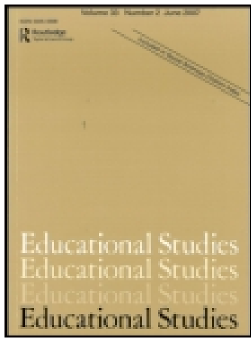

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Experiences of beginning teachers in a school-based mentoring program in Sweden

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Even though teacher education has been successful in preparing students for their future profession, the classroom reality can differ greatly from the inservice training. Many novice teachers therefore find the transition from student teacher to inservice teacher overwhelming To support beginning teachers, mentoring programs—where more experienced teachers support novice teachers—have become commonplace in many schools worldwide. In Sweden, mentoring for beginning teachers has been a frequent feature of support since 2001. This study, conducted in Sweden, examines seven novice teachers and the impact the mentoring process had upon them during their first-year teaching. Based on interviews, it was found that these experienced both professional and personal support from their mentors. The study also showed the significance of observant leaders within the mentorship program following up on the development of the mentor–mentee relationship.

Keywords: *School-based mentoring; Beginning teachers; Professional development*

Transition to the teaching profession

The role of teachers has changed during the last several years. This is due to increased tasks and demands, in combination with more diverse students. In addition, many teachers have other duties to organize and plan, such as parental cooperation and school development. For novice teachers especially, everyday routine at school can be overwhelming; the newly graduated teachers are expected to independently organize and carry out their work and simultaneously adapt to the local culture and expectations of the school (Bjarnadóttir, 2003).

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Unfortunately, as good as their training might have been in the university, inservice training for student teachers often conflicts with the reality of the classroom. These conflicts can contribute to feelings of unpreparedness for meeting pupils' needs, classroom management and understanding school culture (Stanulis *et al.*, 2002). At the same time, it is common for novice teachers to have high, sometimes unrealistic, self-expectations.

Once employed, many novice teachers have no support at all in stark contrast with their inservice training. They might especially feel a lack of support in the following areas: the role of the teacher, discipline, demanding pupils and collaboration with colleagues (Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1990; Wildman *et al.*, 1992; Bennett & Carré, 1993; Stanulis *et al.*, 2002). Therefore there is a need for bridges to be built between being a student teacher and being a teacher. One example of such a bridge is mentorship for novice teachers. The goal of mentoring is to pass on many of the experiences and possibilities in the teaching profession from more experienced teachers to novice teachers. None the less, being a well-known and accomplished teacher is not always the same as being skilled at assessing and supporting student teachers. As such, there can be considerable variation in the supervision that novice teachers obtain during their education (Hayward, 1997).

Mentorship in general

The origin of mentorship is often referred to in Greek mythology, in which Homer recounts how a wise man, Mentor, was an adviser, teacher and friend for Odysseus' son Telemachus. Although the word *mentorship* has its roots in mythology, the definition has changed Mullen and Kealy (1999) argue that today mentoring is an up-to-date method for development, and Aryee *et al.*, (1996) believe that mentorship is a process in which norms, valuations, language and societal behaviour are transferred from one person to another.

A good mentor–mentee relationship is built upon openness and confidentiality. It is best when the mentor is an experienced, judicious person who is interested in supporting a less experienced individual. Frequent discussions between the mentor and the mentee are a necessity, and the mentor must also act as a role model to help the novice progress professionally (Brooks & Sikes, 1997; McGee, 2001). The mentor must be viewed not as a person who solves problems, but rather as an active listener who makes it easier for the novice to come to his or her own decisions. Furthermore, it is beneficial when a mentor encourages and challenges the novice's thoughts and reflections. Through this process, the novice's opinions are further honed, and subsequent decisions are facilitated (Mullen, 1999; Mullen & Kealy, 1999; Lucas, 2001).

To support the mentees' professional development, their needs should be central, with a focus on constructive self-awareness and realistic possibilities. Therefore, the mentees must be able to express themselves and critically reflect in discussions with their mentors (Alred & Garvey, 2000). In order to be meaningful, the mentoring process must have clearly stated purposes that should be suitable for the particular

mentee's assumptions and needs; otherwise the mentoring will not effectively contribute to professional development (Allsop & Benson, 1997).

