

## The Mentor and the Student-Teacher: An Important and Delicate Relationship

Merita Hoxha

PhD Candidate, Mentor teacher at "Naim Frashëri" school  
University "Aleksandër Xhuvani"  
E-mail: hoxha.merita@yahoo.com

Doi:10.5901/jesr.2016.v6n3p87

### Abstract

One of the key factors of preparing future teachers is the process of mentoring and as part of it the mentor teacher. The relationship between student-teachers and their mentors is very delicate, in some cases even cold and lame. The mentor teacher is the one that helps student-teachers connect the knowledge they get from their studies in universities with the real classroom environment, where they are going to implement their knowledge. As a bridge that connects the university to the schools, the role of the mentor teacher is that of a facilitator, a leader, and an adviser who will transmit to the future teachers the art of teaching. But, what is the mentors' perception of their role? How do they view the relation between mentors and student-teachers; and what are some of the advantages or the risks of this relationship? Does he/she feel motivated to better do the job? What are some of the problems they face during mentoring? On the other hand stands the student-teacher. What defines the relation he/ she has with the mentor teacher? How successful is the teaching practice? To what extent does the mentor affect in this success or lack of success? Is there anything that the student teacher would like to change in this relation; simple at first sight, but complicated if you see deep inside? Through interviews with 13 mentors of Elbasan and a questionnaire with 38 student-teachers of "Aleksander Xhuvani" University, this paper will try to answer most of the above mentioned questions. Also part of this study will be some suggestions for a better mentorship and recommendations.

**Keywords:** mentor, student-teacher, relationship, schools, teaching practice, mentoring.

### 1. Introduction

Ever since Hommer first mentioned Mentor in his book *Odysseus* the term mentor has been widely used around the world. Although there are many definitions of this term, in education it generally refers to someone who:

- guides unexperienced teachers
- helps future teachers acquire initial teaching skills
- serves as collegial and emotional supporter for the student-teachers
- serves as a trusted counselor or guide

Freeman (1982, reported by Nizegorodcew 1996) distinguishes three styles of mentors:

1. **the supervisory model** where the mentor suggests the required changes in the student-teacher's behaviour, attitudes etc, modelled on his/her own behaviour. It is probably the most traditional and popular model of mentorship; and follows a well-established tradition of prescriptive teacher training.
2. **The alternative model**, where the mentor suggests alternatives in the way of handling a particular teaching point; and the student-teacher is to select among the alternatives.
3. **The non-directive model**, where the mentor directs the student-teacher's attention to a particular teaching point, without necessarily accepting it or giving alternative solutions, to enable the student to fully understand what he/she is doing

Whatever the style of the mentor is, her/his role during the observation and teaching practice is crucial for the future teachers. Scholars consider that there are many roles a mentor has to play. Some of these roles of the mentor are: an adviser, a guide, a "critical friend" a coach, a supporter, a transmitter of knowledge, a counsellor etc. According to Tomlinson (1995, reported in Zanting 1998) there are two major roles of the mentor:

1. the effective coach, challenging and stimulating students' motivation and commitment,
2. the effective facilitator, supporting teaching skills, including counselling.

Zachary (2000) considers the mentor of these days as the facilitator of a learning relationship which is focused on the accomplishment of student-teachers' goals and objectives. To make this possible, according to the author, it is necessary for the mentor to invest in his/her professional development. While Arthur, Davidson & Moss (2003) say that

the role of subject mentoring itself involves modelling good practice in the widest sense: in particular, the values of the profession.

Because of these roles according to Wilkin (1992) mentors should be carefully chosen and generally should be highly qualified veterans with management and subject-based experience.

On the other hand Thiel (1999) declares the key to successful mentoring must surely be a willingness on the part of experienced teachers to be mentors, to encourage autonomy and effective teaching amongst trainees, and to have a commitment to the profession.

"Aleksander Xhuvani" University prepares teachers for many subjects. During their Master Studies the future teachers have to observe and practice teaching in elementary and middle schools. The observation and teaching practice is organised by the university in this way:

- First term – 15 weeks, observe 2 classes per week
- Second term – 15 weeks, 1 day per week (3 classes observation, 1 class teaching at elementary schools)
- Third term – 10 weeks, 1 day per week, (3 classes observation, 1 class teaching at elementary schools)
- Third term – teaching practice for 5 weeks

During all this time the student-teachers and mentors have to collaborate with each other and build a strong relationship. The relationship between mentors and student-teachers is very important for the development of both parts during mentoring. Johnson & Ridley (2008) suggest that mentorships are developmental relationships and that these relationships should be planned by the part of the mentor for the development, change and eventual ending. Otherwise, stress the authors, they risk stagnation and disintegration.

In fact what results is that sometimes this collaboration does not function as it is supposed to. Sometimes there is a gap in this collaboration which might be because of planning or lack of planning, or even because of mentors overlapping their roles. Another reason might be the student-teacher himself.

