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Learning Partnerships in the Professional Development of Teachers

Abstract:

Experienced teachers give support and challenge to novice teachers. This is the common summary of mentoring in practical teacher education. Most teachers have to act in a mentoring relationship as if they had natural traits to do so: they develop competencies during the mentoring process itself like parents do when they raise their first born child. What mentors really do to pursue effective guidance, counselling, coaching, support, and challenge of mentees and what they gain for themselves in doing so has to be considered from different viewpoints. In this literature study structure and quality of some selected concepts of mentoring are reviewed. It is aiming towards a closer look at interactive processes to shape a learning partnership between school teachers.

1. Learning experience with a mentor and a group of peers

Early this summer I went into a novice learning experience: a hike in the mountains, one week, with a rucksack hiking from hut to hut in the Alpes. I did not do it totally adventurous like a lonely backpacker, but in a group guided by a hike-expert.

Hiking in the mountains cannot be taught in advance, a training course before does not make sense, although some instructions as to your physical condition and your equipment are useful. As a person being geographically socialised in the flat area of northern Germany, spending holidays at the seaside, I am used to feel comfortable with a wide horizon before my eyes and a lot of sky above me. I knew the Alpes from skiing when they are covered with snow and look like the sky. Up to this summer I was sure that mountains are not an area for me to feel good. But I felt to need a new challenge in my life, an experiment with myself.

First I organised the *basic equipment*: with the written advice of the guide, some friends being familiar to hiking, and the advice of the seller in the shop, I bought the equipment, trusting my own sense of quality and prices and my own feeling of how shoes do fit or

not. The “tapping” of different personal experts was not the mere fun and more or less confusing after a while. You get the philosophy (or ideology) of hikers if you ask for details; when you ask for reasoning why they prefer this or that, you are unable to understand what they mean since you are not familiar to the special situation they refer to. The most helpful advice came from friends who told the story about their painful way from – let me say – home-knitted woollen socks to the fabric ware of a special merchant. Telling stories takes time.

To make it short: It turned out to be the most impressive and totally overwhelming experience I had since I learned to ski or to swim. I got an idea about mountain hiking to be an obsession.

Two major factors contributed to this success. One was the guide, an experienced younger woman, giving situated technical instructions when she expected critical situations, and giving facilitating advice on demand. She was caring for body, soul, and mind by means of advance organisers, reflective feedback, a motto for meditation and a sticking-plaster for blisters. The other factor was the group of participants, the peers to communicate experience, to give and accept solidarity, to share water and nut-bars. The relationship to the guide was not that unequal; of course, I was the novice and she the expert in hiking, but our mutual feedback made us gain something: me in hiking experience, her in motivating and facilitating others, and both of us in discussing how it is to learn something new.

This “real life” example has certain aspects of what a “learning partnership” can be. Similarities to institutionalised teaching and learning processes are obvious. But there is also a certain limitation of transferability: Enthusiastic as I became now on mountain hiking, I really want to remain an amateur, not to become a professional hiker.

2. Professional learning partnerships

Becoming a school teacher is not only depending on formal education at a Higher Education Institution, but to a major part depending on one’s own personal and constructive development of a strong relationship between knowledge, skills, and attitudes of a good teacher. To put hands on practical teaching experience is regarded as the most promising path to bring knowledge about teaching together with competencies within teaching. Practical teaching experience goes for the “king’s path” to a teacher’s professional development – but only when the practice is structured, reflected, and to some extent guided by experienced professionals in the field with a personal relationship. These persons or practitioners can take over responsibility for someone else to his/her professional support; they act as mentors to a mentee, they are involved in a learning partnership to promote their own development as well. There are several different situations in which a learning partnership with a peer or with a mentor is useful:

- (1) When you first come to the university or the teacher college, you need someone to give an institutional introduction. To get familiar with the faculty, the library, the curriculum, the schedules, rules, rituals, and customs etc. is much easier if someone is *tutoring* or mentoring the newcomer for a certain amount of time.
- (2) When you as a teacher-student are obliged to collect short-term practical experiences from observing school-teachers and from giving classroom lessons, it is good to know an expert at your side, serving as a model and providing help and *guidance with a hand in your back*.¹
- (3) When you are in a school as a newly qualified teacher in the first year, you are lucky if there is a formally mentored *induction phase*. In some countries the first year (or two) at school is a probationary year. You have someone giving seminars and assessing your classroom practice, and someone else to mentor your personal and professional competencies. You are lucky if the *mentor is an experienced colleague* and the assessment procedures are up to different persons, not the same. In the beginning you might trustfully rely on a shoulder to cry, but the more teaching experience you gain the more challenging your mentor should act, with *a hand on your shoulder*.
- (4) Numerous research projects are concerned with mentoring student-teachers in a long-term practicum and in the first year of teaching at school.²
- (5) When you are a school teacher, your professional development has not come to an end. You may visit university courses part-time to broaden qualifications, taking additional exams. But school-based in-service courses turned out to be closer to special needs and problem solving. Most effective is an *internal cooperative partnership* with a colleague (of the same school or external from a different school) to work on a project and/or a problem solving process. A *tandem-partnership* could be the appropriate term for this³.
- (6) When you have run into severe school troubles, thinking about how to quit your job, becoming tired and or sick, then it is urgently time to ask for help from an external expert, a *clinical supervisor or a personal coach* to work with you and find a way out of the troubles.
- (7) When you think about your *career development*, becoming e.g. a head teacher, then another experienced head teacher is good for mentoring you: first to find out what a career aspiration means to you, later to accompany your professional growth.

¹ Different terms for this function are in use: practicum advisor, school-site-trainer, contact-teacher etc.

² See for the USA: S. J. Odell/ L. Huling (Eds.): Quality Mentoring for Novice Teachers. Washington. D.C: Association of Teacher Educators/ Indianapolis: Kappa Delta Pi 2000.

³ Esther Enns has developed tandem-partnership as a formalised in-service course. The Swiss Institut for Teacher In-service Education in Bern has adopted the model in its programme.

E. Enns-Connolly: Fortbildung als Prozess der Selbstentwicklung. Eine Projektbeschreibung. In: Schweizer Schule 78(1992)12, S. 3-10.

E. Enns: Tandem als Raum für narrative Lernprozesse in der Lehrerfortbildung. In: Forum Lehrerfortbildung. Biographische Methoden in der Lehrerfortbildung. Hrsg. Deutscher Verein für Lehrer- und Lehrerinnenfortbildung. Grebenstein 1999, S. 117-127.

Mentors in different settings *help to ease transitions* – in mountains, in deserts and jungles of the education and schooling business. It is the person that matters: a mentor, a critical friend, a cooperative peer, a facilitator.

But the setting in which mentoring occurs, the climate in a school-staff has an impact on successful mentoring.⁴ Mentoring is different from teaching. A good teacher is not automatically a good mentor. How is it possible to learn together with and from a mentor?

Mentoring should be seen as a professional activity which can be developed by means of in-service initiatives⁵. That means to get beyond informal relationship of the two or more partners, beyond mutual sympathy and stories, but to work on professional development and growth.

3. Results in biographical research

Lilian Fried (1997)⁶ gave an overview to research results on teacher education in general. She did not find too much in Germany, but some complaints about the lack of research as to the efficiencies of the pre-service teacher education in the university, the influence of the so called “second phase” in study-seminars, and the in-service education predominantly offered by state institutions. One of the most often reported results was that being mentored is highly valued by teachers, independent from their age, teaching experience, or school-type.

Recently we published a biographical study on religious education teachers⁷. In-depth narrative interviews of 23 protestant RE-teachers were the material to find out the relationships between the religious socialisation of the teachers (the ‘lived’ religion) and their concepts of teaching religion (the ‘taught’ religion). The teachers were asked how they became a teacher of religion. Amazingly most of them – and women more than men – referred to personal models in their lives and during their teaching career that had a positive impact on their decision making and shaping the basic teaching attitudes.

4 In addition: The institutional partnership between the schools and the university or teacher education college in teacher pre-service programmes has to be clear: Are the conditions of the practical teacher education at schools clear enough? What kind of divisions of labour between university/faculty and schools are appropriate? What kind of constraints limit the realisation of teacher education concepts? D. McIntyre/H. Hagger: *Mentors in Schools. Developing the Profession of Teaching*. London: David Fulton Publishers 1996.

5 This issue is not taken for granted. When I asked a group of German professional in-service managers and educators what they think about formal coursework to support teacher mentors, someone argued: Not necessary, don’t teach what is a natural trait or not, don’t overdo the educational business in too many aspects.

6 L. Fried: *Zwischen Wissenschaft und Berufspraxis. Bilanz der Lehrerbildungsforschung*. In: M. Bayer/ U. Carle/ J. Wildt (Hrsg.): *Brennpunkt Lehrerbildung. Strukturwandel und Innovationen im europäischen Kontext*. Opladen: Leske & Budrich 1997, S. 19-54.

