa Perunka
Oulu University of Applied Sciences, Finland

Raija Erkkilä
Oulu University of Applied Sciences, Finland

Abstract

Although there are different views concerning the roles and responsibilities of mentor teachers, the process of mentoring is generally understood to be complex and emotionally demanding. At the same time, mentoring has reported to be rewarding for both mentors and mentees. The starting point to present study was to understand this special relationship between a student teacher and more experienced teacher.

The present study explores dialogical mentoring in Finnish vocational teacher education. The aim of the research is to investigate the supervising relationship between a mentor and mentee during teaching practice. The empirical data was collected from mentors and mentees during teaching practice period. According to the results a successful mentoring relationship benefits both the educational institutions, mentors and mentees as well. There were also found meanings, which were recognized as the features of dialogicality and empowerment. Dialogical mentoring is a process in which both novice and experienced teachers learn something new. Empowerment emerged at two levels: both at individual level and school community level. The results have encouraged us to develop mentoring during teaching practice towards more dialogicality and pay attention to mentor education.

1. Introduction

The present study on mentoring started in 2009 and it examines mentoring in the School of Vocational Teacher Education, in Oulu (in Finland). Mentor means a supervisor, who is supporting a mentee during his or her teaching practice. Mentors´ conceptions of their tasks have been described with various models in different research reports. These models share the idea of a mentee´s growth towards an independent professional person. [1, 2] The conceptions differ from each other, for instance regarding the amount of criticism which the mentors are expected to give concerning either the present theories or practices.

Traditionally guidance in teacher training has been seen as the situation where the experienced teacher supervises the beginning teacher. The main goal is to support the growth of the student teacher into an autonomous person.

In recent studies on mentoring new perspectives have been sought to show the interpersonal communication between the mentor and the one being mentored. An interesting view is equity, which is important in a dialogical relationship. In a dialogical relationship neither owns the more competent view of reality. In the next chapter, we will examine more closely the characteristics of dialogical mentor relationship.

2. Perspectives to mentoring

In the research literature there are various terms denoting a mentoring process in the field of teacher education [3, 4]. According to Hennissen et al. [5] there can been seen a change in the role of a mentor during the 1990s. In the seventies and eighties, supervising teachers focused mainly on the socialization of prospective teachers. Later mentoring gradually came also to include the encouragement of new teachers to grow professionally through reflection on their practices [6].

Mentoring has been defined as a nurturing process in which a skilled or more experienced person counsels a less skilled or a less experienced person. The purpose is to promote a mentee´s professional or personal development. Sometimes the mentor may even have a formal evaluative role [7] The conception of mentoring is in a constant change process. The core idea of mentoring, however, is connected to a professional supportive relation.

The most traditional conception of mentoring is the so called novice-expert model which emphasizes teaching, the transference of regulations and normative practices, modelling and repetition. The question is of the socialization of a mentee and, when the teachers are concerned, the socialization into the practices of a certain school or institution [6, 8].

Wang and Odell [4] identified three perspectives in relation to mentoring; these include the situated apprentice approach; the humanistic approach and the critical constructivist approach. According to Brown et al. [9], the situated apprentice perspective assumes that all knowledge is contextualized and that it grows out of the context where it is used. In practice, mentor teachers help novice teachers to develop practical knowledge including teaching techniques and skills.

The humanistic perspective focuses on the development of a learner´s self-esteem and confidence in learning through a counseling process. In practice, a mentor teacher assumes the role of a counselor who helps novices identify and resolve personal conflicts, redefine their needs as a teacher and feel confident about teaching [4].

The critical constructivist approach offers both partners a possibility to produce new knowledge. The goal is to criticise existing knowledge, structures, and the culture of teaching. Learning and development are mutual [4]. However this approach has been criticised on the grounds that it is the mentor who is regarded as a change agent. It is the mentor who asks critical questions to develop the prevailing knowledge and practices. [10]

One of the most interesting conceptions depicting mentoring is the dialogical approach (see figure 1).
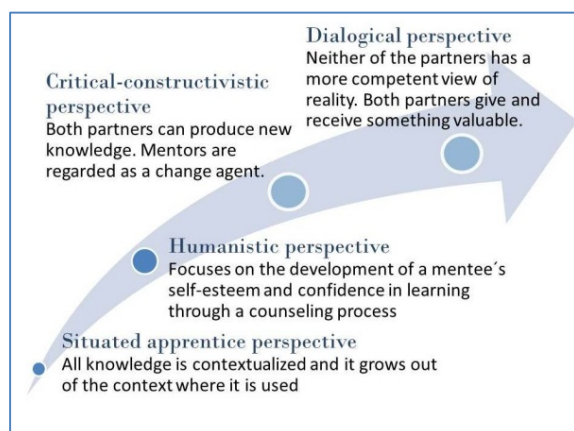

Figure 1. Perspectives to mentoring

In a dialogical relationship, equity is central. The dialogical approach refers to the fact that the partners both give something valuable and receive something valuable as well. Mentoring is professional dialogue in which both novice and experienced teachers learn something new and construct common understanding [10].

