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Mentoring in school settings: Insights from school principals and pre-service teachers***

Summary

Mentoring programmes have recently emerged as crucial components of professional development in Polish schools, providing essential support for teachers in line with current educational standards. This study focuses on the perspectives and experiences of both pre-service teachers and school principals regarding the role of mentoring in their professional development and learning. Employing qualitative interviews guided by Kvale's methodology, data were collected from a sample comprising 40 teachers and 33 school principals. The findings reveal shared experiences and needs among school principals and teachers, offering insights into their perceptions, expectations, benefits, challenges, and suggestions for improving mentoring effectiveness. Additionally, both groups advocate for a mentoring approach grounded in constructivism, highlighting its importance in enriching professional development through mentoring initiatives. These insights underscore the significance of adopting constructivist mentoring models to optimise the effectiveness of mentoring programmes in school settings. However, further research is needed to explore the long-term impacts of mentoring programmes on teacher retention, student achievement, and overall school improvement.

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Introduction

Teacher education is encountering global challenges that urge educators worldwide to reconsider their purpose, methods, and perspectives. As the role of teachers evolves rapidly, those who educate them must adjust (Goodwin, Madalińska-Michalak, & Flores, 2023). Mentoring in school settings, as an integral part of teacher education, plays a crucial role in facilitating teacher professional development (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Greiner, Hofmann, & Katskaller, 2017; Wanga & Odella, 2002). It has a positive impact on the quality of teaching and motivation to work, and it serves as a bridge between theoretical knowledge gained in teacher education programmes and practical application in real-world educational settings, especially for beginning teachers. Mentoring provides beginning teachers with guidance, support, and opportunities for reflection as they transition from student to teacher. For school principals, mentoring offers a platform to cultivate leadership skills, share best practices, and navigate the complexities of school administration. This study aims to illuminate the significance of mentoring in the broader landscape of teacher education and professional development by investigating the experiences and perspectives of both principals and pre-service teachers. At the core of the analysis lies the question: What are the experiences and opinions of school principals and pre-service teachers regarding the role of mentoring in their professional development?

Mentoring at school

A teacher's responsibilities extend beyond classroom instruction and encompass their own continuous professional and personal development (Madalińska-Michalak, 2021). The commencement of a teaching career marks a pivotal juncture (Madalińska-Michalak, 2019), as teachers embark on their professional journeys within specific educational environments, engaging with various stakeholders such as students, parents, and fellow teachers. While the initial stages of teaching may present challenges, they also offer substantial rewards. It is imperative for teachers to embrace new challenges, demonstrate dedication to their work, and exhibit a willingness to continually enhance their professional skills. This endeavour is characterised by a duality of emotions – on one hand, feelings of apprehension and uncertainty, and

on the other hand, a fervent desire to learn and strive for excellence. As noted by Joanna Madalińska-Michalak (2021), contemporary professionalism necessitates that teachers engage in continuous learning and professional development throughout their careers, deepening their knowledge base, refining their pedagogical skills, and adeptly applying acquired knowledge in practice. School-based mentoring is a topic extensively discussed in the literature, with numerous definitions underscoring the vital role of mentors and their actions in providing support to less experienced individuals. Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, and Tomlinson (2009) define mentoring as “individual support of a novice or less experienced practitioner by a more experienced practitioner, designed primarily to assist in the development of the mentee’s expertise and to facilitate the mentee’s acquisition of knowledge into the culture of the profession” (p. 207). In turn, Pirkle (2011) points out, specifically referring to teachers, that the mentor’s observation and provision of teaching support and feedback are crucial. Teachers define mentoring as a master–student relationship (Aydın & Arslan, 2022). Feiman-Nemser’s approach (2001) delineates two distinct models of mentoring: the transmissive model and the constructivist-oriented model. In the transmissive model, the mentee passively receives knowledge transferred by the mentor. Conversely, the constructivist-oriented model emphasises two-way learning, characterised by the exchange of experiences and the analysis of actions. In this model, the mentor’s mentee actively participates, initiating and carrying out activities. The mentor’s communication encompasses both informational and controlling aspects (Hofmann & Springer, 2014). A controlling mentor sets goals and ensures their achievement, while an informative mentor provides feedback through reflection, exchange of perspectives, and collaboration. Numerous studies affirm the positive impact of mentoring on novice teachers at the outset of their careers. Through analysis of these findings, several areas emerge where mentoring yields significant benefits:

