

Mentoring Pre-Service English Teachers: Mentors' Perspectives

Anzela Nikolovska

English Department, Blaze Koneski Faculty of Philology, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje, Macedonia

Abstract- The aim of the paper is to present the results of a qualitative research into mentors' perceptions of participating in a pilot mentoring program for pre-service English teachers. The study investigates mentors' motives for mentoring as well as the outcomes for the mentors. The findings corroborate the findings of previous research. The survey revealed that the most common motives were the desire to support novice teachers and the need for professional development. The benefits of mentoring for the mentors included enhanced professional learning as well as personal growth and satisfaction. The most common challenge was the increased workload. Mentors' suggestions on how to improve the mentoring program can be taken into account in planning future mentoring programs.

Index Terms- pre-service teachers, mentors, perspectives, benefits, challenges.

I. INTRODUCTION

The origin of the concept of *mentoring* can be traced back to Greek mythology. In Homer's epic poem *Odyssey*, Mentor was Odysseus's friend who watched over Odysseus's son while Odysseus was away helping him grow into a young adult (Green-Powell, 2012 as cited in McCollum, 2014). This sense of a more experienced individual guiding and supporting the development of a younger and less experienced person has been at the core of the concept of mentoring.

There is absence of a widely accepted operational definition of mentoring as the concept of mentoring is used in a number of contexts and for a number of purposes (Jacobi, 1991). In the context of English language teacher education it has been used to refer either to support provided by a more experienced teacher (mentor) to trainee teachers in pre-service teacher training or to beginner teachers in the first years of teaching. This support is mainly directed to the development of mentees' teaching expertise and their induction into the professional culture. Apart from the support role, mentors can perform other roles, as the literature on mentoring reveals. Fullerton and Malderez (1998) in (Malderez & Bodozcky, 1999: 4) contend that mentors can also take the following roles: role-model (to inspire and demonstrate), acculturator (to help mentee to get acculturated into the professional culture), sponsor ("to use their power in the service of the mentee"), and educator ("to achieve professional learning objectives.")

Since the 1980s there has been a surge of interest in mentoring which can primarily be attributed to the need to overcome the gap between theoretical and practical aspects of teacher education and facilitate the induction of trainee teachers

into the school culture (Hobbson et al., 2009; Feiman-Nemser, 1996 as cited in Iancu-Haddad and Oplatka, 2009). Another reason for the emergence of formal school-based mentoring programs in many countries was to overcome the increasing attrition of newly qualified teachers in the first years of their career caused by the lack of support and the inability to cope with the reality shock. A third reason was to retain the capable teachers in the role of mentors (Little, 1990 in Hobbson et al., 2009). Effective mentoring programs were found to have several positive outcomes such as improved quality of classroom instruction, increased teacher confidence and job satisfaction as well as reduced teacher attrition (Ingersoll & Strong, 2012 as cited in McCollum, 2014)

There has been a plethora of studies dealing with different aspects of mentoring since the 1990s. In their exhaustive literature review of empirical studies on mentoring beginning teachers, Hobbson et al. (2009) report on the findings of research regarding the potential benefits and disadvantages of mentoring for mentees, mentors, schools and the educational system. In addition, they comment on the factors influencing the success of mentoring programs. Most studies on mentoring have focused on the impact of mentoring for novice teachers. Interest in studying the effects for the mentors has started to emerge recently (Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009). The summary of research findings on the advantages and the disadvantages of mentoring for mentors (Hobbson et al., 2009; Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009) indicates that the main benefits for mentors include learning new instructional strategies, increased learning through self-reflection and cooperation as well as increased confidence and satisfaction. The major negative implications are stress and energy drain caused by the increased workload and a loss of privacy.

Synthesizing the research evidence on mentoring beginning teachers, Hobbson et al. (2009) conclude that if conditions for effective mentoring are fulfilled, mentoring can play a vital role in the professional development of beginner teachers.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The context of the study

The aim of the present study is to explore mentors' perspectives on the effects of a pilot mentoring project entitled INSET for PRESETT launched by the British Council and Blaze Koneski Faculty of Philology in Skopje in December 2014. The project came out of the acknowledged need for more practical experience in teaching for pre-service teachers. Practical teaching experience of pre-service English teachers at Blaze Koneski Faculty of Philology is limited to fifteen hours of lesson

observation in the final year and teaching two lessons at either primary or secondary school.

The main aim of the project was to support the development of professional competencies of pre-service English teachers by engaging them in a formal mentoring scheme. The participants in the project were ten mentors with at least five years of teaching experience as either primary or secondary school teachers, thirty teacher trainees and two University tutors who coordinated the project. Each mentor was assigned three trainees to work with. The selection of mentors was done through nomination by the project coordinators. Some of the mentors had already had some experience in mentoring novice teachers in preparation for the certification exam after the first year of teaching. The rest of the mentors had mentored pre-service teachers who observed their lessons as part of the University Teaching Practicum. Although they did not have any experience in mentoring, a couple of mentors were active members of the English Language Teachers' Association of Macedonia and had already been actively involved in many of its activities. The trainees had all joined the project on a voluntary basis.

