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**THE ROLE OF THE MENTOR IN THE ACTIVITY OF THE
BEGINNER TEACHER**

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Abstract

The concept of mentoring has evolved much in recent years, being increasingly tied to the concept of the Professional Learning Community. The mentor has to be an expert in his field of activity. Their role should be to increase the disciple's self-confidence, challenging them to do their best in order to capitalize on professional opportunities, but especially to form a reflexive practitioner. Although there is a legal framework in Romania, the schools in Bihor do not have in their organizational charts teachers with the official mentor status. The aim of this research was to assess the beginner teachers' perception of the need for a mentor at the beginning of the teaching career. The specific objectives of the research were the following: (1) identifying the beginner teachers' perception of the need for a mentor as support at the beginning of their teaching activity; (2) identifying the difficulties faced by beginner teachers in their work; (3) identifying beginner teachers' opinions on ways of professional and personal development. The instrument used in conducting the research was a questionnaire consisting of 20 multiple choice item. It was administered to beginner teachers from upper-secondary schools in Bihor county, Romania. The results show that although all respondents agree on the necessity of a mentor, in most cases this role is fulfilled by an experienced teacher, without having time assigned for this activity. This makes the activity seem sporadic, there is not always continuity and no pursuit of a personalized mentoring plan.

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1. Introduction

We live today in an ever changing world. Education systems should adjust themselves to this dynamic, which is social, economic, cultural, political etc., so that they can train young people who are capable of meeting the expectations of society. School, as part of the community, should always look for solutions to make the education process more modern and more effective. One of the components which requires a particular attention in this respect is the quality of the human resources involved in the teaching activity, more precisely, the initial and continued training of teachers. It is no doubt that the quality of teachers determines the quality of the teaching process. This is the reason why in all countries of the world the initial training of teachers is treated with the utmost seriousness and efforts are constantly made to find ways of improving this process. Equally, mentoring periods under the supervision of mentors is a key stage in harmonizing theoretical knowledge with practical one, the stage of shaping the professional identity.

In the literature (Murray & Owen, 1991; Caldwell & Carter, 1993; Carter & Francis, 2001; Hobson et al., 2009; McLaughlin, 2010; Gamlem, 2015; Ambler, Harvey & Cahir, 2016 etc.), there are several interpretations of the mentoring process. All of them, however, state that, in education, mentoring is a complex process which involves guiding and supporting a beginner teacher or a student who wants to become a teacher. A mentor teacher supervises and advises another teacher, who lacks experience, on solving teaching-learning-assessment issues, provides professional support and guides the development of the new teacher by reflection, collaboration and evaluation, helping their introduction to the culture of the profession and to the specific local context. Some studies have even suggested that mentoring is the most important and effective way of supporting the professional development of beginner teachers (Carter & Francis, 2001; Franke & Dahlgren, 1996; Marable & Raimondi, 2007). Mentoring benefits those who are at the beginning of their career in multiple ways: it reduces the feeling of isolation, increases self-confidence and self-esteem, helps professional development and improves the capacity for self-reflection and problem solving (McIntyre & Hagger, 1996). The benefits of mentoring also refer to providing emotional and psychological support, which have proved to be useful for improving beginner teachers' self-confidence, helping them in this way to put difficult experiences in perspective and increase their professional ethics and satisfaction (Bullough, 2005; Lindgren, 2005; Marable & Raimondi, 2007).

Continued training of beginner teachers inevitably assumes a permanent preparation for embracing the new roles they are faced with and for which they need a specific training, grounded mainly on the experience of the mentor teacher. When somebody is integrated in the organization through mentoring, they have immediate access to the mentor's professional experience and perspective, to the knowledge needed to get a current or future position within the organization, to developing some action methods adjusted to concrete situations, as well as to improving personal capacities and abilities or personality traits (flexibility, openness, communication, mutual understanding) (Pânișoară, 2009).

2. Problem Statement

Mentoring relationships can be formal and informal (McLaughlin, 2010; Wong & Premkumar, 2007, para. 4). Formal mentoring relationships usually develop at workplaces through well-designed, well-structured mentoring programs, where program objectives, timetables, training (for mentors and mentees)

and evaluations are included. Informal relationships develop by chance between the partners. The informal mentoring conditions usually occur spontaneously and they are to a great extent of psycho-social nature.