We can ask if a dialogical mentoring relationship can be fully equal. A mentor must have such kind of personal capital as the mentee lacks or the relationship loses its importance, or the question is of something else but a professional developmental relationship. In an equal dialogue there can be discerned various levels according to the prevailing human conception, epistemology and juridico-ethical status.

In the levels of existential equity the basis is the humanistic conception of people according to which a mentor and mentee are equal in their shared human value and existence. They both have equally valuable lives, which we as researchers underline.

Epistemological equity refers to the capital of knowledge and skills. In a mentoring relationship one of the two has more knowledge and competence than the other. The juridico-ethical equity, again, refers to the juridical duties, rights and responsibilities connected to the mentoring relationship and the field of activity. [10] In the present study a mentor has juridico-ethical responsibilities, because of his or her official status at school.

An equal relationship, aiming at a true dialogue is with good reason important in the present study of teaching practice, since the student teachers are well-educated adults with work experience. They actually aim at second or even third careers. Vocational student teachers have acquired vocational or professional identities in their jobs. They have deep knowledge of their respective fields and have composed masters´ and, in some cases, doctors´ theses. [11] So, the student teachers, like their mentors, are substance specialists in their fields of science. In this respect we can suppose that the mentors and mentees are in a symmetric relation to each other.

Mentors are qualified teachers with experiences of teaching from many years. This is how they have gained their competencies in pedagogy. In this respect we suppose that the mentors and mentees are in an asymmetric relation to each other.

3. The present study

3.1. Research aim and research question

The aim of the research was to investigate the supervising relationship between a mentor and a mentee during teaching practice. This was examined through the following research questions:

- How do mentors experience the supervising relationship?
- How do mentees experience the supervising relationship?

3.2. The context of the study

The study was designed and carried out in Finland, in the University of Applied Sciences, in the School of Vocational Teacher Education in Oulu. The unit offers the teacher´s pedagogical studies of 60 ECTS. The school grants diplomas for teachers to work in vocational institutes, universities of applied

sciences, adult education centres, liberal adult education units and upper secondary schools, as well as for subject teachers in comprehensive and senior secondary schools. A general entrance requirement for the program is the Master´s degree or the highest vocational degree in the majoring subject and a three-year work experience in the respective field.

The curriculum is based upon the concept of a vocational teacher's work and its development and on the professional skills of a teacher. The objective of the curriculum, both in content and form, is to promote the development of a teacher as an expert in pedagogy. Because of vocational student teachers´ educational background and experience in work life they are supposed to have critical thinking skills, autonomy, inquiry and problem solving competencies in their fields of expertise. [11]

Today, the professional skills of a teacher require expertise in many areas so that she or he can act as a pedagogical expert. The core areas include Pedagogic know-how; Know-how of work communities; Know-how in work life, and Know-how in research, development and innovations.

These areas of expertise in pedagogy are combined in the praxis which is the application of what is learnt as well as the development of new ideas during teaching practice. In the school of vocational teacher education the comprehensiveness of teaching practice is 11 ECTS. The practice includes observing teaching processes and student groups (about four days) and a planned sequence of lessons (at least 20 hours) supervised by a mentor who also gives feedback together with the supervisor from the school of vocational teacher education unit.

3.3. Data gathering and analyses

In this study a mentor has been chosen from among the teachers of the institution involved to support the practicing student teacher. Thus the mentor works as a full time teacher. She or he will give a certain number of his/her lessons or other teaching to be carried out by the student teacher.

The student teacher, mentee, is responsible for the unit of lessons agreed, but the mentor teacher supports him/her in planning, realization and student evaluation. The official role of the mentor is to assist the mentee in interpreting students´ behavior and to help him/her to discover how to promote and guide the students´ learning processes.

The research data was collected in two separate research projects, but they were analyzed as one entity of material. The first data set was collected using open-ended interviews, lasting from 45 minutes to over one hour long, with 17 mentors in different vocational institutes. The aim was to explore mentors' views about their mentoring activities and the supervision of teaching practice. The interviews were not strictly structured, but they proceeded within the central theme freely according to the thinking processes of the interviewees. Mentors were asked to consider their views about mentoring as a process; the manner in which they mentor teaching practice; what they consider to be the core elements of mentoring and what does the process say about mentors and student teacher involvement. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The second data set were reflective essays of ten student teachers. After the student teachers had finished their teaching practice they were asked to reflect on their experiences on essays. They were allowed to write freely about the issues that they felt had promoted their learning during teaching practice.