The project centered around the following activities: a two-day mentor training delivered by the project coordinators and six observation cycles for each mentor-mentee pair. Each cycle consisted of two classes taught by the mentor and observed by the mentee, two team-teaching sessions collaboratively planned and taught by each mentor-mentee pair and two classes taught by the mentee and observed by the mentor. Learning by reflecting on teaching was facilitated throughout the mentoring arrangement. Each lesson observation was followed by a post-lesson discussion (PLD) and the main points were summarized in a PLD form. Reflecting on the lessons observed and taught was guided by filling in observation and self-assessment forms. In addition, the mentors reflected on mentees' overall progress by completing a final report. All of these reflection forms made up the mentees' portfolios.

Objectives and research questions

The purpose of this qualitative method study was to examine mentors' perspectives on the mentoring experience during the pilot mentoring project INSET for PRESETT which took place between December 2014 and June 2015. The research focused on the following research questions:

1. What are mentors' motives for participating in the mentoring project?
2. What are the perceived benefits and challenges of mentoring for the mentors?

Data collection and procedure

The data were collected by an online survey and informal interviews with some of the mentors. The questionnaire for the mentors designed for this study consisted of 8 open-ended questions (see Appendix). In case additional information was needed on some of the questions, informal interviews were carried out with some of the mentors. The survey responses were coded to identify themes which were then categorized and analyzed. We focused on the themes pertinent to the research questions.

Participants

The participants in the survey were 22 pre-service teachers (one male and 21 female) and 8 mentors (all female) who were involved in the INSET for PRESETT mentoring project.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Mentors' motives for participating in the mentoring project

The aim of first research question was to investigate what motivated teachers to become mentors. In order to understand the context of the study, we find it necessary to point out that during the project, the mentors were not relieved of their regular teaching duties.

Empathizing with pre-service teachers' needs for assistance seemed to be the dominant motive. Most of the mentors perceived mentoring as an opportunity to help novice teachers by sharing their knowledge and experience as more experienced teachers. Some illustrative quotations are provided below:

"I know that every novice teacher needs a helping hand...and I can do something about it...share my knowledge and personal experience and feel useful."

"I want to help other teachers define their individual goals and find ways to achieve them."

"...to help young people achieve their potential and discover their strengths."

Here are some additional comments in response to this question:

"...the mentor has the potential to change a young person's life."

"...the mentor contributes to building better, more stable and confident teachers."

"...mentoring is a way to give back something to the teaching profession."

Another motive emerging from the responses stemmed from the need for continuing professional development. Six of the mentors who participated in the survey mentioned that they had decided to become mentors for professional development reasons. Responses that were indicative of this motive included:

"...to refresh my knowledge of methodology...and keep up with the latest teaching methods and approaches."

"...to learn something new and challenging..."

"...because I value professional development."

"...for ongoing learning and growth."

One teacher-mentor was aware that mentoring would inspire her to do research-based teaching and become more self-aware as a teacher.

Another mentor believed that mentoring would be beneficial not only for her personal development but would also bring about acknowledgement for the school.

Insight into mentors' motives for participating in the mentoring program was also gained from the answers to the fourth question (What did you think you would gain from mentoring?). Developing professionally was again the most frequent theme, as illustrated by the following quotations:

"...to gain a different perspective on my own teaching skills...to further develop as a teacher."

"...to observe new effective teaching models...to improve teaching styles over time...learn by putting knowledge to practice."

“...to develop active listening and consultation skills.”
Mentors’ motives for participating in the INSET for PRESETT mentoring program reported in this study echo the findings of previous research. Iancu-Haddad and Oplatka (2009) have also found that the key factors motivating teachers to become mentors were: an altruistic attitude to help novice teachers based on mentors’ personal experience as novice teachers and a belief that mentoring could improve their school and the school system.

2. The perceived benefits and challenges of mentoring for mentors

2.1. The benefits

As the synthesis of research on mentoring has shown, mentors can benefit from mentoring in a number of ways (Iancu-Haddad and Oplatka, 2009; Hobson et al., 2009). Mentoring provides mentors with opportunities for professional learning by critical reflection on their own teaching and by observing mentees employ new teaching techniques and strategies. The impact of mentoring on the learning of mentors is also evident in mentors’ heightened awareness of their strengths and weaknesses as well as their professional needs. The increased interaction with mentees and university tutors leads to improved relationship with colleagues and students as well as enhanced communication skills. Collaborating with colleagues and sharing knowledge and experience has been associated with a reduced feeling of isolation often felt by practicing teachers. In addition, engaging in mentoring arrangements has been reported to create a feeling of increased self-confidence and job satisfaction.

The findings of the present study largely echo the findings of previous research outlined above. The major contributions of mentoring for the mentors were found to be both professional and personal.

All of the mentors have admitted that they had improved their teaching skills and enriched their repertoire of teaching techniques with new ideas by observing mentees’ teaching. The following quotations illustrate this feeling of professional growth:

“Mentoring has turned me into a better teacher, learning new ways of teaching and getting new ideas...”