In the Romanian education system there were no formal mentoring programs until the regulations included in Education Act no. 1/2011, neither at the level of the initial training, nor at that of the beginning of the professional activity. There were sporadic efforts to perform this type of work, but they were random, non-organized, and the mentors did not benefit from special training in this respect.

Today, however, we can see in Romania an impressive increase in the number of mentor training programs. Many university have master's degree programs or post-graduate courses in mentor training, and courses were also organized within international education programs, where the partners were universities or providers of such programs from countries with experience in this field. Despite all that, at present, in our country, the mentoring activity in the field of education is limited to the teaching practice done by those students who want to pursue a teaching career, which takes place under the supervision of a teacher from the university they attend and of a pre-university teacher, appointed by the leadership of the given faculty in cooperation with the specialty inspector of the County School Inspectorate.

Although there is a legal framework (Order of the Minister no. 5485/2011 and the corresponding Methodology of 29.09.2011), there is not a formal framework for the implementation of mentoring periods for beginner teachers. Their support in the first years of their activity, in the induction process, is done sporadically (sometimes with the help of a specialty inspector from the County Inspectorate or with that of an experienced teacher from the school).

Many aspects of the mentoring experience have proved to have an impact upon the learning of the mentors as well, through self-reflection or critical reflection on their own practices (Lopez-Real & Kwan, 2005; Simpson, Hastings ,& Hill, 2007). The true path to expertise in a certain field is given by the individual's constant reflective practice on their own activity and theories, the development of more and more effective positive strategies based on reflective practices. It is obvious that the effectiveness and richness of these reflections depends on an extensive knowledge in a field (Orțan, 2017). You cannot form a reflective young person if you yourself lack this component. The introduction of reflexivity in the mentoring periods is a crucial condition.

3. Research Questions

The aim of our research was to analyze the ways of performing mentoring for beginner teachers in Romanian schools, especially in Bihor county, from the perspective of the coordinator of a mentor training post-graduate program. The goal was to identify the strong points of this process, as well as the weak ones, highlighting the need to prioritize mentoring as a core part of the professional induction.

4. Purpose of the Study

Starting from the ideas presented above, the research had the following specific objectives: (1) identifying the beginner teachers' perception of the need for a mentor as support at the beginning of their teaching activity; (2) identifying the difficulties faced by beginner teachers in their work; (3) identifying beginner teachers' opinions on ways of professional and personal development. The sample of research consisted of 104 people (N = 104), all of them beginner teachers from pre-university schools in Bihor

county, Romania. The people included in the sample were chosen using the simple random sampling procedure, and they belonged to the following categories: according to gender: 87% females, 13% males, according to the school stage: 19% primary school teachers, 55% lower secondary school and 26% upper-secondary school, according to where they teach: 59% in urban areas, 41% in rural areas, 49% permanent teachers, 51% substitute ones.

5. Research Methods

The instrument used in this research was a questionnaire, which consisted of 20 multiple-choice items and 3 open-ended ones. The questionnaire was prepared by educationalists from the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of the University of Oradea. Each respondent filled in the printed questionnaire individually. The research implementation period was September 2017 - June 2018.

6. Findings

The quantitative interpretation of the results was performed by calculating the statistical frequency of the answers provided by the respondents. The results are presented below (Table 01).

Table 01. The beginning of the teaching career

Indicators	To a very great extent %	To a great extent %	To a small extent %	To a very small extent %	Not at all %
At the beginning of your teaching career, did you feel prepared from a professional point of view?	5	46	49	0	0
Did you benefit from a mentor's help?	0	0	6	10	94
Do you think a mentor is necessary in the first years of teaching?	88	12	0	0	0

Looking at Table 1, it can be seen that 49% of the respondents felt prepared to a small extent for the teaching profession. The essential criterion for legitimating the teaching profession in the field of social professions consists of the existence of a specific knowledge base and competences required to practice it. Most of the respondents felt they do not have this baggage. A significant segment of those who gave positive answers (5% to a very great extent and 46% to a great extent) teach in primary schools, and are those who benefited from training for the teaching activity both in teacher training high schools and later at university. Thus, they benefited from longer teacher training placements, which gave them the opportunity to observe, to act and then to structure their entire experience in a professionalisation model. As shown above, the mentoring activity in our country is performed in an organized, formal way only at the level of teaching practice, where the mentors provide guidance, support and feedback for the students who do their practice. Once they become the employees of a school, they lack the support of a mentor. 94% of the respondents did not benefit from the help of a person appointed for this role, of a mentor, although all respondents would have liked that (88% to a very great extent and 12% to a great extent) (Figure 01).