- Emotional support: novice teachers often face professional and personal challenges that can lead to stress, exhaustion, and frustration. In these situations, having a mentor who can offer emotional support, lend a listening ear, provide advice, and help find solutions proves invaluable.
- Motivation for work and development: mentoring encourages novice teachers to stay motivated, remain engaged in their work, and pursue ongoing professional development.
- Classroom/group organisation and management: mentors assist novice teachers in honing their skills in effectively organising and managing their classrooms or groups, contributing to a more conducive learning environment.

Research indicates that mentors play a crucial role in supporting novice teachers worldwide, particularly those at high risk of attrition (Howe, 2006;

Hudson, 2013; Li, Sani, & Azmin, 2021). A novice teacher can rely on the mentor for advice, tips, and valuable experiences that aid in navigating their teaching journey. Furthermore, through the support and knowledge provided, novice teachers enhance their self-confidence and develop problem-solving skills, leading to increased job satisfaction (Ingersoll, & Strong, 2012; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Lindgren, 2005). Moreover, mentoring can contribute to increasing teachers' motivation for professional development, improving skills and improving the quality of teaching work, cooperation, and building positive interactions. According to research results, cooperation with a mentor has a positive effect on the motivation of a beginning teacher (Klassen, & Durksen, 2014), as well as on improvement and a sense of community (Schwan et al., 2020). It is especially worth emphasising the importance of mentoring based on constructivism. Its importance is confirmed by the research of Richter et al. (2013). Feedback from a mentor, joint activities and work planning, as well as inspiring the teacher to act may have a positive effect on his/her willingness to develop professionally and personally. Additionally, mentors can help teachers develop classroom management skills by providing practical tips, strategies, and tools. Thanks to this, they will be able to effectively deal with various situations and challenges occurring in the classroom. Research results show that mentoring improves teachers' skills in organising work and classroom management (Lindgren, 2005; Malderez, Hobson, Tracey, & Kerr, 2007). Consequently, the skills and knowledge gained by a novice teacher can lead to a more positive classroom atmosphere, enhanced teaching effectiveness, and improved relationships with students. The mentor thus assumes a pivotal role in the developmental journey of a young teacher. Collaboration, exchange of perspectives, and emotional support foster the growth of professional competencies, motivation, and job satisfaction.

Mentoring at schools in Poland – legal regulations

In Poland, teachers acquire multifaceted knowledge through pedagogical studies, covering a broad spectrum of subjects including the history of education, philosophy, didactics, individual class methodologies, psychology, and sociology. Nonetheless, it is crucial to underscore the importance of learning and continuous professional development beyond initial training: “the process of becoming a teacher, from the emergence of motivation to choose a profession and its maturation, to fuller identification with the profession, takes place throughout the entire period of professional activity” (Dróźka & Madalińska-Michalak, 2016, p. 162). It is paramount to carefully consider the aspiration to become a teacher amidst the evolving socio-economic landscape. It is worth emphasising that there are many factors behind the choice of the teaching profession and its

attractiveness. These are both internal (individual) factors and external factors, i.e. work organisation, social situation and educational policy. “Analysing external conditions from the macro-social level implies the need for the researcher to pay attention to factors such as the characteristics of the school system and its socio-cultural environment, and therefore to the educational policy of a given country, its internal legal regulations, internal cultural diversity, history, economy and professional requirements” (Madalińska-Michalak, 2021, p. 96).