Combining these two different data we wanted to deepen the interpretation of the dialogicality concerning the mentoring relationship. The analysis of the data was following: 1. Both researchers analysed own data from the point of view of mentoring experience. 2. After the first step, the researchers investigated and discussed the emerging meanings. 3. The data was subjected to cross analysis by both researchers from which common themes were discerned from the data.

4. Results

The aim of the research was to investigate the supervising relationship between a mentor and a mentee during teaching practice. In the analysis we found two phenomena, which are significant in depicting the relationship between mentor and mentee. The first phenomena is dialogicality. We will discuss how the nature of dialogicality emerged in our data and see what mentors and mentees tell about equity, which we defined to be one of the key elements in dialogicality. Secondly, we will rise up, how the feeling of empowerment is connected to dialogicality.

4.1. Dialogicality and equity

In data analysis it came out clearly that the mentoring process was experienced rewarding. We examined more closely a group of meanings which regard mentoring as an especially positive experience. Both the mentors and mentees emphasized in their stories the importance of equal and confidential atmosphere in mentoring. Here is an example from one mentee´s essay:

"Mentoring was a great possibility to show my frustrations quite freely. Mentoring worked as an emotional support, especially because the mentor was somebody that I knew beforehand and I could discuss with her with trust. I also got a lot of positive and supportive feedback from my mentor and that made me believe that I did something right."

The question of equity is connected to a symmetry and asymmetry relationship between mentor and mentee. Earlier in this article we claimed that the mentors and mentees are in a symmetric relation to each other concerning epistemological equity. We found some evidences of it. In the following quote one mentor express that he is open to ideas of a mentee:

"The mentee came from outside the school and said that it can be done like this. He had a ready solution to it."

Dialogicality is an activity directed toward discovery and new understanding [12]. In dialogical mentoring relationship the partners both give something valuable and receive something valuable as well. At the same time the partners construct new understanding of reality. One of the mentors tells:

"I would like that in discussions we change ideas and create something new, not just using my ideas. So we would get into a situation, where one+one would be more than two."

According to Crasborn et al. [13] there is no single approach to mentoring that will work in same way for every mentee in every context. So, developing diverse and individual style in conducting mentoring dialogues is an important challenge. This aspect was clearly present in many mentors interview. One mentor tells:

"The mentor should be able to modify him- or herself according to the mentee. Mentor should continue the mentoring process on the bases of the mentee´s needs."

According to some earlier researches, successful mentoring has been found to be an empowering experience to actors [14]. The same appeared also in the present study and we will discuss empowerment in the next chapter.

4.2. Empowerment

Mentors described mentoring in itself to bring variation and enthusiasm into their everyday teaching work. Although mentoring caused extra work in the daily routines, they experienced it as enriching. They had experienced feelings of success in their mentoring which brought pleasure.

The feeling of empowerment arises as an inner process in an individual, and it cannot be transferred from one person to another as such. In the present study empowerment was experienced at two levels: both at individual and collective level. According to Short et al. [15] empowerment can be defined as a process whereby school participants develop the competence to take charge of their own growth and resolve their own problems. Empowered individuals believe they have the skills and knowledge to act on a situation and improve it.

The individual level refers to the mentors and mentees and the meaning of teaching practice individually to them. Feeling oneself capable increases no doubt the feeling of empowerment. One of the mentors tells:

"I enjoy this kind of interaction terribly much. It is a great fun. In this kind of change of ideas you can share the experiences in quite another way than with your own student group, which is our everyday work."

In addition to the fact that mentoring meant changes in everyday routines the mentors told that they had started to think of their work as teachers more deeply. According to Bell & Gillbert [16] empowerment is connected to the tendency of taking responsibility for one´s personal development. An empowered person feels that she or he is the change agent. The same appeared in the present research. The mentors told that mentoring had been a starting point for their autonomous analyses of and reflections on their teachership.

"I would have taught it in another way. It is true that things can be learnt in other ways as well. I have been thinking of that matter. And I have not given any feedback of it to the mentee, since I think it is only my own processing around that matter."

The collective level refers to school or whole institution: the changes that have been made on the grounds of mentoring process. A mentee writes;

"Mentoring supported my practice greatly. Actually, we got so much interested in it in our working community that we carried out a minor research on the theme and wrote an article based on our experiences."

