

ERD 2020

Education, Reflection, Development, Eighth Edition

FORMAL MENTORING VERSUS INFORMAL MENTORING IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

Educational mentoring is a challenge for all educational systems, being a necessity for the continuous optimization of the instructive-educational activity carried out by teachers, which is why it is studied in relation to training and professional development. Mentoring programs are often integrated into broader professional development programs at the institutional level, essentially based on an educational project whose results can be measured according to the objectives set, being offered to new teachers over a variable period of time, in order to improve their chances of professional success. Educational mentoring must ensure a differentiated approach, as the teachers involved make decisions based on their own training, their own interest or personal teaching styles, which are configured alongside the training, interest and learning styles of students. In this context it becomes important to identify a type of mentoring that is as effective as possible, either in a rigorous organization and institutional development - resulting in a form of formal mentoring, or in open, unplanned and sporadic meetings with more experienced colleagues - resulting in a form of informal mentoring. The use of several tools to measure the satisfaction of mentored teachers (questionnaires, interviews, case studies, etc.) can capture the dynamics between the general perception of the success or failure of a mentoring program (in general) and the impact of a specific intervention on the participants' process of professional development.

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Keywords: Mentoring program, professional development, formal mentoring, informal mentoring, professional satisfaction



1. Introduction

There is a wide range of vocational learning methods that lead to improvement: analysis of educational actions, belonging to a working group (community or vocational learning team), collaborative learning (sharing experiences/skills), exchanges of experience by placing teachers in other schools, school courses and the use of long distance learning materials, personal reflection, learning via information technology and last but not least, mentoring or coaching in the workplace. According to Choy and Chua (2019), high-performance school systems focus on three fundamental aspects of the education system: 1. An effective mechanism for selecting teachers so that the right people can be hired to become teachers; 2. Effective training and development processes, with a strong emphasis on ensuring that teachers are professionally developed to be effective instructors; 3. Effective support systems and structures implemented to ensure that every student receives excellent training.

All these aspects are included in the issue of mentoring, taking into account both the essential characteristics of the process itself and the process of professional training of teachers to be mentors, through which they acquire specific role behaviors (Lunenberg et al., 2014).

The general classifications made in correspondence with the criterion of the nature of the mentoring process bring into discussion two general types of mentoring: formal mentoring and informal mentoring. While formal mentoring is performed at the institutional level, with well-defined objectives, a coherently established program, scheduled meetings, precise and anticipated actions, formative evaluations etc., informal mentoring is performed through sporadic, voluntary meetings, training activities, without planning or evaluation. In an informal relationship, mutual guidance and advice is changed sporadically as needed, without a pre-set schedule or formal agenda (Leslie et al., 2005). Discussions take place during unplanned meetings, open meetings with more experienced colleagues, and daily conversations.

Numerous studies that have analyzed the two types of mentoring, formal and informal, have not been able to conclude, for a certainty, that one is superior to the other (Torey & Blamires, 2006). Boyle and Boice (1998), making a comparison between formal mentoring and informal mentoring, concluded that people who participated in the formal mentoring program were more satisfied, considering that they were better organized, planned, a greater length and a systematic feedback, as well as determining a greater involvement of the mentored persons in the specific activities of their institution. Mathias (2005) shows, in turn, that starters in education have better appreciated the formal aspect of the mentoring program, as part of their initial training program. In addition, formal mentoring has allowed the various departments of educational institutions to support the professional development of their new teachers, to a greater extent than to rely on outside specialists, based on the specific needs of each department.

At the same time, Cawyer et al. (2002) and Leslie et al. (2005) conducted similar research, but found that informal mentoring promotes a more satisfying relationship between mentor and the person being mentored, which is due to the possibility to choose each other, depending on affinity, to exchange information and mutual advice without rigorously organized and pre-established activities. However, it can be difficult for new teachers to find an informal mentor, leading to the view that formal mentoring should be encouraged. Still, the way informal mentors are elected or how some people choose to become informal

mentors has not yet been identified. This leads to discussions about how informal mentoring is operationalized in an educational environment (Muste, 2016).