Some scholars believe that the success of mentoring depends mostly on the student-teacher. Cullingford (2006) declares that in order for mentoring to be successful the student-teacher should:

- Follow the procedures
- Be a good listener
- Ask for help
- Listen to the advices
- Accept the mistakes
- Reflect on his/her experiences
- Have good interpersonal skills

While student-teachers are so eager to learn, their learning and formation depend too much on the mentor. Arthur, Davidson and Moss (2003) say that the student-teacher will generally follow or even emulate the practice of the subject mentor, especially at the early stages of teaching experience, so it is important that the subject mentor realises this possibility and, as far as is possible, presents the highest standards of teaching and professional practice to the student teacher.

Some scholars: Shea (1992), Eby (1997), Santamaria (2003), Zachary (2005) believe that mentoring is a relationship; a developing relationship. Having said that we can consider the collaboration between mentors and student-teachers as the heart of this relationship.

## 2. The Mentor

13 mentors (teachers of foreign languages) in 8 elementary schools in the city of Elbasan were interviewed for this research. The aim of the interview was to point out what problems do the mentors face, what their level of motivation is, how much aware they are about their responsibilities and their role and what they really need in order to help the student-teachers.

Here are some of the results of the interviews.

When asked about how important they consider their role as a mentor, 80% of the mentors answered they consider their work as very important. This may be due to the fact that they feel they have responsibilities in preparing future teachers. They say that as mentors their role is to:

- Advice student-teacher how to manage different situations and to be successful
- Guide them throughout the teaching practice

- Support student-teachers professionally and personally
- Create a “friendly” environment in which to transmit their knowledge and experiences to student-teachers.
- Help student-teachers become familiar with their future profession

Mentors also state that they face many problems while mentoring. Following are some of these problems:

**Lack of time and the big number of students.** Sometimes, especially during the observation session, a mentor has to welcome around 8 student-teachers per class. This means that he/she has to accommodate them and usually there is not enough space where to sit. At the same time the mentors should give them directions and teach. At the end of the lesson the student-teachers have to go back to the university, while the mentor has to go back and teach his classes. This means that mentors and student-teachers have no time to share ideas about the class or give feedback. While, Thiel (1999) says that mentors frequently have many professional responsibilities and the available time for counselling and guiding student-teachers is limited. This is something that we also notice very often in our schools.

**Mentors' lack of motivation.** Again in a 5 scale rating the mentors were asked to tell their level of motivation. The chart below describes mentors' level of motivation.

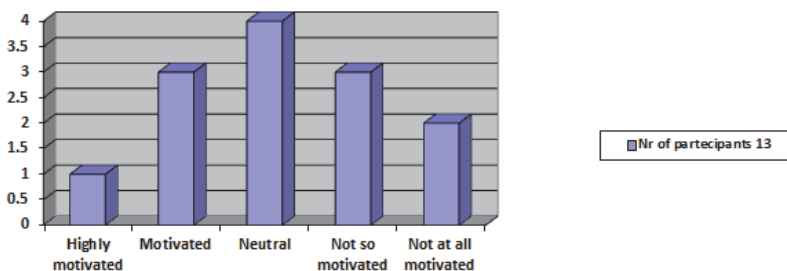


Figure 1. Mentors' level of motivation

As we can see some of the mentors are not so motivated or no motivated at all and this may lead to other problems during mentoring. Below are some reflections of experienced mentors:

*I am unable to say that I am satisfied or motivated about my “job” as a mentor. Our job is not praised, we are not evaluated, nor motivated, but I still welcome student-teachers because I love my job, I love teaching and I want to give my own contribution for the future generations.*

*Everything I do, I do it for my own pleasure, because I love teaching and I want to share my almost 20 year experience as a teacher with the student-teachers. Unfortunately, I feel that as a mentor I am not praised by the institutions, I work on hard conditions and I only get a ridiculous payment for what I do.*

*I feel no motivated at all and sometimes I even feel not important and useless in this position.*

Apart from other factors the motivation of the mentors is the one that mostly affects the process of mentoring among mentors in our city. Thus, it is important that they have a higher level of motivation and satisfaction.

One of the topics of the interviews was the relation mentors establish with student-teachers during mentoring. Most of the mentors declared that they pay much attention to building and maintaining strong and professional relationships. They say that it is easier for them to create a constructive relationship if they and the student-teachers have the possibility to choose each other for the mentoring process. They say that the possibility to choose each other has different advantages, such as:

- It generally leads in building a strong relationship in which both parts are willing to collaborate and develop
- It helps student-teachers' self esteem and makes them feel confident
- It spares time and the embarrassment of working/ collaborating with unknown people
- It makes the job of the mentor easier as they are working with someone they like and/or trust.

On the other hand one of the risks it may have, according to the mentors, is that if both the parts are not careful it may end up in a more personal than professional relationship. Another risk is that for some of the student-teachers the fact that they were the chosen ones might make them overestimate themselves. For these reasons it is important to

once again highlight the words of Johnson and Ridley (2008) that in a mentoring process the mentor should also think about planning the relationship with the student-teachers.