When mentoring is successful, it is a dynamic and developing process, as well as a powerful method for learning and improving human dynamics. Mentorship, then, can be seen as a process where the novice, as the learner, is optimally engaged and has a constructive self-awareness. Therefore, it requires that the novice has understanding and objectivity, as well as the ability to accept constructive criticism. Mentoring also has potential for development of the mentors themselves since the questions, values and acts of the mentees provide unrealized and new possibilities. Mentor programs can even be seen as an integrated part of staff development for more experienced teachers because they grant opportunities for ongoing learning (Ganser, 2002; Kajs, 2002). This synergistic effect of mentoring, however, depends on the cooperative actions between the mentor and the novice (Lick, 1999).

Even if participation in mentoring can lead to personal and/or professional development, it is important that the participants initially have a realistic view of what can be achieved (e.g. Shea, 1994). Everyday life will form the mentees during the mentorship project—they will meet a lot of other people and experience different situations in work, as well as in their private lives—so although participation in mentoring generally has positive effects, other influencing factors cannot be excluded (Lindgren, 2000).

Mentoring novice teachers

According to Ganser (2002), mentorship for beginning teachers, which began to emerge about 30 years ago in the USA, has never been so common as today. In various empirical studies, mentoring is reported to be effective in both supporting and socializing beginner teachers (Sinclair, 2003). One reason for this is that mentorship programs provide newly graduated teachers with the assistance needed during the difficult transition from preservice education to actual classroom teaching (Brooks & Sikes, 1997). Mentoring programs do not only support this transition, but also reduce the dropout rate of newly graduated teachers (Kajs, 2002).

International support for beginner teachers can also be found in the literature. Moskowitz and Stephens (1997) conducted case studies in New Zealand, Australia and Japan. They found that when school professionals with shared responsibility took an active part in new teachers' adjustment, it was easier for the beginner teachers to find their new role. There was no common definition or standard set of mentoring, but the professionals generally were not assessing the new teachers' competence, but rather assisting them.

Serving as a mentor differs from most of the traditional roles for teachers. Consequently, it is important that the mentors are well-informed about the aims of the mentorship, as well as the needs of the mentee. Mentor training should involve activities that support the mentors' own professional development and give them the tools to discuss and meet new teachers' needs and questions (Brooks & Sikes, 1997).

Mentorship for beginner teachers is often focused on current situations for the mentee, advising and emotional support. Feiman-Nemser (2001) argues that

mentoring should instead be focused on educative components rather than just emotional support. She refers to 'educative mentorship' (p. 17), which involves forming a clear opinion of what is needed for good teaching and becoming a good teacher. When mentors have this understanding, they will facilitate the new teachers in learning from their own experiences. Through discussions with a more experienced teacher, educative mentorship can lead to deeper effects than mentorship that is only aimed at emotional support (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Although mentorship for beginner teachers focuses mainly on professional development, the possibility for personal development must not be overlooked. Various studies have found that good mentors can help the novices develop self-confidence and knowledge about their own abilities (Alred & Garvey, 2000; McGee, 2001; Stanulis *et al.* 2002). Moreover, mentorship seems to be not only satisfactory for the persons involved, but it can also have a vital effect on the educational organization's growth, stability and leadership (Allsop & Benson, 1997; Lick, 1999).

The mentoring program

In an effort to support newly graduated teachers during their first year, the municipality of Umeå, in northern Sweden, started a mentoring program in the spring of 2001. This one-year program has continued for the past two years with four different groups of mentees and mentors. Apart from support, the aim of the program was also to attract and retain new teachers to the municipality of Umeå. According to *Who should teach? Quality counts 2000* (as cited in Chubbuck *et al.*, 2001), current data show that almost 50% of US teachers leave the school within the first five years. Similarly, in Sweden, the trend of novice teachers leaving the school system earlier in their careers has begun to receive attention. The dropout of novice teachers is becoming problematic, especially since the need for qualified teachers will increase prominently within the next years due to numerous retirements (National Union of Teachers in Sweden, 2001).