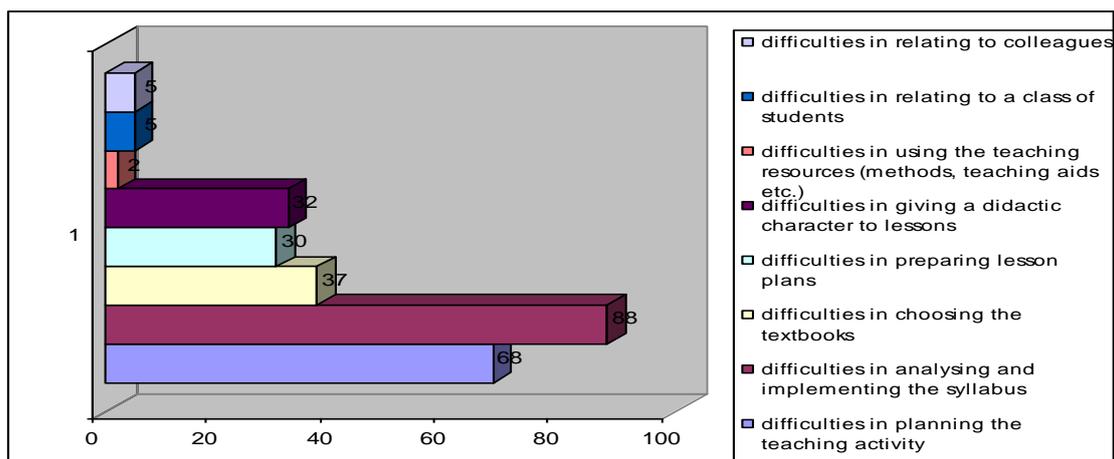


Figure 01. Difficulties faced at the beginning of the teaching activity

In principal, the knowledge and competences a teacher needs in order to perform their activity successfully can be divided in two big categories: professional knowledge in the corresponding curricular field and knowledge in the sphere of psychopedagogy and in that of the didactics of the discipline taught. The respondents' answers show that the difficulties faced in the first years of their teacher career do not refer to the professional ones, but rather to those of the didactics of the discipline taught and to those of psychopedagogy, that is, those connected to the way of teaching and to how to organize the students' learning process. The difficulties which got the highest percentages are those connected with analysing and implementing the syllabus, with planning teaching activities, with choosing textbooks. A very small percentage answered that they had difficulties in relating to the colleagues or to the students. Several studies have showed the impact of the guidance provided by mentors on beginner teachers' development capacities, especially concerning their behaviour and their abilities to manage the class and the capacity to manage time and workload (Lindgren, 2005). Although they go through initial training, where they practice such activities, they prove insufficient for the use of diverse methodologies in such different contexts. Furthermore, the perception of the teaching activity is different when it is no longer done fragmentarily (as teaching practice), but it is a continuous process, both in school and outside it. The presence of a support person proves necessary. The next table (Table 02) highlights aspects related to the role of an experienced teacher.

Table 02. The existence of support at the beginning of the teaching career

Indicators	To a very great extent %	To a great extent %	To a small extent %	To a very small extent %	Not at all %
Did you benefit from an experienced teacher whom you could turn to for help?	26	64	10	0	0
Have you ever asked for the help of an experienced person regarding the teaching activity?	35	65	0	0	0
Are you open to receive feedback from an experienced person/mentor?	91	9	0	0	0
Did you feel valorised in school by experienced colleagues?	11	31	47	9	2