### 3. The Student-Teacher

The student-teacher is the heart of the process of mentoring. During the observation and the teaching practice he/she has to make a connection of what was taught to him/her in the auditorium with what happens in real classes. The mentor in this case is the facilitator that will help them make this connection. Unfortunately, sometimes both the mentor and the student-teacher get lost in the process of mentoring. The mentor and the problems he/she faces during mentoring, which were mentioned above, are only one part of this failure.

38 student-teachers enrolled at Master Studies Programme in "Aleksander Xhuvani" University, were part of a questionnaire aiming to point out their opinion about the teaching practice and the process of mentoring. They were all students preparing to become English Language teachers who had just finished their 5 weeks teaching practice.

Here are some of the results of the questionnaire.

- 92% of the student-teachers consider the teaching practice as very important. They state that although sometimes they do not feel comfortable enough with what they do, the observation and the teaching practice help them understand what they are expected to do in a real class.
- 62% of the student-teachers said they get regular feedback from their mentors during the teaching practice but not as much during the observation. They suggest that this might be due to the fact that the time is limited during the observation
- Almost all the student-teachers consider the role of the mentor teacher as very important for their future career. Below are the reflections of some student-teachers about this topic:

*Observing my mentor teach makes me feel honored having chosen this profession. She shows so much passion on what she does and she transmits it to me together with her knowledge and the techniques she uses to teach. (Kela)*  
*I am aware that part of my success as a future teacher belongs to my mentor and our relationship. Our relationship is special; it is professional but at the same time friendly and warm. I do not feel judged by my mentor even though I make mistakes. He patiently asks me to reflect on what I did, advises me or asks me to find a solution. (Alda)*

- 70% of the student-teachers want to have a much stronger collaboration with their mentors. They say that they feel more motivated when they know they are welcomed, when they are part of a friendly environment and when the mentors ask for their opinion.

In a study by Tellez (1992) he observed that student-teachers may feel uncomfortable and embarrassed asking for help from a mentor, and the mentor may seem distant and aloof or inaccessible. A stronger collaboration would make possible that this problem gets overlapped.

As we can see both student-teachers (92%) and mentors (80%) consider the teaching practice very important. This might be an indicator that if all the necessary conditions are provided for them, the mentoring process will be more successful.

When asked about what would help them to have a more successful teaching practice, they mostly answered:

- Have pre and post observation discussions/sessions
- Have a stronger collaboration with their mentor
- Get regular feedback
- Have a schedule/program prepared in cooperation with the mentor
- Observe different mentors

### 4. Conclusions

Mentoring is considered a very important process by mentors and student-teachers for their future profession. Both actors consider the relationship as very important but stress that it needs improvement and strengthening, because it is a delicate relation which may lead to many problems for the preparation of the future teachers.

Mentors face different problems while mentoring such as: big number of student-teachers and accommodation, student-teachers commitment. They accept they have some training for what they do and they want to be trained to successfully accomplish their mission.

On the other hand mentors do not feel very motivated by their work and this one of the reasons why the process of

mentoring becomes disputable for them.

Student-teachers say that they need to spend more time with their mentors so that they could discuss, get appropriate feedback and directions. They need pre and post observation sessions in order to collaborate with their mentors and to strengthen their relation.

Collaboration and strong relationships are the key to a successful process of mentoring.

## 5. Suggestions for a Better Mentorship

As a crucial process in the preparation of the future teachers, mentoring needs some improvement. The university in collaboration with the Regional Departments of Education should provide continuous trainings for the mentors including finding ways to build strong relationships between them. These institutions should work together to motivate mentors.

The pre and post observation sessions and workshops would help the mentors and student-teachers strengthen their relationship.

## References

- Allen Tammy D, Eby Lilliam T, Lentz Elizabeth (2006) *The relationship between formal mentoring program characteristics and perceived program effectiveness*. Person Psychol.
- Arthur. J, Davidson. J and Moss. J (2003) *Subject Mentoring in the Secondary School* Taylor & Francis e-Library
- Dietlind Fischer, Lydia van Andel (2002): *Mentoring in Teacher Education - towards innovative school development* Poland
- Faire Mary. 1994. *Improving the Practicum: The Professional Development Needs of Lecturers, Associate Teachers and Student Teachers*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Teacher Education Association
- Freeman Donald (1982), "Observing Teachers: Three Approaches to In-Service Training and Development" in *TESOL Quarterly*
- Johnson. W.B & Ridley. C (2008) *The elements of mentoring*. Palgrave, Macmillan, USA
- Nizegorodcew Anna. PRINCE Links Conference 1996: *Mentoring-an unknown skill?*
- Tellez Kip. (1992). *Mentors by choice, not design: Help-seeking by beginning teachers*. *Journal of Teacher Education*
- Thiel Teresa (1999) *The English Teacher* Vol XXVIII :*From trainee to autonomus teacher* Moray House Institute of Education
- Wilkin Margaret. (1992). *Mentoring in Schools*. London: Kogan Page.
- Zachary, JL (2000) *The mentor's guide.facilitating effective learning relationships*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, USA
- Zanting Anneke (1998): *Explicating Practical Knowledge: an extension of mentor teachers' roles*. *European Journal of Teacher Education* Vol 21 (1998)

