Mentors´ Perceptions of Teacher Practice at the School of Vocational Teacher Education in Oulu, Finland

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Abstract

Mentoring has emerged as an essential and effective process for developing teacher practice. The holistic student-centred guidance model is utilised to define the mentors’ roles and inputs in the teacher practice mentoring process. The purpose of this article is to describe mentors’ perceptions of mentoring teacher students in teacher practice at the School of Vocational Teacher Education in Oulu, Finland. The material for the development project was collected by conducting an inquiry at the beginning of mentors’ guidance training. The study participants included 21 mentors from different vocational schools. In the mentoring process, the interaction and cooperation between mentor and mentee plays an essential role. Mentors’ perceptions of their role in mentoring focus mainly on educational guidance and personal guidance. According to the findings, more attention could be focused on mentoring teacher students’ vocational development during teacher practice. The results can be used in developing the mentors’ guidance training.

1. Introduction

Mentoring has emerged as an essential and effective process for developing teacher practice [1]. The teacher practice mentoring process has been studied from different viewpoints; the objects of the studies have mainly been primary and secondary school teacher students. Vocational teacher students’ mentoring processes have also been studied, but less than other educational degrees. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to describe the mentors’ perceptions of mentoring teacher students in teacher practice at the School of Vocational Teacher Education in Oulu, Finland.
In this article, we begin briefly by outlining the aspects of mentoring, then we introduce the holistic student-centred guidance model. At the end of the article, we introduce the findings and make some conclusions.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Aspects of mentoring

Historically, a mentor has been used to denote a wise and trusted guide or adviser [3]. Hobson et al. (2009) defines mentoring as a one-to-one support of a novice or less experienced practitioner (mentee) by a more experienced (mentor) [1].

According to Murray (2001), the action is mentoring if the following aspects can be taken in to count:

- the mentee and the mentor have confidential discussions;
- the focus is on the mentee’s and mentor’s reciprocal and personal development;
- they meet regularly;
- they deal with practical issues more than theoretical issues in accordance with the mentee’s interests [4].

In addition to the above-mentioned structuring, mentoring also consists of a contract between the mentee and the mentor. The institution usually is the third party of the contract. All these aspects are realised in the teacher practice mentoring process at the School of Vocational Teacher Education.

A mentor can play a number of potential roles and corresponding functions, as follows:

- mentor as a model: functions to inspire and demonstrate;
- mentor as an acculturator: functions to help familiarise the particular professional culture;
- mentor as a sponsor: functions to introduce the mentee to the people in the central and significant position;
- mentor as a supporter: functions to provide the mentee with the possibility of sharing and analysing their feelings and experiences;
- mentor as an educator: functions to guide and create opportunities for the mentee’s professional learning [3].

The mentor’s roles and functions also include supporting the mentee’s psychological well-being and taking the social aspects of the mentoring process into consideration. For example Kram (1983) stated two basic mentoring tasks: career functions and psychosocial functions. Career functions are the aspects of a relationship that primarily enhance career advancement, for example sponsorship and challenging assignments. Psychosocial functions include role modelling, enhancing the sense of competence, clarifying identity and friendship. [5] These basic functions work well in the mentoring relationship at our school. One of the aims is that the mentee in the teacher practice will be able to understand his/her role in the larger scope of the profession and in the extended operational environment of the schools. An important goal is also to learn how to develop and advance one’s competence. It is crucial to recognise that mentoring can have a variety of purposes and goals and can take place at different stages of the mentee’s professional development [3].

2.2. Teacher practice mentoring in the School of Vocational Teacher Education

In the School of Vocational Teacher Education, the teacher practice mentors also have to consider the principles of mentoring an adult. At the School of Vocational Teacher Education in Oulu, the average age of teacher students is 40 years. The teacher students lead a rather typical adult life, which means dividing their time between family, work life and studies. The principles of adult learning should be considered in the mentoring process. [6] The essential question is how to define the mentors’ roles and inputs in the teacher practice mentoring process. The holistic student-centred guidance model can be utilised for this process.

2.3. The holistic student-centred guidance model

In the holistic student-centred guidance model, the student is the focus (Figure 2). To form the whole picture of the student’s support, it is essential to define the different roles and inputs of the different

Figure 1. Framework of the study

three aspects of mentoring: teacher practice mentoring, holistic student mentoring and mentoring in the study.
actors. The model contains three areas of student support: 1) personal guidance, 2) educational guidance and 3) career guidance. Personal guidance denotes the support of the student’s personal and social issues, which positively affects the development of the person. Educational guidance, however, includes supporting the student in his/her educational choices and supporting the student’s progress in his/her studies. Career guidance consists of supporting the student’s occupational choices and his/her placement into occupations and work roles. These three areas are not seen as being separate; rather, they overlap. [2]