In Poland, there has been a decline in the number of individuals pursuing pedagogical studies, contributing to an aging teaching profession. This trend is underscored in the Education and Training Monitor 2023 report, which highlights various factors contributing to the aging demographic of the teaching staff, surpassing the EU average. As highlighted in the report, the teaching staff is ageing more than the EU average: “While in 2015 the proportion of schoolteachers (ISCED levels 1–3) aged 55 and older was 12.6% (EU 23.4%), in 2021, it increased to 21.3% (EU 24.4%). At the same time, the proportion of teachers aged 25–34 decreased from 18.8% in 2015 (EU 16.6%) to 12% in 2021, below the EU average (15.8%)” (European Commission, 2023, p. 6).

School-based mentoring in Poland operates within a framework of legal regulations that outline the roles, responsibilities, and parameters of the mentorship process. This mentoring initiative was introduced in 2022 as part of the professional development for Polish teachers, aligning with recent regulations governing professional advancement in the country. Detailed guidelines and the course of professional promotion are defined in Poland by the following documents: Act of January 26, 1982, Teacher’s Charter, Regulation of the Minister of Education and Science of September 6, 2022 on obtaining professional promotion grades by teachers, Regulation of the Minister of Education and Science of on August 25, 2022 on the evaluation of teachers’ work. The mentor now assumes responsibilities formerly held by the internship supervisor, as outlined in the Teacher’s Charter (Act of January 26, 1982). The legislator has defined the mentor’s tasks, which include:

- “1) supporting the teacher on an ongoing basis in the process of introduction to work in the profession, including familiarising the teacher with the documentation of the course of teaching, educational and care activities and other documents applicable at school;
- 2) providing teachers with assistance in selecting appropriate forms of professional development;
- 3) sharing knowledge and experience with the teacher to the extent necessary for the effective performance of the teacher’s duties;
- 4) enabling the teacher to observe the classes he conducts and discuss these classes with teacher;

- 5) observing classes conducted by a teacher and discussing them with the teacher;
- 6) inspiring and encouraging teachers to take up professional challenges” (Act of January 26, 1982, Teacher’s Charter).

Moreover, the mentor participates in observing classes conducted by the novice teacher during the second and final years of their preparation for the profession.

According to current regulations, the school principal, mentor, methodological advisor, teacher-consultant, or representative of the pedagogical supervision body, along with a certified teacher, are present during the observations of the classes conducted by a teacher. In the second observation, which occurs in the final year of preparation, an expert from a designated list or an appointed or certified teacher with qualifications in psychology, pedagogy, or special education, may replace the mentor. The committee then issues a positive or negative opinion, as outlined in the Teacher’s Charter (Act of January 26, 1982).

Furthermore, the school principal evaluates the work of beginner teachers twice, as stipulated by the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Science dated August 25, 2022, on the evaluation of teachers’ work (Journal of Laws of 2022, item 1822). These evaluations occur in the second and final years of preparation for the profession. While the opinions of the mentor and the parents’ council are considered, it is important to note that their absence does not impact the assessment by the school principal. The regulation specifies detailed evaluation criteria, categorised into mandatory and additional criteria. Mandatory criteria encompass aspects such as the substantive and methodological correctness of teaching, education and care activities, maintenance of safe and hygienic learning environments, knowledge of children’s rights, collaboration with colleagues and parents, and adherence to legal provisions and internal school regulations. Additional criteria for assessing teacher performance may include, for example: diagnosing the needs and capabilities of the student and individualising work with the student, undertaking innovative organisational, programme or methodological solutions in conducting teaching, analysing one’s own work, ability to resolve conflicts among students, ability to recognise and use non-verbal communication and improving communication skills (Regulation of the Minister of Education and Science of August 25, 2022 on the evaluation of teachers’ work). What is important is the degree to which all criteria are met, including one indicated by the principal and one given by the beginner teacher.

The final stage of professional promotion to an appointed teacher is an examination. It is important that during preparation for the profession, the teacher demonstrates knowledge and skills in the field of:

- knowledge of legal provisions regarding work organisation, tasks and principles of operation of the institution, conducting classes, recognising students’ needs and individualising teaching;

- applying knowledge in the field of psychology, pedagogy and didactics at work,
- knowing the students' environment and taking into account the issues of the local environment and contemporary social and civilisation problems in their work,
- using multimedia and IT tools at work, especially during classes.