7 Feige, A./ Dressler, B./ Lukatis, W./ Schöll, A.: *Religion der Religionslehrer*. Münster: Lit 2000. The author has actively been involved in the research group of the qualitative part of the study.

These key-person could be a teacher, a mother, a friend, a colleague or someone else to become “the meaningful other”, the teaching model, the mentor in personal and professional crisis. The memories became vital and sculptured when they described the impact of a mentor, and by memorizing the model they could describe their own competencies and weaknesses very detailed and very clear.

Some of them gave an insight of how the mentorship worked to make them gain competencies:

- They had someone to address themselves to with questions or problems. They themselves could initiate contact and dialogue when it was needed.
- They were not expected to copy the model or to transfer methods and skills into their own practice. They did not undergo any skill training.
- The mentor gave them a vision of how content learning in religious education could be realised in a broad complexity of aims, goals, attitudes, interactive methods, materials, and personal perspectives.
- They could share their teaching experience with the mentor, analyse and reflect together with her/him.
- One teacher named her mentor an “angel”, expressing his saving support in a very depressive personal situation.

These results are an example and a plea for more research in teacher biographies to find out how good mentoring works. The impact on professional development cannot fully be assessed immediately after the mentoring experience, but from a long term distant point of view the contours are gaining clearness.

4. Activity concepts in mentoring – What makes the learning partnership work

It is taken serious that mentors – personal companions into a professional field – make a difference in teacher education. In most cases⁸ student teachers expect mentors to serve as gate-keepers to the teaching reality, but they function more or less informal. Sometimes mentors have a reduced workload, sometimes they get a small stipend from the university, but most of the mentoring is voluntarily done and good for honour or status in the school.

The informality and lack of systematic mentoring processes makes it difficult to develop concepts of mentoring, to discover skills being in use, and to evaluate concepts and skills.

Reviewing different reports on mentoring in teacher education I found some interesting models.⁹ One of them is the Austrian “5-C-Model”, the other a hermeneutic method of situation analysis to develop a research attitude towards experimental teaching.

8 We refer to a small set of unpublished case studies from different European countries in which the role of mentors in formal teacher education is described.

9 See also D. Fischer/ L. van Aniel: Mentoring in Teacher Education – towards innovative school development. Paper presented at the 27th Annual Conference of the ATEE Warsaw/Poland August 2002

4.1 “5 - C – Model” of mentoring

The core task of mentoring school teachers in the Austrian model¹⁰ is to guide and counsel student-teachers one day weekly during two years. The practicum is an integrated part of the curriculum of teacher education at the teachers' college (Pädagogische Akademie). A project leader is responsible for contacts, cooperation with schools, conduct of the project, and evaluation. He/she is as well concerned with induction, training and support of the school teachers in their role of mentors.

How to counsel student teachers in a way which empowers them – that is the central question of mentors.

In the project mentors reported their common way of counselling: Observe the student's classroom lesson, write down notes on whatever seems to be noticeable, and afterward talk to the student (Feed-back “Nachbesprechung”) and make a long list of what he/she omitted, did not notice, did not care about, could have done. The mentors were not convinced that this was worth while because the students often did agree but could not act according to the advice.

The project leader gave a “4-C” baseline-model to the mentors, a kind of mission-statement to set up structure in the lesson feed-backs:

Cooperation: The mentor is meant to act in a cooperative relationship with the mentee. He/she cooperates with three or four other mentors, with six to eight teacher-students, and with one of the practicum advisor of the Teachers' College in a *team*. The team negotiates the programme for half a year.

Criteria-orientation: This issue means to concentrate the counselling procedures around core situations like “Group work” or “conflict management” or “media”. The focus on selected criteria gives an opportunity to the student to evaluate and test different elements of teaching in “typical” situations.

Continuity: The student-teacher should put the main emphasis on continuously reflecting a topic which is personally meaningful to him/her. Continuity over time gives an opportunity to develop a research-like attitude towards teaching competences.

Context-related: The mentors should refer to the whole situation and the developmental status of the teacher-students, not to give them really difficult classes in the very beginning.

During the project the team discovered a fifth dimension:

Creativity: Creativity is addressed to the partners to activate their creative potentials while they were developing the mentor-mentee-relationship itself in an experimental, research-like, and reflective attitude.

10 K. Klement/ A. Lobendanz/ H. Teml (Hrsg.): Schulpraktische Studien. Beiträge zur Qualitätsentwicklung in der Lehrerbildung unter Berücksichtigung europäischer Perspektiven. Innsbruck/ Wien: Studienverlag 2002.