The program highlighted in this study is the second of the four programs and was started in January 2002. Twenty-five newly recruited teachers from all levels of school, some with a few years' experience, were assigned a mentor who worked within the same age category of pupils. The mentees were offered a mentor but not obligated to receive mentoring. The mentors, who were all experienced teachers, were trained for their assignment by attending a course of five credits at the university over nearly half an academic year. Each mentor–novice couple was expected to meet once a week or every other week during the school year, and additional mentor and mentee group meetings were also arranged with the aim to highlight and discuss general situations and questions important to the mentees.

Purpose, selection and method of the study

As part of a long-term collaborative study between three universities in Sweden (Aili *et al.*, 2002), granted by the Swedish Research Council, an interview study with

mentored novice teachers was implemented. The interviews took place in the beginning, at the end and twice during the year. The purpose of the research was to obtain an in-depth understanding, through the participant perspective, of the most apparent effects the mentoring project had had on them.

The criteria for participation in the study were to have recently graduated as a teacher, to work with pupils between the ages of 7 and 16 and have been assigned a mentor. Initially, the aim of the research was to interview novice teachers who did not have previous teaching experience. However, since it is common in Sweden that teachers have previously worked as teachers before they entered teacher education and/or worked as teachers during their education, it was not possible to reach this goal. From the group of 25 newly employed teachers a total of 10 novice teachers were identified for participation in the interviews by the manager of the school department.

These 10 teachers were informed about the study via email, and when just two of them agreed to be in the study, a follow-up email was sent to the other eight. In addition, the mentors and manager of the school department were asked to motivate the novices to participate in the interview study. In the end, a total of seven teachers, five women and two men from elementary and secondary schools agreed to participate. The three teachers who were not interested in participating reported insufficient time and/or too demanding work situations as reasons for not participating.

Two of the participating teachers had some earlier teaching experience, and another mentee was both working as a teacher and taking part in a teacher training program. When the program started, one of the teachers worked with younger children, three of the teachers worked with children 8–12 years old, one of the teachers was a substitute teacher for children 7–11 years old and two of the teachers worked with children 13–16 years old. All of the teachers worked in central Umeå.

The seven teachers were interviewed four times, in March, June and October 2002 and in January 2003, when the mentoring had ended. The round of interviews presented here was the fourth and last. The following questions about the mentoring were central to the study:

1. Do beginning teachers feel support from their mentors? If so, in what ways?
2. Which subjects, from the novices' point of view, are the most important to discuss with the mentor?
3. Should mentorship for beginning teachers be continued? If so, why?

The interviews were carried out as informal discussions in a quiet and secluded environment and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Five of them took place at the teachers' schools, while two teachers preferred to come to the university. The interviews were semi-structured (Fontana & Frey, 1994), and the primary questions were the same for all individuals, but there was opportunity for follow-up questions and individual thought (Kvale, 1989; Bogdan & Biklen, 1994). None of the teachers had read the questions prior to the interviews, but they were informed about the aim of

the study. However, as the questions were in large part the same in all of the interview rounds, the teachers were likely somewhat prepared for the questions. The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. When the transcriptions were finished, the data were read multiple times over several weeks to become familiar with the statements and find patterns and similarities. The results were then organized according to the questions in the study.

One aim of such qualitative studies is to understand and highlight experiences and phenomena as they are described by the informants. As a result, Kvale (1989) and Bogdan and Biklen (1994) suggest that interview methods are preferred in qualitative studies. However, because subjective behaviour is so important, there is some uncertainty in interview studies, which means that generalization is limited (Theman, 1979). Some valuable information might have been lost, depending on what the mentee chose to share and the interviewers' interpretations.

Results

In this article, only the part of the interviews that concerns the mentoring itself (Lindgren 2003) is presented. To protect the identity of the individuals, their names have been replaced by numbers 1–7, and their gender is not disclosed.