The issue of the superiority of formal mentoring over informal mentoring remains unanswered, and Trorey and Blamires (2006) believe that, although informal mentoring relationships are the most successful, the issue of accessing mentors leans towards a formal, flexibly applied guidance formula. However, in addition to formal mentoring, informal mentoring relationships can be developed, with educational institutions ensuring the accessibility of a mentor for each newcomer, but also encouraging an institutional culture that facilitates informal mentoring (Cawyer et al., 2002).

Therefore, as a potential solution to the problem of choosing one type or another of mentoring, between formal and informal, Bernatchez et al. (2010) discuss a hybrid mentoring model. The structure of this model takes into account the objectives, methods and techniques specific to the mentoring process, as well as the different forms of guidance. A flexible structure is recommended, which allows the new teacher to choose between two possibilities: 1. to be formally but voluntarily associated with a mentor by an institutional manager (formal mentoring) or 2. to choose a mentor in accordance with mutual affinities (informal mentoring). In this perspective, formal mentoring ensures the access of beginners to a formal mentor, but also allows the facilitation of informal mentoring, in which teachers at the beginning of their teaching career can initiate and manage an informal mentoring relationship in a structured support environment (Thorndyke et al., 2008).

2. Problem Statement

In the context of some studies on the mentoring process in school (Miller, 2007), it appears that it is required as a result of professional difficulties faced by trainees, including: the educational process at the level of school institutions; the absence of theoretical guides that would facilitate easier adaptation to the specifics of the teaching activity; difficulties in elaborating school documents (planning, activity projects, psycho-pedagogical knowledge sheets etc.); lack of thorough knowledge on the application of interactive strategies in teaching and learning; sporadic use of modern means of transmitting information; facing problems related to insufficient or unknown material equipment from the perspective of their functionality; problems in performing the traditional evaluation or through alternative methodologies; difficulties in establishing effective communication with students, their parents, co-workers or the community etc. In order to solve these difficulties, an option should be made for a specific form of mentoring, which can be established on the basis of research on the results obtained over time.

For better edification regarding the results of formal, informal or hybrid mentoring, the collection of field data should allow access to information located at several levels: 1) data on the level of satisfaction of the beginner; 2) data about the skills developed by the beginner; 3) data for measuring the impact of mentoring on the institution (Thorndyke et al., 2008).

In terms of the novice teacher's satisfaction with the mentoring process, the analysis should consider benefits such as:

- job satisfaction, given by personal satisfaction in relation to success in the teaching process;
- broadening the educational perspective;
- fulfillment and professional recognition (Ungureanu, 2001).

Regarding the skills developed by the beginner through the mentoring process, the analysis of the benefits relates to aspects such as:

- the level of theoretical and practical knowledge, acquired from experts;
- better management of one's professional career by offering opportunities for personal and professional development;
- avoiding the difficult transition to the new job;
- eliminating the stress as a result of the possibility to clarify any doubts and to solve the problems manifested in the professional activity by calling on the support of a mentor;
- positive perception of the work environment;
- quick and easy learning;
- acquisition of desirable professional behavior patterns;
- personal development, highlighted by increased self-confidence, self-efficacy, increased self-esteem, mental well-being, stress reduction, motivation for self-improvement etc. (Stănculescu, 2015).

These benefits are very evident in the school environment, in the context of formal mentoring, comparative studies conducted by different experts (e.g., Stănculescu, 2015; Van der Weijden et al., 2015), between mentors and people who have never participated in a mentoring program, demonstrating the existence of major differences in terms of professional performance, level of motivation, job satisfaction, job stability etc., clearly in favor of those mentored.

Another important aspect is measuring the impact of mentoring on the institution, which can be achieved by analyzing:

- success in terms of more efficient staff recruitment, starting from knowing the qualities acquired by potential employees based on their training through mentoring programs. Practically, "probationary" employments and the number of those who leave the institution or field of work early are reduced, which would lead to a high staff turnover;
- increasing the loyalty of employees to the institution and colleagues;
- ensuring the transfer of knowledge that allows the training of qualified staff for higher levels of mentoring;
- achieving increased productivity and/or success in professional activities, as a result of high job satisfaction (Crașovan, 2004).

