Individual guidance and communal experience: Mentoring in support of student teachers’ professional development
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Abstract

This study examines vocational student teachers’ experiences of mentoring during their teaching practice, and is part of a larger research project begun in 2009. It was designed and carried out in Finland, in the School of Vocational Teacher Education, a unit of the University of Applied Sciences. The empirical data was collected from student teachers using a group discussion method. The aim of the discussion was to explore student teachers’ experiences in the supervision of their teaching practice. In the analyses, two categories were found: student teachers’ self-direction and communal experiences. These two factors are significant in a teacher’s professional development, and they should be acknowledged during the supervision of teaching practice. Through this acknowledgment, an individual student teacher’s need for guidance can be met.

1. Introduction

Research into teachers’ professional development shows that learning to be a teacher is a long and dynamic process, which begins during a person’s education [1, 2, 3]. The teaching practice period has been shown to be one of the most critical phases in professional development, and the guidance received during the practice process plays a very important role in the whole of teacher education. The guidance itself, and its quality, are of critical importance [4, 5].

In the research literature, there are numerous concepts and definitions used to describe teacher training guidance [6]. The common denominator of all of these definitions is that guidance in teacher training is seen as a situation where the experienced teacher supervises the beginning teacher. The main goal is to support the development of the student teacher into an autonomous person [7].

In this presentation, we will focus on the student teachers’ experiences of mentoring during their teaching practice. Our research question is: What is the significance of mentoring in the student teachers’ professional development.

2. Context of the study

Our study of mentoring began in 2009, and it was designed and carried out in Finland, in the School of Vocational Teacher Education, a unit of the Oulu University of Applied Sciences. This unit offers the teacher’s pedagogical studies of 60 ECTS [8].

The path leading to vocational teacherhood differs from that of, for example, the primary school teacher. In the case of Finland, the general entrance requirement for vocational teacher education is a Master’s Degree, or highest vocational degree in the major subject, and three years of work experience in the respective field. Often, vocational student teachers actually aim at their second or even third careers. They have deep knowledge in their respective fields, and have composed their Master’s and, in some cases, Doctoral theses.

In this study, the term ‘mentor’ refers to the supervisor of the teaching practice who has been chosen from among the teachers at the institution involved, to support the practicing student teacher. Thus, the mentor works as a full time teacher. He/she will give a certain number of his/her lessons or other teaching projects to be carried out by the student teacher. The student teacher is responsible for the agreed upon unit of lessons, but the mentor teacher supports him/her in planning, implementation and student evaluations. The official role of the mentor is to assist the mentee in interpreting the students’ behaviour, and to help him/her to discover how to promote and guide the students’ learning processes. Mentors are qualified teachers with many years of teaching experience.

3. Data gathering and analyses

The research participants are vocational student teachers, made up of 12 female and 9 male student teachers representing different occupational fields. The data was collected using the group discussion method, with five group discussions, from 2012 to 2013, organised by the researchers. The aim of the group discussion was to explore the student teachers’ experiences in the supervision of teaching practice.

For the data analyses, both researchers analysed their own data. After reading the material carefully, the researchers investigated and discussed the emerging meanings. The data was subjected to cross
analysis by both researchers, from which common themes were extracted.

4. Results

Our research indicated that guidance needs vary with student teachers. Each student teacher is on a different stage of their journey to be a competent teacher, and therefore requires individual, personalized guidance. For example, one student teacher, who was in the front of the class for the very first time said, “I turned to the mentor many times during the lesson. I asked her opinion when I felt that I lost the point in my teaching.” For some, the mere existence of a mentor, and the knowledge that support is continuously available, are of prime importance during all phases of the teaching practice. They saw the guidance holistically, “My needs were related to things like planning, implementation and evaluation.” One common element with all of the student teachers in the study was that they personally sought help on their own, and turned to their mentor when they needed guidance.

Our results are based on the findings presented above. Our question is about self-guidance of the student teachers, which manifested itself in the ability to seek appropriate guidance, both from their appointed mentor and the other teachers in the school. Essential prerequisites for successful teaching practice include the student teachers’ self-guidance and ability to seek help when it is needed. One of the characteristics of true self-guidance is that guidance is sought only when it is actually needed, “I was very active in asking for feedback. I asked for feedback after every lesson. At the end of the practice I felt that I didn’t need the feedback anymore.”

Another interesting result of the need for guidance deals with the educational institution’s working environment. In light of this, the student teachers’ experiences varied a lot. Some student teachers felt that they had been duly supported by the school, “I think that I got more ideas from the other teachers than my mentor, I really got into the work community.” However, some felt that the actions of the other teachers and the management did, in fact, slow down and hinder their successful teaching practice, “I had the feeling that the work community was against my teaching practice. The heads/leaders weren’t interested at all.” When considering the success of the student teacher, and the teaching practice process as a whole, the attitudes emanating from the educational environment and the people working in it are important.

5. Conclusion

The student teachers’ self-guidance and communal experience are intertwined, with self-guidance factoring significantly in the amount and quality of the guidance that the student teacher receives. The student teachers that were self-guided sought guidance when it was appropriate.

A particularly interesting point of view emerged in conjunction with the role of the school community in the teaching practice. The active or self-guided student teachers widely sought guidance and support for their practice. For them, it was possible to have various reflective discussions. This result is important from the point of view of the student teachers’ development. According to Dobber et al. [9], the possibility of developing so-called community competence, that is, the ability to establish, maintain and develop relationships with other professionals as a basis for a professional learning and working culture in the school, enables beginning teachers to work as socially engaged professionals once they enter the profession [9].

These results show that in spite of the student teachers’ different needs and backgrounds, their self-confidence as teachers is connected to positive and constructive feedback from a mentor. Student teachers’ experiences of being part of the school community were positively associated with their professional development as vocational teachers.

6. References