Frequency of mentor meetings

Five of the mentees said they had managed to meet their mentor weekly or every other week for one- or two-hour discussions. One mentee fortuitously met the mentor during the first semester, and after the summer holiday, at the mentee's request, a new mentor was assigned. Meetings with the new mentor then occurred weekly during the last semester. For another mentee, contact with the mentor gradually decreased when cooperation with a teacher in a parallel class was established. During the last semester, there were no meetings with the first mentor.

Both of these mentees said it was much easier to find times for meetings and to talk with the newer colleague. This is consistent with the results of Tellez (1992) concerning where beginning teachers look for support. Even if they were assigned a mentor, some of them preferred other teachers or relatives of their own choosing.

Contents in the mentor meetings

According to Stanulis (1994) and McNamara (1995), mentoring built upon reflective talks can support the professional, as well as the personal development of beginning teachers, assuming the mentees pay attention to and are prepared for the possibilities. The time for the individual meetings in this study was usually booked in advance. Therefore it could be expected that the mentees were prepared for discussion, but in reality, it was not so planned. Five of the mentees saw the interactions with the mentor as more spontaneous and used the time to talk about things that had recently occurred. Just two mentees regularly planned for the talks:

> I have also done a list on what I will discuss and a list of questions on what I have experienced … I was thinking of which areas I found hard and tried to come up with questions based on my experiences. Most often, I chose subjects that I had experienced, something from my past, and maybe how I handled that situation and what my mentor would have done. (Mentee 2)

> It has happened, if you say so, that I have written down situations that have occurred in the classroom with turbulent pupils, to have something to discuss with the mentor later on. (Mentee 4)

Although speaking with a more experienced teacher when unforeseen things occur is beneficial, it is likely that the mentoring could have been more valuable for the mentees if they had prepared in advance. However, the mentees had not been provided with suggestions for discussion topics. They were only informed that the talks should focus on their own needs; for instance, one mentee considered the problems with pupils with special needs especially important:

> Concerning the pedagogy around the boy with difficulties in maths and the boy with social problems and no friends, and so on, it is hard to know how to act in those situations. We have no common policy. (Mentee 4)

Another mentee said that he or she received practical advice about both laboratory experiments in chemistry and simply surviving as a teacher:

> Plenty of advice how to simplify your work. I usually present how I have been thinking, and he normally thinks my plans involve too much work. He would never consider doing all that, even if he worked full time. [Did he mean you put down too much effort or that it becomes too much work for the pupils?] Too much work for me. He thought I complicated things. (Mentee 3)

Five of the mentees said they mainly talked with the mentor about the different tasks of a teacher:

> Cooperation with parents, how to handle conflicts, assessment meetings, they are the major parts. (Mentee 1)

> This is the hardest part to know, that you are a teacher, not the person who many times is criticized by parents in despair, and that you have a role as a teacher. It is not your personality that is criticized. We have been talking about evaluation meetings—i.e. how to plan them, and how to cope with conflicts with parents, that you do not become defensive, and so on. (Mentee 2)

> In the beginning it was about … well, from small practical details to larger things as problems with colleagues. For instance, when you are new and meet older more experienced colleagues it is not easy with bigger or small issues. We discussed quite frequently small practical details before lectures, and I got some advice. (Mentee 5)

According to similar studies (e.g. Bennett & Carré, 1993), questions about parent cooperation, the teachers' role, problems with colleagues, and assessment have been foci of the talks with the mentors. But the fact that teaching questions were not predominant in this study, mentioned by just one mentee, contradicts other findings that show beginning teachers' need of professional guidance for deeper understanding of teaching (e.g. McNamara, 1995; Tomlinson, 1995; Britton, 2003).