These issues are not the only ones relevant in validating an option for one form or another of mentoring, and the information gathered in various research may differ from one country to another, from one educational system to another, depending on the national frame of reference regarding educational mentoring, or the professional standards of mentors (taking into account their skills and knowledge) (Muste, 2018).

For this reason, the research presented in this paper aims to provide a perspective on the implementation of mentoring programs in Romanian schools, which could complement similar studies in other education systems, contributing, alongside them, to streamlining educational mentoring.

3. Research Questions

The questions we tried to answer following our investigation were:

- Which of the two types of mentoring - formal or informal - has a higher appreciation among teachers who have gone through such mentoring programs?
- Are there differences for starter teachers in Romania in the implementation of formal mentoring programs (provided by the law), from one area to another or even from one institution to another?
- Can situations be identified in which informal mentoring is the main source of training and professional development at the beginning of the teaching career, especially in rural areas away from large urban centers and in educational institutions with a small number of students and teachers?

Can the novice teachers' professional dissatisfaction, caused by the difficulties of having permanent access to a formal mentor, be eliminated by facilitating access to informal forms of mentoring through educational institutions?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the research was to identify differences in the appreciation of mentored teachers through formal and informal mentoring models, in order to highlight a more advantageous type of mentoring process from all points of view: both for beginners as well as the institution to which they belong.

We start from the assumption that a detailed knowledge of the advantages and disadvantages recognized by the study participants for each type of mentoring would also eliminate the causes of professional dissatisfaction of beginners in education, as a result of accessing various types of mentoring.

5. Research Methods

The program involved the administration of two questionnaires, intended for two categories of subjects:

5.1. A questionnaire addressed to the teachers involved in the study, regarding the particularities of the mentoring programs they had

The group of teachers who partook in the questionnaire presented the following structure: a) 30 beginning teachers (of which 19 teachers for preschool education and 11 teachers for primary education) who experienced formal mentoring programs for one school year. 15 teachers from this group work in urban schools and 15 work in rural schools; b) 30 teachers (of which 13 teachers for preschool and 17 teachers for primary education) who experienced informal mentoring programs. 15 teachers work in urban schools and 15 work in rural schools (of which 5 teachers teach in schools in relatively isolated areas, located further away from urban centers).

5.2. A questionnaire addressed to institution managers, regarding the evaluation of mentoring programs for beginning teachers

The managers were selected according to the location of the schools they coordinate and the number of beginner teachers in the respective institution in the last 2 years. Thus, the following were interviewed:

- 15 managers from urban schools, who had, on average, 3 beginner teachers in the last 2 school years and
- 15 managers from rural areas, who manage schools with a small number of classes and students (generally teaching in simultaneous classes, where teachers do not stay very long, preferring to transfer to larger schools, in more accessible areas), who have had on average only one beginner teacher in the last 2 school years.

The content of both questionnaires relates to aspects of mentoring, with the difference that while teachers were asked about the characteristics and impact of mentoring at the individual level, managers were asked about the impact of mentoring programs at the institutional level, through an evaluation of the characteristics of these programs.

6. Findings

The evaluation of the answers of the two questionnaires was performed on a three-step scale (large extent, some extent, small extent), the maximum score being 3 (corresponding to the answers to a large extent), and the minimum being 1 (for the answers to a small extent). Table 1 illustrates the opinions of teachers who have benefited from formal mentoring programs.