It is important to highlight that mentors should continuously develop their knowledge and skills through lifelong learning. The mentor serves as a guide and role model for novice teachers. With the mentor's guidance, support, and experience, a teacher at the outset of their career can acquire valuable insights and build self-confidence. Effective collaboration between a novice teacher and a mentor is grounded in trust, safety, mutual assistance, and reciprocal learning.

Methodology and methods

The research conducted by the authors aims to provide a comprehensive understanding, description, and interpretation of mentoring phenomena, with a focus on the subjective experiences and interpretations conveyed by participants. Additionally, it aims to discern the benefits and challenges inherent in mentoring practices within the school learning environment.

The research objectives encompass:

- Analysing the phenomenon of mentoring in schools, encapsulating the perspectives of both pre-service teachers and school principals.
- Exploring the experiences of beginning teachers regarding their engagement in mentoring processes and the significance they attribute to these experiences.
- Identifying the benefits and challenges arising from mentoring practices within the school educational setting.

The adopted research approach, qualitative interviews following Kvale's methodology, focuses on understanding the role of mentoring from two essential perspectives: school principals, who wield significant organisational influence, and teachers undergoing professional development, who directly benefit from mentoring support. Qualitative interviews, guided by Kvale's approach, prioritise attentive listening to discern the underlying meanings conveyed by study participants (Kvale, 2001). This approach allows for adaptability in the interview process, aligning with the direction provided by participants' narratives.

The main research problem is encapsulated in the following question: What are the experiences and opinions of school principals and pre-service teachers about the role of mentoring in their professional development?

In addressing the primary research question, several specific inquiries were articulated:

1. How do school principals perceive their role in introducing and developing mentoring in the context of teachers' professional development?
2. What are the principals' main expectations regarding mentoring as a support tool for teachers?
3. What are the benefits of having a mentor for beginning teachers?
4. What challenges and difficulties are identified by beginning teachers in the mentoring process?
5. What suggestions do principals and teachers have for improving the effectiveness of mentoring in the school educational environment?

Study participants and data analysis

Two distinct groups were engaged in interviews for this study. The first cohort consisted of pre-service teachers, specifically teacher students in their final semester, enrolled in long-cycle master's programmes in preschool and early childhood education, comprising a total of 40 individuals. The second group consisted of school principals and vice-principals representing schools and educational institutions from the Masovian Voivodeship. These principals were participants of courses and postgraduate studies in education management and leadership, comprising 33 individuals, of whom 28 were women and 5 were men, aged between 31 and 46. The deliberate selection of beginning teachers and school principals aimed to ensure a diverse array of perspectives and capture a broad spectrum of viewpoints.

The discussions were conducted in congenial settings facilitated by a moderator, allowing study participants to influence one another through their contributions. Kvale (2001) addresses and responds to common objections regarding the quality of research conducted through interviews. It is pertinent to consider the subjective experiences of respondents and the role of the moderator. Firstly, interviews are inherently flexible and contextualised within specific temporal and spatial parameters. Secondly, interactions between the moderator and participants should be viewed as a means to enhance understanding. However, it is crucial for the moderator to possess a requisite level of knowledge, empathy, and competence.

Prior to commencement, study participants were briefed on the research objectives and assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. The moderator explicitly disclosed the recording of the conversation and secured consent from all present individuals. The interviews were documented using a voice recorder. Subsequently, the recorded statements were transcribed to generate a structured text document for analysis and result processing. As conventionally

practiced, interview transcripts serve as the primary empirical data upon which research projects rely for analysis and interpretation. “It is interview transcripts that are usually treated as solid empirical data on which a given research project is based” (Kvale, 2021, p. 154). MAXQDA software was utilised for data processing and thematic analysis.