K. Klement/ H. Teml (Hrsg.): Schulpraxis reflektieren. Wege zum forschenden Lernen in der Lehrerbildung. Innsbruck/Wien: Studienverlag 1996.

The faculty offers four blocked seminars to the mentors (three to four days per half year) and additional voluntary courses during the holidays. The mentors are involved in subjects of three areas:

- Reflection of their own teaching and counselling practice by means of “cooperative counselling”, “cooperative classroom observation”, “action research” and “presentation”.
- Development of mentoring-concepts referring to: “teaching”, “counselling”, “assessing”, and “organising”.
- Personal in-depth-studies like “Gestalt”, “non-directive communication”.

The Austrian project “Practical Studies in Schools” is pursuing a new teaching-learning paradigm aiming at a personal-professional development by means of *person-centred* interactions, *situated* learning and a *reflective* practise of construction and action. The mentors start with a personal-professional development of their role and undergo in the coursework the same arrangement and process which is constitutive for their own mentoring practice. Their qualification is aiming at

- reflecting their own classroom practice in an in-depth and criteria-oriented manner,
- awareness of a position and being able to express it,
- competence in communication of experiences,
- criticise classroom practice and think about alternatives. (Altrichter/Aichner in Klement 2000, pp135)

The reflective turn (since D. Schön 1983) has arrived in the teacher-students’ practical school studies as a two-fold strategy:

- Student-teachers reflect on their personal-professional development by making use of a mentor’s help.
- Mentors reflect on their personal-professional competencies by making use of a university course and a project leader’s help.

The two-fold strategy nurtures the learning partnership and gives room to the development from a student to a teacher on one side, from a teacher to a teacher educator on the other side. Mentoring the mentors is an important contribution to qualitative mentoring in a learning partnership.

4.2 Analysis of critical situations

The current (educational-psychological) expert-novice research is concerned with descriptions of knowledge differences between experienced teachers and novice teachers¹¹. The “practical knowledge” of an experienced teacher to be activated in the classroom is not an application of different scientific discipline knowledge to the situation. There is not a kind of discipline oriented algorithm running through an experienced teacher’s head, to be scanned parallel in order to check what fits to the situation and to make a decision to an action. “Practical knowledge” is organised in a

11 R. Bromme: Der Lehrer als Experte. Zur Psychologie des professionellen Wissens. Bern: Huber 1992

different way: more or less around complex situations or cases which are memorised. The experienced teacher is able to refer very quickly to similar situations/ cases and to make his decisions (e.g. about classroom management) while recollecting what was the case. The case-wise reference enables him/her to act, although he does not know (by definition) the parameters of the situation to base his reaction upon.

It is unknown in which way this kind of *situated knowledge* is developed, and obviously it cannot be taught.

But there is some evidence that analysing critical classroom processes in an action-relieved situation can prepare a teacher for being aware of the complexity of potential options and decisions.

The “talk afterwards” between the mentor and the student-teacher is referring to “critical situations”, represented in the notes of the mentor or recollecting in the mind of the student-teacher. It is not really a reliable source because the perspectives of the actor and the observer differ from the very beginning so that their interpretations could vary a lot. What the mentor is interpreting to open someone’s eyes could be misunderstood by the mentee as contradictive to his own interpretation. They both cannot get through the vagueness of the “critical situation” in view.

A taped or videotaped scenario (and a written text of the verbal dialogues) gives the opportunity to repeat the review as often as needed, and to check and balance different ways of “reading” the situation. This slowing-down of reflection processes on classroom actions promotes a research-based attitude towards teaching as well as the basic insight into a didactic philosophy. You cannot teach in a “right” or “wrong” way, but you can come closer to the probability of learning to occur.

The methods to interpret texts in a way that clears the structure of the situation and opens perspectives about what makes the situation “critical” have been developed in the context of “Grounded Theory” by Glaser/Strauss and the “Structural Hermeneutic” (former named: Objective Hermeneutic, sometimes Sequenced Analysis) by Ulrich Oevermann¹².

There is not space enough to explain the theory behind. Andreas Wernet¹³ has described the rationale of the research method in a booklet, and he has demonstrated in several examples what you get from it in teacher education.