Table 1. Opinions of beginner teachers on the quality of experienced formal mentoring

Items	To a large extent (3)		To some extent (2)		To a small extent (1)	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Planning/Organization	25	83,33%	2	6,66%	3	10%
<i>Mean</i>	2,73					
Support in various situations	19	63,33%	5	16,66%	6	20%
<i>Mean</i>	2,43					
Relationship with the mentor	17	56,66%	4	13,33%	9	30%
<i>Mean</i>	2,26					
Long-term implications for professional development	23	76,66%	2	6,66%	5	16,66%
<i>Mean</i>	2,59					
Long-term implications for personal development	12	40%	10	33,33%	8	26,66%
<i>Mean</i>	2,12					
Satisfaction with the results	26	86,66%	4	13,33%	0	0%
<i>Mean</i>	2,86					

As shown in table 1, the majority of teachers who have favorable opinions of formal mentoring relates to the satisfaction of the individual compared to the results obtained (86.66%), the planning and organization of the process (83.33%) and the long-term implications in terms of professional development

(76.66%). A rather negative appreciation of formal mentoring was found in regard to the relationship with the mentor (30% of teachers giving a minimum score to this aspect), the long-term implications in terms of personal development (with minimal appreciation from 26.66% of teachers), following the support of the mentor in various situations (considered unsatisfactory by 20% of teachers and acceptable by 16.66% of them).

We consider that these results are explained by the fact that formal mentoring is an imposed one, with the mentor appointed to support a certain beginner (not by compatibility criteria but by proximity or availability), with a risk of incompatibility between mentor and beginner, which may have negative implications.

From the data collected from the subjects who participated in the study, information was also recorded that confirmed the existence of differences in the implementation of formal mentoring programs, from one area to another. Respectively, there are situations in which, due to the location of the educational institution relative to the distance from larger urban centers (where mentors are usually recruited), the beginner teachers pointed out that mentoring activities were less frequent and with interruptions, often requiring interventions of some colleagues, who have transposed themselves into a role similar to those of informal mentors, in order to complete the professional development path. As such, there are situations in which we can appreciate that informal mentoring is the main or complementary source of training and professional development at the beginning of the teaching career, especially in rural areas far from large urban centers and in educational institutions with a small number of students and teachers. Table 2 illustrates the opinions of teachers who have benefited from informal mentoring programs:

Table 2. Appreciation of beginner teachers on the quality of informal mentoring

Items	To a large extent (3)		To some extent (2)		To a small extent (1)	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Planning/Organization	2	6,66%	9	30%	19	63,33%
<i>Mean</i>	1,43					
Support in various situations	11	36,66%	12	40%	7	23,33%
<i>Mean</i>	2,13					
Relationship with the mentor	22	73,33%	8	26,66%	0	0%
<i>Mean</i>	2,73					
Long-term implications for professional development	14	46,66%	9	30%	7	23,33%
<i>Mean</i>	2,23					
Long-term implications for personal development	20	66.66%	6	20%	4	13,33%
<i>Mean</i>	2,53					
Satisfaction with the results	18	60%	12	40%	0	0%
<i>Mean</i>	2.6					

From table 2 we can see that the relationship with the mentor was highly appreciated (73.33%), as well as the long-term implications in terms of personal development (maximum appreciated by 66.66% of teachers), but also the satisfaction in relation to results (positively appreciated by 60% of teachers). A low

appreciation was registered in regard to the level of planning and organizing mentoring activities (by 63.33% of those surveyed), an aspect that stands out, being at a great distance from other effects of informal mentoring appreciated to a small extent.

In addition to the data illustrated in the table, we bring some clarifications. Teachers who were part of the group that benefited from informal mentoring represent an older generation, which at the beginning of its teaching career did not have the opportunity to benefit from formal mentoring, this not being explicitly provided in Romanian education legislation until the appearance of the new law on education (2011). Therefore, the informal mentors who were available to teachers were, in many cases, family members (there is a certain tradition in choosing teaching for several generations) or co-workers who, especially in the situation where teamed up with the beginner in a class of students or group of preschoolers, took on the role of voluntary or involuntary mentor.

Comparing the opinions of teachers who have had formal mentoring with those of teachers who have benefited from informal mentoring, we find that although there are differences, satisfaction with the results of any type of mentoring is quite appreciated. Obviously, given the particularities of informal mentoring, the biggest differences are observed in the aspects related to the organization and planning of activities, which can also affect the efficiency of the professional modeling process.