“...increased learning...and teaching performance.”

“I enriched my professional portfolio and ... my teaching experience. I met wonderful and enthusiastic new teachers with fresh ideas and techniques.”

“...I learnt a lot of interesting activities and I realized what I need to change as a teacher.”

In the same vein, one mentor emphasized that mentoring had provided her with opportunities for “close collaboration, shared challenges and a sense of achievement...”.

Another important learning outcome for the mentors derived from engaging in critical self-reflection on their own practice. Creating opportunities for reflecting on teaching is considered to be one of the cornerstones of effective teaching (Frick et al., 2010). Reflective practice entails re-thinking the actions taken and the principles underlying these actions, “...particularly when professional performance goes especially well or especially badly” (Wallace, 2001:13). Teacher enquiry into their own practice is essential in making informed choices and planning for improvement.

Being embedded in the reflective mentoring model (see Furlong and Maynard, 1995 as cited in Leshem, 2012), the INSET for PRESETT project was designed to facilitate both mentors’ and mentees’ reflective learning. The mentors guided the mentees in their transition from university to the professional sector by engaging them in a reflective enquiry into their teaching which was facilitated by non-evaluative observation and constructive feedback. At the same time, the mentees’ feedback guided the mentors to rethink the principles behind their teaching and become more aware of the importance of principled behavior.

As some of the mentors have pointed out, talking about their own teaching or mentee’s teaching and reflecting on the feedback they received from the mentees had been an enriching experience. In addition, the discussions about teaching and learning in general were found to be very profitable. The following quotations illustrate the importance of reflection for mentors’ professional learning:

“I was learning from the opportunities to talk about teaching and learning...”

“I learned from the opportunities to analyze evidence of student learning which led to professional insights”

“I got the opportunity to rethink my teaching practice...”

“As I learned from this project, a good mentor protects his/her mentee from his own influence. A mentor is ...a guide, a pointer to the truth that each mentee must find for him/herself”.

“Mentoring made me realize I had fallen into a routine...”

Apart from the enhanced professional well-being, most of the mentors reported a sense of increased self-confidence as well as pride and satisfaction caused by helping mentees and having an influence on their progress. This finding again coincides with the findings of previous research on mentors’ personal growth as summarized by Hobson et al. (2009).

2.2. The challenges

In response to the question about possible negative aspects of mentoring, two of the mentors complained of the amount of paperwork whereas one mentor mentioned encouraging mentees to be on time with class reports as a problem. The rest of the respondents were unanimous in stating that they hadn’t experienced any problems. The increased workload was also found to be the major disadvantage in other studies (Lee & Fang, 2007 and Robinson & Robinson, 1999 as cited in Hobson et al., 2009; Bullough & Draper, 2004 as cited in Iancu Haddad & Opatka, 2009). In response to the question what was the most difficult aspect of working with the mentees, two of the mentors mentioned the time-consuming paperwork, one found it difficult to be tactful while giving constructive feedback, and another one pointed out “trying to meet mentee’s diverse needs” as a challenge. Difficulties in accommodating all mentees’ needs have also been reported as drawbacks in other studies on mentoring (Maynard, 2000 as cited in Hobson et al., 2009). The feelings of displacement, loss of privacy and frustration experienced by the mentors in other studies (Koerner, 1992 and Hastings, 2004 as cited in Iancu Haddad & Opatka, 2009) were not among the problems reported by the respondents in this study.

Mentors’ suggestions on how this mentoring program can be improved are indicative of other challenges for the mentors.

Although most of the mentors seemed to be satisfied with the outcomes of the project, there were a few ideas for improvement such as reducing the paperwork, working with one mentee at a time and most importantly, officially recognizing the professional status of teacher-mentors.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The study is significant because it is a contribution to the scarcity of literature on the outcomes of mentoring for the mentors. The research revealed that the major motives of mentors for mentoring were a desire to help novice teachers by sharing their knowledge and experience and a desire to develop professionally. The main professional benefits for the mentors included upgrading teaching skills and rekindling enthusiasm for teaching as well as enhanced reflection skills. The main personal benefits were an increased feeling of self-worth and satisfaction. The major disadvantage was the increased workload. The insight into mentors' perceptions of the mentoring experience can serve as a valuable source of ideas for designing future mentoring schemes.

APPENDIX

Questionnaire for the mentors participating in the INSET for PRESETT project

1. Why did you decide to become a mentor? What did you think you would gain from mentoring?
2. What were your expectations of mentoring? Were they met?
3. What were the benefits of mentoring for you? (professional, personal, etc.)
4. What were the negative aspects of mentoring for you, if any?

5. What was the most difficult part of your work with the mentees?
6. What were the results of mentoring for the school where you work?
7. What was the impact of mentoring on your pre-existing beliefs about teaching?
8. Can suggest any ways of improving the project?

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AUTHORS

Anzela Nikolovska, PhD: English Department, Blaze Koneski Faculty of Philology, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje, Macedonia