One small example can shortly be mentioned here¹⁴:

12 Ulrich Oevermann, a sociologist and psychologist at the Frankfurt a. M. University, has “invented” the concept and theory of the “objective hermeneutic”, and written several articles on it. He teaches it at the university and in summer-school-courses for more than 30 years, but he never succeeded in writing a monograph on it or a handbook. Many of his students, meanwhile scholars themselves, have applied and tested the method in research projects, empirical dissertations etc. My colleague Albrecht Schöll and me have made use of “objective hermeneutic” in several (qualitative) biographical studies and –recently – in a classroom research project.

13 Andreas Wernet: Einführung in die Interpretationstechnik der Objektiven Hermeneutik. Opladen: Leske & Budrich 2000.

14 Andreas Wernet: Die Kunst des Deutens und das Deuten der Kunst. Objektive Hermeneutik als Methode der Lehrerbildung. In: Journal für LehrerInnenbildung 2(2002)4, p. 60-68. (Translation of the episode: D.F.)

In the beginning of a biology lesson in form 12 (17 years old students) the teacher asks one of the students to read his homework, and soon a conflict occurs in the dialogue:

T: Please read your homework.

S: I have not done it.

T: May I ask why not?

S: I have come to the conclusion that I must not do things which are absolutely distant from reality and will never again be useful anyhow.

T: This is no excuse for not having done your homework. I expect them to be done in our next lesson.

S: But I'll never in my life have anything to do with that stuff.

T: Don't you realise that this topic does not fit in our lesson theme? If you like we easily could discuss it afterwards. Please bring your homework in tomorrow.

The hermeneutic method is to interpret this passage “turn-by-turn” in sequences, to produce as many ways of “reading” it and to exclude in the following turns what can rationally be excluded. This way of careful analysis enables the interpreter to reconstruct the different dimensions on which the persons base their reactions, which means to discover “theories” behind the teacher’s action.

The result in short: The teacher successfully divides the situation into two aspects to deal with separately. His problem solving strategy is to mark a border between the two spheres “responsibility to do one’s homework” and “freedom of decision what makes sense”, not to get stuck in contradictions. The separation helps him to acknowledge the right of both, to take the student serious, but in the same moment to go on with the lesson programme. The student is criticising the assignment in general and refers to his personal right to decide what makes sense to him. If the teacher had immediately argued why the assignment is valuable, he might have gone into a trap of legitimation. He does not even blame the student for his laziness, and he avoids reacting aggressively. Taking the student serious in both aspects, but not getting lost in the contradiction of “freedom” and “responsibility”: this kind of behaviour is an element of a pedagogical “art” and a well developed professionalism. His being emotionally restraint is not done without some effort, but it is contributing to the de-escalation. The logic of separate areas is accompanied by a de-personalised model of calming down the situation. Thus he must not take the student’s refusal „personally“ and re-act in an aggressive way.

This example cannot transport the full theory and methodological operation of “Objective Hermeneutic”, but some principles:

- The process of interpretation goes in sequences, turn-by-turn.
- The interpreter’s operations are mental experiments, producing potential options and testing alternatives to the situation.
- The interpretation should be extensive, to overcome routines.

Basically the interpretations are not dependent on expert knowledge, and a special training is not needed. The interpretative competencies come from everyday language competencies and language rules knowledge. Thus everyone can become involved as a critical participant observer into the sequence analysis of critical situations, the novice as well as the expert. A promising opportunity to structure processes of reflection systematically in teacher education.

5. Questioning further research and development

Empirical research on practical teacher education is not regarded as bearing sufficient reputation for those who do it. Its image is like doing “dirty” work in muddy waters, at least in Germany. This could be one of the reasons why “mentoring” is not a German research topic, although thousands of mentors work in schools and dedicate time and energy to the promotion and support of new qualified teachers.

Major research on mentoring in teacher education (in the USA and UK) is based on interviews, questionnaires, and self-reports: Mentors describe in interviews how they view the advantage and pitfalls of mentoring. Student teachers assess competencies and qualifications of their mentors.

Our options to further research are directed to analyse *teaching biographies* including learning biographies. The view backwards gives room to the notion of the dynamics in a growing professionalism.

To better understand how good mentoring works we need *situated demonstrations* of good practice (i.e. counsel, indirect dialogue, collegial supervision, case study on a mentoring process, video-tapes).

Case analysis by using the method “objective hermeneutic” is a promising tool in mentoring. It should further be developed and evaluated.

The Austrian “*5-C-Model*” is open to be further developed to standard based mentoring, in the case that national standards of teacher education are existing.

At least a few of these questions will be on the agenda of a COMENIUS 2.1 project on mentoring called MINT to be funded for three years, beginning in 2004.