Table 3 illustrates the opinions of managers regarding the evaluation of formal and informal mentoring programs, with an impact on the educational institution, but also the analysis of the potential degree of involvement in mentoring optimization:

Table 3. Managers' opinions on formal and informal mentoring

Items	To a large extent (3)		To some extent (2)		To a small extent (1)	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Facilitating formal mentoring	26	86,66%	4	13,33%	0	0%
<i>Mean</i>	2,86					
Facilitating informal mentoring	8	26,66%	18	60%	4	13,33%
<i>Mean</i>	2,13					
Carrying out different forms of mentoring, depending on the situation	17	56,66%	10	33,33%	3	10%
<i>Mean</i>	2,46					
The contribution of formal mentoring	28	93,33%	2	6,66%	0	0%
<i>Mean</i>	2,93					
The contribution of informal mentoring	21	70%	7	23,33%	2	6,66%
<i>Mean</i>	2,62					

Managers considered to the greatest extent that formal mentoring should be provided in their institutions (with an average of 2.86 out of a maximum of 3). However, in terms of facilitating informal mentoring, only 26.66% largely appreciate that they should get involved, with the majority taking a neutral position, not necessarily against, but neither in support. Carrying out different forms of mentoring,

depending on the situation, seems to be an option with which the majority agrees (56.66%). Likewise, almost unanimously, they consider that formal mentoring makes the greatest contribution to institutional development (with an average of 2.93), but informal mentoring is not excluded either, 70% of managers considering that it also plays an important role in the development of the educational institution. But, analyzing the above results, although they recognize the formative value of informal mentoring, not all managers consider that they should be involved at the institutional level to facilitate this type of mentoring (for example by recommending potential informal mentors or facilitating their access in the schools), so that they can relate to the specifics of these institutions when providing support to beginners.

We mention that the differences of opinion are also registered in the light of the characteristics of the institutions that the managers supervise, half of them being large schools, with numerous teachers of various age and professional experience, located in urban areas (or rural but in close proximity to urban centers), where formal mentoring is easier to implement. At the same time, the inclination to appreciate the contribution of informal mentoring to institutional development to a significant extent is determined by situations such as the difficulty of having permanent access to a formal mentor, which would facilitate access to forms of informal mentoring so that beginner teachers should not present professional dissatisfaction generated by the absence of constant support in their professional development at the beginning of their career.

7. Conclusion

Although there are differences of opinion about the effectiveness of formal and informal mentoring programs, mentoring (in general) is perceived as a process that can positively influence the understanding of educational traditions and the values behind them, the set of skills needed to ensure professional success, efficient management of the teaching career, creation and maintenance of a professional network with colleagues, allowing the exchange of experience etc. (Leslie et al., 2005).

These benefits are very evident in the school environment, and comparative studies conducted by experts in various educational systems (for example: Thorndyke et al., 2008; Van der Weijden et al., 2015) completed by the results of our study, related to the conditions in the Romanian educational system. This confirms that there are major differences between people who have participated in mentoring processes and people who have never participated in a mentoring program in terms of professional performance, level of motivation, job satisfaction, job stability etc., clearly in favor of those mentored

Specifically, in this case, although formal mentoring is provided in the education legislation, the way it is conducted may present certain deficiencies due to particular conditions such as relative isolation of schools, low number of mentors, personality incompatibilities between mentor and beginner teachers. At the same time, although informal mentoring contributes significantly to the professional development of beginners, there is no optimal way to select people who can offer such mentoring, nor is there always the possibility of direct involvement in the activity of the beginner teachers, depending on particular working conditions, if the informal mentor does not have, for example, access to school, and the lack of organization and planning of mentoring activities can affect their quality. A potential solution would be a modern mentoring system (cyber-mentoring), which integrates new mass communication technologies (Thorndyke et al., 2008).

We believe that experimenting with a form of hybrid mentoring would solve some of the shortcomings presented by formal and informal mentoring, respectively, but the optimal conditions for implementation must be identified, by involving educational managers.

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