Subsequently, the analysis of the interviews commenced, employing a meaning-oriented approach. The meaning condensation technique was employed, and the analysis followed the five stages delineated by Kvale (2021). In the initial stage, the authors meticulously read through the interview transcripts multiple times, facilitating the identification of meaning units as the second stage. Subsequently, the main topics within individual meaning units were determined, and respondents’ statements were categorised accordingly. The identified topics included the benefits of mentoring, challenges and difficulties associated with mentoring, expectations regarding mentoring, suggestions for enhancing mentoring effectiveness, and the role of management in implementing mentoring in schools. Throughout the analysis, the study’s objectives were carefully considered. Finally, the most salient interview topics were synthesised into a cohesive framework in the last stage.

Mentoring at school – research findings

The following section presents the findings derived from an in-depth exploration of mentoring practices within educational contexts. Addressing the key research questions outlined earlier, this segment sheds light on the nuanced perceptions, expectations, benefits, challenges, difficulties surrounding mentoring as perceived by school principals and beginning teachers, and suggestions for enhancing mentoring effectiveness.

Through an exploration of the research findings presented below, a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics shaping mentoring relationships in educational settings emerges, offering valuable insights for stakeholders invested in fostering effective mentorship programmes.

Principals’ perspectives on mentoring implementation

This subsection examines how school principals perceive their pivotal role in introducing and nurturing mentoring initiatives for teachers’ professional development. It looks at the challenges and complexities they encounter in orchestrating the mentoring process, including issues related to organisation, duration, and mentor selection.

School principals in the context of their role in introducing and developing mentoring in their institutions, they drew attention to the challenges and difficulties related to this. The first area concerned the organisation of the mentoring process. Several of them pointed out problems with answering teachers' questions regarding the duration of preparation for a profession, taking into account breaks in work or cases of starting an internship before the entry into force of the new regulations: "The headmaster may get confused about who should start and finish professional promotion for particular degrees".

The management staff are also aware of the need for appropriate selection mentor for a beginner teacher. Referring to their experiences, the directors emphasised several related issues. In their opinion, the mentor should be a teacher from the same area of education (e.g. early childhood education or from a field (humanities/science). "If, for example, a teacher of Polish receives a chemist as a mentor, it is also a challenge. It may be a good idea to think about it when choosing a mentor for a given person." Moreover, the mentor should express their willingness to be one. This is about not having to be a guide for a novice teacher. "It is also difficult to force the role of a mentor, because the great one already has a lot of responsibilities, including young teachers." "A mentor should want to become a mentor, not just because the principal told a mentor to perform this role. This young teacher feels like he can't learn anything. A mentor should be open and have something to share. And here the issue of the mentor's competences is also important: "A clear distinction exists between a guardian and a mentor. While the supervisor oversees the teacher's internship, a mentor, on the other hand, is expected to possess leadership qualities and establish a personal connection with the mentee. This is about, for example, charismatic skills. In addition, the school principals focused on organising work regarding the mentor's and novice teacher's lesson plans. "It often happens that the mentor and the novice teacher have classes at the same time and cannot go to each other's place for observation." Therefore, when planning classes, it is worth taking this fact into account and ensuring that these people have the opportunity and time to talk to each other. "A mentor has to spend time with the person. Additionally, both people need to have some time to do something together."

The principals' challenges also included those related to the young teacher's approach, which influences the work with it and the subsequent formulation of the assessment. "I was the guardian and my teacher (the young one) didn't want to learn, didn't want to listen. He wanted to get promoted as quickly as possible. Later, I had a problem writing a diplomatic opinion about this person. Moreover, the young teacher's reluctance to cooperate translates into the atmosphere in the teaching team/group. This is a challenge for the institution's management staff:

“The teacher does not allow her guardian to come near her at all. The teacher is a calm and subdued teacher. And there were many situations where she did not react to her and claimed that she did not need help. And now the risk is that the person who is the caregiver is wondering whether to leave because she feels unnecessary. The atmosphere in the team is getting weaker and weaker.” In such cases, it is the director’s responsibility to take action, but it must be appropriate to the situation. Therefore, the organisation and course of preparation for the teaching profession also include certain challenges for management staff.