Also according to earlier researches [16, 17] a positive and emotionally supportive community promotes the empowerment of an individual.

The results showed that the nature of action environment is important in the empowerment process. In the best cases we can speak of the empowerment of the whole community.

5. Conclusion

We claim that dialogicality is a key element in the feeling of empowerment. This study showed the significance and relevance of dialogicality in mentoring. The equal and confidential atmosphere is essential feature in dialogical relationship. According to the results, the feeling of empowerment may emerge and make difference both at individual and collective level. We found that a dialogical mentoring relationship promotes also another interesting process besides empowerment. These processes were connected to personal and professional growth. For example the mentors reported that their subject based knowledge has also developed. Similarly the mentees described that the supervision carried out according to the principles of mentoring had made them analyze their pedagogical ways of acting.

The results have encouraged us to develop mentoring in teaching practice more towards dialogicality and pay attention to mentor education in the School of Vocational Teacher Education, in Oulu. Teacher´s professional growth is a long process, and it can be supported by a successful mentoring relationship right from the start. For that reason the role of a mentor should rather be a co-reflector than an evaluator.

6. References

[1] Kram, K. E. 1983. Phases of the mentor relationship. *Academy of Management Journal* 26 (4*)*, pp. 608-625.

[2] Turban, D. B. & Lee, F. K. 2007. The role of personality in mentoring relationships. In: B. R. Ragins & K. E. Kram (eds.) *The Handbook of mentoring at work. Theory, research, and practice*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore: Sage Publications, pp. 3-15.

[3] Sundli, L. 2007. Mentoring. A new mantra for education? *Teaching and Teacher Education,* 23(2), 201-214.

[4] Wang, J. & Odell, S. 2002. Mentored Learning to teach according to standards-based reform: A critical review. *Review of Educational Research* 7(3), pp. 481-564.

[5] Hennissen, P., Crasborn, F., Brouwer, N. Korthagen, F. & Bergen, T. 2008. Mapping mentor teachers´ roles in mentoring dialogues. *Educational Research Review, 3,* pp. 168-186.

[6] Feiman-Nemser, S. 2001. From preparation to practice: Designing a continuum to strengthen and sustain teaching. *Teachers College Record,* 103, pp. 1013-1055.

[7] Ianchu-Haddad, D. & Oplatka, I. 2009. Mentoring novice teachers: Motives, process, and outcomes from the mentor´s point of view. *The New Educator,* 5, pp. 45-65.

[8] Saarnivaara, M. 2004. Mentorointisuhde valokeilassa – Hyvässä ja pahassa. [Mentoring in the Spotlight – in good and in bad]. In: Nummela, P., Friman, M., Lampinen, O. & Volanen M. V. (eds.) *Ammattikorkeakoulut ja sivistys.* Opetusministeriön julkaisuja 34, pp. 89-106.

[9] Brown, J. S., Collins, A. & Duguid, P. 1989. Situated Cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational Researcher* 18(1), pp. 32-42.

[10] Karjalainen, M., Heikkinen, H. L. T., Huttunen, R. & Saarnivaara, M. 2006. Dialogia ja vertaisuus mentoroinnissa. [Dialogicality and equality in mentoring]. *Aikuiskasvatus* 26(2*)*, pp. 96-103.

[11] Nissilä, S.-P. 2006. *Dynamic Dialogue in Learning and Teaching. Towards transformation in vocational teacher education*. Acta Universitatis Tamperensis 1179.

[12] Burbules, N. C. 1993. *Dialogue in teaching: theory and practise*. New York: Teachers College Press.

[13] Crasborn, F., Hennissen, P., Brouwer, N., Korthagen, F. & Bergen, T. 2011. Exploring a two-dimensional model of mentor teacher roles in mentoring dialogues. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 27(2), pp. 320-331.

[14] Harrison, J., Dymoke, S. & Pell, T. 2006. Mentoring beginning teachers in secondary schools: An analysis of practice. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 22(8), pp. 1055-1067.

[15] Short, P. M., Greer, J. T., & Melvin, W. M. (1994). Creating empowered schools: Lessons in change. *Journal of Educational Research,* 32(4), pp. 38–52.

[16] Bell, B. & Gilbert, J. 1994. Teacher development as professional, personal, and social development. *Teaching & Teacher Education,* 10(5), pp. 483–497.

[17] Neufeld, J. & Grimmett, P. P. 1994. The Authenticity for Struggle. In: Grimmett, P. P. & Neufeld, J. (eds.). *Teacher development and the struggle for authenticity. Professional growth and restructuring in the context of change.* New York: Teacher College, pp. 205–232.