In an educational environment, different types of actors play a role in developmental support. The key question is: Who is doing what? In the model, a three-in-line approach can be elaborated upon (Figure 2). First-in-line easily covers accessible guidance support. At this level, the staff in question is teachers who have been trained to develop awareness for sensing problems rather than solving them. The guidance support is seen as a part of a formal teaching function. They are not, however, specialised in any particular area of guidance. The first-in-line-staff also consists of different tutors and mentors. In the second-in-line, the guidance system is also linked to the formal teaching function, but at this level there is some degree of specialisation. The staff at this level consists of internal specialists who are involved in guidance to solve and prevent problems. They are involved specifically in individual guidance. The staff at this level contains counsellors and student office workers. The third-in-level, however, covers external specialist who are not necessarily involved in the teaching process. They can be experts in some particular sector of guidance, but their main tasks are differentiated diagnosis, remediation and support to counsellors at the earlier levels. At this level the staff contains, for example, school study psychologists, study pastors and school health nurses. The workers in the employment office, mental health clinic and the specialists in career and professional guidance are also involved to guide staff at this level.

In the School of Vocational Teacher Education in Oulu, everyone on the teaching staff is involved in the first-in-level guidance. The mentors in teacher practice from different vocational schools can also be seen as a part of this level of guidance. In the School of Vocational Teacher Education, the study office workers and counsellors are involved in the second-in-line. The third-in-level covers external specialist who are, for example, workers in the employment office.

Teacher practice mentors are significant partners in cooperation. The mentors’ perceptions highlight their roles and inputs in the teacher practice mentoring process and provide valuable knowledge about how to develop both the cooperation between the different parties and the quality of the mentoring process.

3. Purpose of the study

In this development project, the holistic student-centred guidance model is utilised to define the roles and inputs of the different actors. The mentoring process of teacher practice is of special interest.

The purpose of this development project is to describe the mentors’ perceptions of mentoring in teacher practice at the School of Vocational Teacher Education in Oulu. The objectives of the development project are to answer the following questions: 1) What kind of perceptions do the mentors have about the teacher practice? 2) What benefits do the mentors gain from the mentoring process? 3) What kind of guidance do the teacher students need? and 4) What kind of challenges are included in the mentoring process?

4. Methodology and group

The material for the development project was collected by conducting an inquiry at the beginning of the mentors’ guidance training in January 2012. A total of 21 mentors from different vocational schools participated in the study by answering the inquiry questions.

The research uses a qualitative approach and the study can be characterised as a case study. The data
collection method was the mentors’ open-ended questionnaire. Categories were constructed for the mentors’ open-ended answers, in which the mentors described a variety of things. The outcome, which provided a valuable starting point, consisted of a structured summary of the questionnaire materials.

5. Findings

The mentors’ perceptions of their role in the mentoring process focused on educational guidance and personal guidance, whereas career guidance played a minor role. In addition, the teacher students’ guidance needs in teacher practice are connected to educational and personal guidance. However, according to the mentors’ perceptions, career guidance is considered to be a benefit of the mentoring process. According to the holistic student-centred guidance model, the mentors are a part of the first level of support for teacher students.

In the mentoring process, the interactions and cooperation between the mentor and the mentee play an essential role. What the mentors consider positive in the mentoring process includes the possibility to use their experience and to develop the mentee. The mentors also gain the opportunity to develop their own work. The following challenges were identified as being part of the mentoring process: how to meet the mentee, how to achieve resources for mentoring and how to handle the limited time resources.

The results can be used to develop mentor guidance training. In general, more attention could be focused on mentoring the teacher students’ vocational development during teacher practice. The holistic student-centred guidance model can be utilised to define the roles in mentoring and to create a conversation about the quality of the mentoring process in teacher practice.

6. Conclusions

Many factors affect the development of vocational teacher students’ know-how. Students can affect some of these factors with their own choices, but some of the factors are inevitable and unpredictable, especially the ones that are related to the course of one’s life. However, teacher practice is one of the most significant issues during a teacher student’s training. Many teacher students obtain their first experience of teacher’s assignments during the teacher practice. The teacher practice mentors play an especially important role in this process. In order to get a general view of the profession, mentoring has emerged as an essential and effective process for developing teacher students’ know-how [1].

According to the holistic student-centred guidance model, both teacher practice mentors and teacher educators are a part of the first level support for teacher students [2]. Therefore, the cooperation between mentors and teacher educators is also significant and a common sense of confidence is important. Mentors and teacher educators have common areas of responsibilities in relation to the teacher students. They both guide the students’ tasks and professional growth. Interaction and cooperation are essential and both mentors and teacher educators try to guide teacher students to use different kinds of guiding methods in their own instruction. However, during teacher practice, the teacher student mentoring process is an extremely important part of the teacher students’ studies because the implementation of teaching occurs within authentic situations.

In conclusion, the mentors’ experiences of mentoring vocational teacher students have been positive. The teacher students’ mentors found their role to be motivating and inspiring. It is a process in which both mentor and teacher student can develop.

7. References