Principals’ expectations of mentoring

Here, we explore the principals’ primary expectations regarding mentoring programmes as supportive mechanisms for teachers. This section investigates the criteria principals prioritise when selecting mentors for novice teachers, considering factors such as educational background, subject expertise, and willingness to mentor.

In the context of expectations, principals most often indicated the benefit of having a mentor for a novice teacher. They emphasised help at the beginning of work, the possibility of support and exchange of experiences. “A beginner is introduced to work, becomes familiar with the operation of the facility, gains experience, improves his or her skills, and becomes familiar with the documents available at the school. He has a person to whom he can turn with all his doubts, consult something and talk, which certainly gives a great sense of security. “A young teacher may feel well introduced to the teaching staff, he may become part of the team faster than he does it alone.” Interview participants based their observations on this issue on their own experiences. When cooperation between a mentor and a pre-service teacher takes place, numerous benefits are noticed. “The person who was my guardian introduced me to school life from the very beginning. She showed what is important in this school, what to pay attention to, what to avoid, what not to do. I wouldn’t read this in any book. You can learn such things from someone who has been working with us for several years.” It is also worth emphasising the negative experiences that directors would like to avoid in their facility: “My supervisor’s tasks were limited to signing documents. It definitely bothered me, but my parents were teachers.”

The management staff also have expectations regarding the personal and professional development of the mentor due to performing this function. They emphasised the fact of learning from each other, the possibility of transferring knowledge and the mentor gaining experience that he can demonstrate in his

promotion. “As a supervisor, I have positive experiences because there was an exchange of experiences, because I, as an older teacher, could share something and learn, for example, communication technologies from a young teacher. I could always learn something, not just show it.” “We pass on to others a part of ourselves, our system of values, our approach, the way we conduct lessons.” Moreover, principals paid attention to the relationship between the mentor and the novice teacher, as they are part of the teaching staff. “I was the internship supervisor and a bond is created that lasts for the remaining years, even after the internship ends. It’s something that brings you together, something that gives you such energy, it’s something invisible that allows you to join the team.” The mentor’s task is to help a novice teacher introduce them to teaching and educational work. It is necessary to listen to each other and support each other along the way. “When I had a signal that there was too much help or that it was unnecessary for this person, I focused on helping to solve the problems that appeared. So that there would be a margin of freedom and independence for the young teacher.”

It is important that the management staff’s expectations regarding mentoring during the professional advancement of beginning teachers included the issue of possible benefits to be gained. In addition, these benefits applied to both the beginning teacher and the mentor.

Teachers’ perception of mentoring benefits

Focusing on novice teachers’ viewpoints, this segment elucidates the perceived benefits of mentoring in preparing for the teaching profession. It examines how mentors contribute to their professional growth, emotional support, and overall readiness to navigate the challenges of pre-service training.

Students who are about to start their professional career advancement as teachers show great interest in having a mentor. From their perspective, it brings benefits for both them and the mentor. In their statements, they emphasised the role of a mentor and the fact that they would feel safe when starting work in the institution when they could count on an experienced teacher. “It’s definitely less stressful because there is someone who will guide us through the whole process. And if there are any questions that will probably arise, he is there and can answer them. It will support us in the first months of work”, “we are not alone, we do not have to wipe the glass alone”, “we can count on someone in case of problems”. Moreover, young teachers also see the benefit of observing classes by mentors and talking to them. “The benefits are knowing the opinion, the other point of view, I can receive tips, suggestions for action that I do not notice.” “A mentor as

an observer can help us and suggest a different solution to the problem. We say A, mentor says B, and together we develop strategy C. The perspective of another person who can suggest changes.”