Reflection

Considering that reflection is stressed in teacher education, it was surprising that only two of the mentees voluntarily mentioned it during the interviews. But when they were directly asked about reflection, all of them could provide examples:

> Yes, that is what I have lived after, that is what we have been working with. So, that has been important. Yes, I think I have reflected over what I and my mentor have been discussing. (Mentee 4)

> The reflections have been part of my first year, and they have made my work more fun in some ways. I can now also see things in a wider perspective. Before it was more about what I will do next lecture, and now it is more about what is important to learn. It has made me think in a wider perspective. (Mentee 7)

Two mentees suggested that they should have reflected more than they did:

> Well, it feels like this … since I am fairly fresh as a teacher, I have been trained from the teachers' college to reflect, reflect, reflect. I don't think I have improved but it feels like everybody is stressing that. It is too bad I never write down what I think, instead I think of what went wrong. That is what I usually think about. I do not reflect over what went well; instead I am so happy. This went well, then you do not reflect what went well, just that it turned out well. But as soon as things do not turn out, then you think, *what was it that went wrong*. (Mentee 1)

> A bit more, even if I have not thought about it, I for sure try. I always reflect if something went particularly well or something did not turn out well, concerning things I have done in the classroom. Then you bring it up and think about it, if it was good maybe I can do the same thing again. But not if it went bad. You try to evaluate yourself by reflection now and then. (Mentee 2)

It was clear that most of the mentees were unaware of their own reflections, as well as the advantages of reflection. However, different statements during the interviews proved that they reflected much more than was first apparent. It would be helpful for teacher educators to stress the advantages of reflecting and show the students appropriate tools for doing so. The fact that mentoring is built upon reflective talks was not considered by the mentees, nor possibly by the mentors, despite their training.

Mentee development

After one year, six of seven mentees could see that they had grown as individuals, partly due to the support they received through the mentoring. One mentee was unsure of his own development due to the nature of the discussions. In general, though, the mentees gained knowledge about themselves, including:

- an increased sense of safety;
- the possibility to change perspective;
- the capacity to ask for help;
- increased flexibility in teaching;
- increased capacity to identify teaching duties.

The task of the mentors was to support the mentees based on their individual needs. Therefore it was interesting to know if the mentees experienced that support as professional or personal. Three of them indicated that the mentor had especially been important for their professional development, as is exemplified by two statements:

> In some way the discussions have led to a professional development … to try to be more precise. Last term, I stressed being distinct in what I said to the pupils and to a large extent also with the parents; but this term, I have stressed being more distinct with myself, or in other words, I have realized you can never be too distinct with colleagues. (Mentee 4)

> I think it is professional development. I do not think I have had the need to be emotionally supported. (Mentee 6)

Three other mentees said they had received both personal and professional support, for example:

> As much of both parts. Of course, the emotional might have been in favour since it is tough the first year and then you discuss emotions … It depends what you have experienced just before the meeting. If it has been hard, then you might start the discussion with that. (Mentee 2)

> I have to say both—it has been a wholeness … it is seldom I do not know, about what to do, instead I want to tell what I have thought and get feedback. Not that I ask questions; I rather describe what I have thought and the mentor asks the questions. (Mentee 7)

Even if the form of support given through the mentoring can be unclear for a mentee, most of the mentees had an opinion about its effects. In connection with other statements during the interviews, frequency of meetings, advance preparation for the discussions and personal reflection were considered important. Only one mentee was not so sure that the mentor talks had promoted any progress at all, because they had discussed only questions of a practical nature. Future research, giving the mentees categories of the two functions—personal and professional support—might capture further aspects of the mentors' support and contribute to a deeper understanding of effects of mentoring.

Experiences of mentoring

As a summary question, the novices were asked what they thought were the most significant experiences of mentoring. Three of the mentees stated it was the possibility to talk confidentially with a more experienced teacher without fear of judgement. For two of the mentees, the help and support they had received from their mentors in multiple areas had been most appreciated. One mentee stated that though the support from the mentor was very positive, a decrease in teaching activity for beginning teachers—75–80% of full-time work—would be advantageous.

For another mentee, the awareness that all experienced teachers are not suitable as mentors was the most important realization. This opinion is shared by Feiman-Nemser (2001), who argues that teachers must be educated about a mentor's duties and responsibilities before the mentoring begins. The mentors in this project *were* trained, but their training likely needed improvement.