As in most Romanian schools there are no officially hired mentors (as it should be according to documents in force), their role is being filled by experienced teachers, who, just like mentors, are willing to help an apprentice to develop in order to become successful. They are ready to invest time and effort and they are ready to share knowledge and personal experience with the young teachers in a confidential manner and based on mutual trust and respect. This explains why almost all respondents gave positive answers when they were asked if they had ever asked for help from an experienced person or if they had benefited from their help (26% to a very great extent, and 64% to a great extent). It is known that in order to achieve professional and personal development, beginner teachers should be open to feedback and advice. The answers to this question (91% to a very great extent and 9% to a great extent) show that the first condition required to have mentoring in the Romanian schools too is present: the existence of an apprentice who wants a mentor, is ready to learn from them, is open to feedback and is willing to be as good as possible in the profession they have chosen. An apprentice should want to learn new methods, techniques, attitudes and acquire new abilities and competences. They should be willing to learn from a mentor, to look for and use their valuable advice and also assume commitment for professional and personal advancement.

It has been pointed out that the success of a mentoring relationship depends to a great extent on the attitude and commitment of the protégé. Apprentices should take over the lead within the partnership, be proactive and make effort to achieve success. But in order to be able to do that, they should be appreciated, valorized, encouraged in everything that is related to the teaching profession. Unfortunately, not all respondents feel they are treated in this way by their more experienced colleagues. Only 11% of them claim this happens to a very great extent, and 31% to a great extent. Most of the respondents in this category are beginner teachers in rural areas, who work in small schools, with a small staff, which means that everybody is involved in the activities of the institution. On the other, people in this category teach in primary schools and they are in charge of the itinerary of a whole class of students over a period of five years. Their responsabilisation at the level of school is high, as it involves various roles, activities in school and outside it, building relations with the parents and the local community etc.

Table 03. Mentoring and PLC

Indicators	To a very great extent %	To a great extent %	To a small extent %	To a very small extent %	Not at all %
Is there in your school an open atmosphere, one of collaboration between all teachers?	31	56	7	6	0
Do you have a permanent communication with the teachers in the same working group at school level (department, curricular area etc.)?	26	39	35	0	0
Do you happen to debate in breaks professional topics or topics related to the teaching activity?	2	31	42	25	0
Are the successes of some teachers disseminated at meetings of the Teachers' Council?	8	34	58	0	0
Are you interested to receive from your colleagues as much information as possible about new things connected with the professional activity?	37	63	0	0	0
Are you involved in educational projects at the level of your school together with your colleagues (national or international)?	3	12	37	39	9

As participants in the teaching process, the experienced teachers/mentors and the novices should work out opportunities to learn together, and mentoring should be seen as a bidirectional learning process, which can benefit both the mentor and the mentee. Hence, collaboration becomes a lever in building the visionary capacity, but it requires very motivated professionals to create dynamic learning environments (Blândul, 2011, p.359). The answers in Table 3 show that in the Romanian schools the attainment of a learning community is in its first stage. While 56% answered that there is to a great extent an open atmosphere in their schools, of collaboration between the teachers, when it comes to specific aspects connected with sharing concrete experiences concerning teaching aspects, the percentages go down: 35% say that permanent communication in professional working groups takes place to a small extent, 42% say that debates on professional topics or on topics related to the teaching activity take place to a small extent in breaks, as it would happen within a true PLC, and 58% say that the successes of some teachers are disseminated to a small extent in the Teachers' Council (meetings attended by all the teachers of a school).

Cooperation between experienced teachers and novices is not restricted only to school activities, but it also refers to extracurricular activities which can develop professional and social abilities, carried out through common activities (Marinescu, 2016, p.22), through partnerships and projects in schools and outside them – activities that play an essential role in strengthening an authentic mentoring relationship, but also a PLC. Unfortunately, as it can be seen from the data in the table, a small percentage of the beginner teachers are involved in educational projects at school level: about 20% of the respondents. It should be mentioned that the majority belong to project teams that have European partners (Comenius or Erasmus), and the number of participants from a school in these projects is low. This also explains the fact that most of them are foreign language teachers (English, French, German) and are indispensable to such teams at school level.