In the context of the benefits they can achieve, young teachers talked about their expectations from a mentor. Most of them focused on cooperation as the basis for joint activities with a mentor and on feedback received from an experienced teacher. “I would like a mentor to tell me what I am doing wrong, what I need to improve, what I am doing right, i.e. to give feedback on my actions.” “I expect support and understanding, but without imposing my opinion, so that I have time to think. Giving several options, possibilities, not imposing what to do, but to figure it out together.” Students also commented on the person of the mentor, i.e. what he should be like and what is important to them. They paid attention to character traits and competences. “He was understanding, so he wouldn’t discourage us at the beginning and show us that we can develop, he saw us as a partner, not a person he was given by force.” “So that the mentor does not impose his opinion, so that he also listens to our opinion, so that the principle of cooperation works.” Among the expectations, there was also the issue of time devoted to observing lessons or talking to parents, exchanging experiences and inspiring each other to create materials and/or use those that the mentor/beginner teacher already has. “Time to talk, to observe lessons, even to talk to parents.” “For me, it would be important to have support in conversations with parents, because it is difficult for us, i.e. the mentor stands on the side and then I receive feedback from the mentor about what I could have done differently, how I did.” “Assistance in selecting methods, what is important, what will actually be useful.” Many times, pre-service teachers emphasised help in getting acquainted with documents, school rules and work organisation.

Moreover, the students’ comments mentioned the benefits for the mentor. First of all, the opportunity to learn from a novice teacher. “(The mentor) is up to date with everything and can learn from the younger teacher.” “A beginner teacher can be an inspiration to use new working methods and a fresh perspective.” Moreover, they emphasised the possibility of sharing experience and knowledge: “one can share one’s experience and gain self-esteem”, as well as taking into account the performance of this function in one’s own professional advancement (if an appointed teacher).

It is worth noting that in the statements of novice teachers there were benefits related to the sense of security and emotional support received. Moreover, they feel the need to cooperate, get feedback from the mentor and learn from each other. They are therefore aware of the benefits for themselves, but also for the mentor, which shows that they also want to share knowledge and reflect on their actions.

Challenges faced by beginning teachers in mentoring

Lastly, this subsection delves into the challenges and difficulties novice teachers encounter in their interactions with mentors during pre-service training. It analyses barriers such as mismatched mentor-mentee pairings, role ambiguity, and the delicate balance between mentor responsibilities and existing workload. Beginning teachers based on internships and conversations with other educators and, in accordance with their own needs, identify challenges that face effective cooperation with a mentor. They paid attention to two issues: the selection of a mentor, his qualifications and the approach to pre-service teachers.

Students emphasised the importance of choosing the right person to act as a mentor. This decision is made by the director and, in their opinion, he should take into account the competences of this person, experience, as well as the subject/educational area of the novice teacher and mentor. "Individual selection. Not everyone wants to be a mentor or have a job on top of that." "I need appropriate competences to perform this function." "I would like mentor to have expertise in early childhood education to effectively guide the mentee." "Staff shortages (are such a difficulty), then it is not taken into account whether a person is suitable (as a mentor) or has experience. Sometimes it happens that there is no predisposition to share experience and support. In the context of mentor competences, young teachers focused on their knowledge and communication skills related to transferring knowledge and creating feedback. "A mentor must have knowledge and communication skills so as not to be afraid to express his or her opinion, and we cannot be afraid." "I need the appropriate competencies to perform this function." "It can be challenging to open up about our problems to a mentor, as it may feel like admitting failure."

Hence, it is imperative to consider the perspectives of pre-service teachers, who hold high expectations for their mentors and thus seek individuals with substantial experience and specific competencies.

Exploring recommendations for enhanced mentoring efficacy in school settings

This section investigates the valuable insights and recommendations provided by both principals and teachers aimed at optimising the effectiveness of mentoring within the educational milieu. Exploring their recommendations for improvement, this segment offers practical strategies and actionable measures to enhance the impact of mentoring programmes on teacher professional development.