Improvements for future mentoring programs

As a result of their own mentoring, all of the mentees said they would recommend it to others, as shown in the following examples:

> When you are new, you need a lot of support. It is hard the first years. There are things you do not understand in the work. You can talk about whatever you want and even about feelings. The more you get the possibility to talk, the more confidence you will get in your role, because you are very uncertain in the beginning. It is natural to want to get support. (Mentee 1)

> [With mentoring] you will understand your tasks much faster. You will save yourself headaches about things that are the school's responsibility. Because of that, if you have a mentor who knows and has time for you, it will facilitate a novice in knowing the job. (Mentee 2)

> I think it ought to be a matter of course for a novice teacher to get a mentor who is responsible for introduction, reflection and follow-up. (Mentee 6)

Although all of the mentees were satisfied with their experience, they recommended the following improvements for future mentoring programs:

- The aim of the mentorship must be clearly defined for the participants.
- The mentors must be whole-heartedly motivated.
- The mentees must take responsibility for a productive mentorship.
- The mentor discussions must address the mentee's concerns.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to describe the mentoring experiences of seven novice teachers during their first-year teaching. Since the number of participants was low and the mentoring period was only one year, the conclusions from this study are difficult to generalize. Nevertheless, the results indicate that mentoring is a proficient method for supporting novice teachers, a theory supported by numerous researchers (e. g. Brookes & Sikes, 1997; Ganser, 2002; Kajs, 2002). One notable discrepancy in the other studies is that discussions concerning pedagogical issues took place to such a low degree in this mentoring program. In future mentoring programs the participants—both mentors and mentees—ought to be informed that educational discussions are important and can greatly improve understanding.

The clearest sign of mentoring success, in this study, is that six of seven of the mentees mentioned they had positively developed as individuals. The development was described as both professional and personal, and all of the mentees wanted to recommend mentorship to other new teachers. Even though one of the mentees was disappointed with the mentor and two sought out new mentors, the advantages were still apparent. Such problems with communication, however, could likely have been avoided if the project leaders had been more observant and had had regular follow-up talks with the mentees.

Usually, well-organized mentoring is successful for the mentors, as well as for the mentees. In this study, only the mentees' voices were heard. Therefore, further

research is necessary to examine the mentors' experiences. In order to truly understand the effects of mentoring, it would also be of interest to study the education and experience of the mentees prior to mentoring.

Despite the finding that six of the seven mentees did not plan the content of the talks in advance, they could give examples of development. However, if they had initially set up personal goals and a preliminary plan for the talks, they would probably have increased their development, as targeted reflecting talks usually contribute to progress (Chubbuck *et al.*, 2001; Lucas, 2001). Mentoring is a process, and like other processes it takes time to both develop the relationship and achieve desirable effects (Cederqvist *et al.*, 2004). The mentoring process will likely be facilitated if the mentees are aware of the goals and expectations.

The low awareness the mentees had upon their own reflections is likely due to the fact that reflection is usually not done explicitly. It is something one is expected to do without talking about it. Therefore, discussions about what reflection is and how, when and why reflection should be done are important, as well as asking both mentors and mentees relevant questions at the beginning of mentorship programs.

The constructive improvements for subsequent mentorship programs suggested by the mentees can be viewed as something the mentees had missed during their time in the program. Many of the mentees' concerns could be avoided by better education and preparation of the mentors. A well-informed mentor will likely take more responsibility and be more resolute with meeting the goals of the mentorship. The theory of 'educative mentorship' of Feiman-Nemser (2001) could serve as a guideline for mentor courses.

It is also desirable that more municipalities in Sweden, in cooperation with teacher education, include mentorship in their induction programs. The positive experiences from this study will hopefully contribute to interest in supporting beginning teachers with mentoring, as well as educating future mentors. However, to fully understand the effects of mentoring for novice teachers on the professional and the personal level further studies based on more mentees and mentors must be carried out.

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