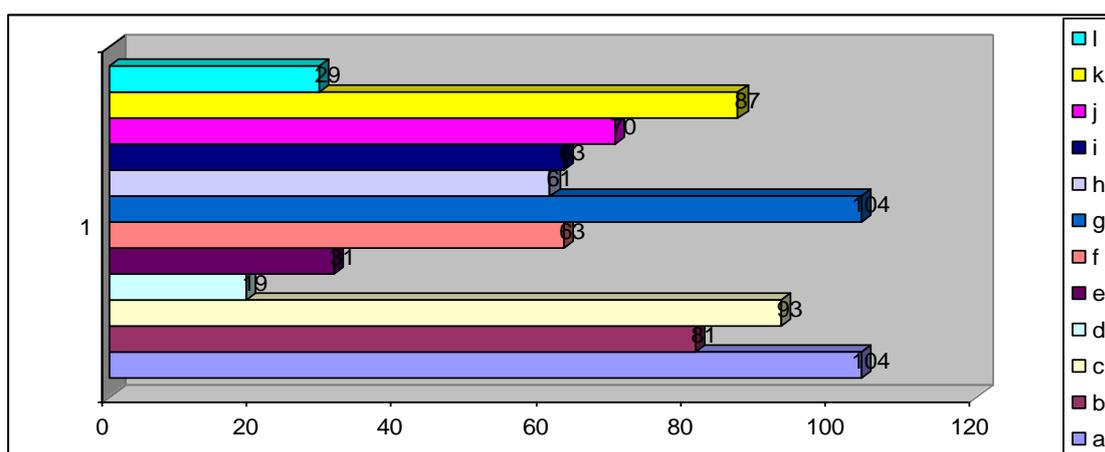


Figure 02. Ways of professional and personal development

In order to achieve professional and personal growth, teachers should be in a continuous learning process, should improve, collaborate, exchange expertise so that they can support students' learning, by promoting new thinking and action models. Figure 2 shows beginner teachers' opinions about the most effective ways of professional and personal development. The ways based on the help of a mentor and on meetings with experts in the field received 100%. This fact points to the need for experienced people, with

considerable expertise, who are there for them at the beginning of their professional career. Then, professional training courses follow (93%), individual study (87%), involvement in projects at national level (81%), exchanging expertise (70%), meetings within school departments (63%), conferences (62%), meetings with all the other colleagues of their school (debates, analysis, suggestions 60%), e-learning type professional courses (31%), teacher training study groups (19%).

7. Conclusion

In the light of all these aspects, we support that the training of mentors should be considered in our country as a priority area by policy makers, and by researchers and teachers who are concerned with providing professional support in the development of beginner teachers. In the legislative documents mentioned above there are regulations in this respect, which should be taken into account in all schools: the mentor teaching position for the professional induction of trainee teachers can be obtained after being successful in a specific competition, regulated by a methodology, and organized by the county school inspectorates. The teachers who become mentors and belong to the body of mentors benefit from a reduction of the teaching load by two hours per week in the year when they carry out the mentoring activity. Preschool and primary school teachers who are mentor teachers and belong to the body of mentor teachers receive additional remuneration as hourly pay. The mentor teacher coordinates the activity of 1-2 trainee teachers, depending on how they are appointed by the county council for mentoring. Unfortunately, as it was shown by this research, in reality this does not happen yet. There are numerous mentor training programs, and our university provides post-graduate courses for teachers to obtain this status. There is openness both on the side of experienced teachers and on that of the beginner ones.

By the research conducted we confirmed some essential aspects of the mentor –mentee relationship. Thus, a mentor can help the apprentice to develop a professional network and a personal one, and induct the apprentice in their own network of experts and professionals. A good mentor will want to make sure that the apprentice gains confidence and independence as a result of mentoring and is, eventually, capable of going ahead on their own feet. The mentor can help the development of interpersonal and organizational abilities. On the other hand, mentoring involves a collaboration policy (Pop, 2016, p.307): collaborative working groups will be set up, stimulated and accepted as components of the teaching culture. This kind of collaboration assumes the existence of some shared experience and practices, the use of similar tools and of a common language among colleagues. Newcomer teachers should be treated as being of the same worth as the other, older ones.

Taking into account the situation in our country, the mentor fulfils their role right in the vulnerable points identified in the induction practiced by the Romanian education system: insufficient encouragement and guidance of self-reflection, the requirement to optimize the connection between the needs and expectations of the beginner teacher and the actual expectancies of the institution. The mentor should intervene in the induction program by their function of optimizing the integration of the young person in the life of school community in which they arrive. For the time being, mentoring is missing from the induction process practiced by the Romanian school, but we hope that in the future its role will be acknowledged.

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