Principals and pre-service teachers based on their experiences and needs provided several specific suggestions to make mentoring more beneficial in the career advancement process. First of all, they emphasised the need for appropriate organisation and selection of a mentor. It is a lesson plan enabling observation of classes, meetings and conversations between the mentor and the novice teacher. The management staff made the following suggestions: “a plan adapted to the possibility of classroom visits”; “if the principal appoints a mentor, it would be good if this teacher could go to his classes and vice versa. That they could see each other at all”; “a mentor should conduct open lessons for his mentee. It’s important for the teacher to see someone experienced in working with students. Teacher should be able to participate in these classes. Maybe a replacement for this time if it is not possible to arrange such a plan”; “the solution for greater accessibility is for teachers to work together, e.g. class teacher, lead teacher and support teacher. They see each other often, they have more to say about each other”; “the mentor should teach the same, related subject as the teacher-student.” Teachers also emphasised the importance of organising a lesson plan and receiving a mentor from early childhood education: “Mentor must have time to observe classes. So mentor can give us feedback.”

Recommendations from principals and young teachers also concerned the appropriate selection of a mentor. Starting from consent to be a mentor, his competences, to establishing rights and obligations and respecting them. “I thought about the mentor’s consent, because I observe such coercion. Voluntary consent or option to refuse. Someone who is forced will not be a good mentor. Nobody asked us, they just informed us. Sometimes these duets form themselves and this is also a good solution or asking the teacher who he would like to see as his mentor”; “greater remuneration for this, but if someone does not feel like they are a mentor, even money won’t change that” (principals’ statements). For students, it is important: “not to impose the role of a mentor, it may not necessarily be a choice, but an opportunity to get to know each other”, “that it be an early childhood education teacher”, “to determine what I can expect – responsibilities, and for the director to check it”, “not to choose a person as a mentor who does not feel capable or has no competence. I think interested people should have training for mentors.”

In their suggestions, principals and pre-service teachers also referred to the need for conversations between the mentor and the novice teacher. In their opinion, they are important at the beginning of professional advancement and during it, as feedback. The staff’s statements included: “introductory conversations are important”; “is for the principal to draw the mentor’s attention to the fact that the teacher sometimes does not know what questions to ask. To oblige the mentor to conduct such guiding conversations”; “to hold a meeting of the principal, mentors

and teachers, where he will present his expectations and how he sees the work. To clearly communicate what he will expect from the teacher and mentor at what stage.” In turn, pre-service teachers indicated feedback as crucial in the learning process. “For the mentor to share at the end of the day, summarise immediately, feedback on an ongoing basis. Not only was it bad and bad. You’re doing it wrong, but let me tell you how to fix it.” “Formulating feedback, paying attention to what we did well, what needs to be improved and how it can be improved.”

Principals and novice teachers agreed with the statements made by each other. In order to increase the effectiveness of mentoring in the process of teachers’ professional advancement, principals paid attention to the selection of a mentor and the organisation of the timetables of the mentor and the novice teacher. Moreover, according to them, conversations based on motivational messages can increase effectiveness.

Summary and conclusions

Upon analysing the research results, it becomes evident that the experiences and needs of school principals and beginning teachers align closely. They underscore the importance of appropriate organisation and the selection of a mentor, as well as the mentor’s competencies and experiences. Additionally, they highlight the benefits for the teacher preparing for the profession and their mentor. Both management staff and students advocate for a mentoring model rooted in constructivism. This model emphasises the collaboration between a mentor and a novice teacher, focusing on the exchange of views, feedback, and joint problem-solving. They also stress the significance of mutual learning and the active involvement of both partners. Novice teachers express a desire for guidance, learning opportunities, and emotional support. School principals emphasise the necessity for openness and a willingness to foster the development of young teachers. Hence, the mentor’s competence in this regard, along with the novice teacher’s engagement, is pivotal.

The importance of mentorship is echoed in the statements of teacher students who seek assistance during their initial tenure in a given institution. They rely on mentors to guide and support them. Therefore, the effectiveness of mentoring in a teacher’s professional development process hinges on the organisation and selection of the mentor, responsibilities that lie with the facility’s management staff. Effective collaboration requires openness to others, joint activities, classroom observations, and proficiency in giving and receiving instructions. Thus, dialogue and a willingness to learn from one another are crucial. Consequently, the research results advocate for the adoption of a constructivist-oriented mentoring model to

benefit both the mentor and the novice teacher. The efficacy of mentoring depends on the involvement of all stakeholders—principals, mentors, and beginning teachers.

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