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Dynamics of relationships between mentors and beginning teachers

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Abstract. This research investigates the relationships that are established between mentor teachers (PM) and beginning teachers (PD) in order to insert the beginning teachers into the school organization and how they are influenced by the institutional management. The specific objectives of the research were the following: (1) Identifying the perception of beginning teachers regarding the difficulties of adapting to the demands of the school environment; (2) Identifying the perception of mentor teachers who work with beginning teachers on the activities of a quality mentorship; (3) Making correlations between the opinions of mentors and novice teachers regarding their strengths and the ability to face adaptation difficulties; The qualitative design consisted of conducting two focus groups with PD and PM. The debut period is considered the most decisive stage in a teacher's professional life. From the first day of school, PD faces the teaching reality that often differs from the perceptions of the teaching profession developed during initial training. The research shows that the teachers in the sample experienced: establishing teacher authority and self-positioning as a teacher, time management, problems with discipline in a classroom, lack of skills to develop curriculum and lesson plans, difficulties in communicating with parents. The article includes critical analysis, opinions on the contradiction at the moment between the legislation and the reality at the school level on the didactic mentoring and the PD insertion.

Keywords. mentors, beginners, insertion, didactic mentoring, institutional management

1. Introduction

The beginning in education means socialization, social integration, professional integration, adaptation to the organizational culture, to the organizational climate. All this generates a series of states: from anxiety, fear of failure to excitement, emotions, the desire to perform, therefore it is important that PD successfully accommodate into school.

Previous studies indicate a high number of PDs who leave teaching after their first years in the department (Ingersoll, Merrill, & May, 2014); therefore, approaches and tools are sought to reduce this tendency.

The European Commission Communication 'Improving the quality of teacher education' (2007) noted that, where they exist, support measures for new teachers are still relatively unsystematic and developing rather than well embedded (Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, 2007)

In the policy document, *Teacher Education in Europe* (2009), the ETUC argues that induction mentoring of at least one year should be both a right and an obligation for newly qualified teachers and should include:

- support from mentors and other peers;
- a reduced teaching schedule without a decrease in remuneration;
- access to appropriate support resources participating in a mandatory mentoring program, opportunities to engage with theory and practice in a systematic way (ETUCE & CSEE, 2009).

The literature has shown the importance in PD insertion of both a school manager and mentoring programs and processes. The assignment of PD mentors and the involvement of school management are crucial in the induction of beginning teachers (Bianchini & Brenner, 2009; Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010).

The benefits of mentoring are mainly for the beginning teacher himself (support at different levels), but also for the mentor (improvement of skills and knowledge) and for the school, as mentoring provides opportunities for developing the culture of a learning community within the school (European Commission Staff Working Document SEC, 2010).

School managers were found to directly influence the frequency of PD–mentor interactions by selecting and assigning a mentor, providing mentor training, facilitating the meeting, overseeing mentoring relationships, program quality assessment, and in some cases directly mentoring beginning teachers.

Although significant attention has been paid to identifying the relationship between manager practices and teacher effectiveness and retention (Loeb et al., 2010), much less attention has been paid to their school-level influence on PD insertion.

In Romania, the concept of the professional insertion and insertion mentor is relatively new and gained recognition in 2011 when the new National Education Law was approved (1/2011). A 2017 OECD study says that although 53% of teachers working in a school where mentoring is said to be available, only 8% of all teachers admitted to having a mentor with specific training, showing that they do not enough is being done at the school level for teachers to benefit from mentoring programs.

From September 2022, the permanent introduction of the Commission for mentoring and training in the teaching career was ordered, but without a methodology regarding PD integration. With this in mind, there are a lot of gray areas regarding the implementation of national insertion and the regulation of mentor–beginning teacher relationships.

Therefore, there is potential for studying the involvement of institutional management in encouraging and dynamizing interactions between PMs and PDs through mentoring programs, thereby facilitating insertion.

2. PD insertion and guidance

The insertion refers to the new teacher's transition from beginner to professional (the internship period); is too large a task for one person to carry out alone (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010) and has been viewed as a multifaceted process: it is a formal, complex process designed and directed by the institutional management with the help of the mentor teacher in with the aim of achieving optimal relations between the beginning teaching staff and the educational environment with the aim of increasing the degree of satisfaction and professional motivation and increasing the professional yield and aims to improve PD performance.

Placement preparation programs focus on skills such as teaching, developing, adjusting, and evaluating (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Beginning teachers must be led, guided, monitored and evaluated by the manager of the institution, the management team, the head of the methodical department, as well as the professional insertion mentor with specific training for insertion mentoring.

The success of the insertion is highly dependent on the PD's own professional progress; of the professional support that the beginner receives from the mentor; the professional experience of the mentor (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011), as well as the positive attitude towards insertion and the involvement of institution managers.

3. Duties and Responsibilities of the PD

In specialized literature, the teacher must be a leader, a model, a manager, counselor (Gliga, 2002) a motivating agent, who can prepare the activity of students, being the craftsman of learning situations (Bocoş, 2013).

The role of the teacher must be especially formative, directing the students to succeed through their own efforts in discovering knowledge, then processing and integrating it cognitively. The teacher is a mediator and a manager of conflict situations, building collaborative relationships with students, even beyond the actual lesson, guiding them in making reports or selecting research sources (Păun and Potolea, 2002).

In conclusion, the teacher, PD must demonstrate qualities such as: authority, energy, adaptability, passion, curiosity, innovation (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

4. The role of the mentor in the relationship with the beginner

A primary focus for researchers for several decades has been on the mentor as a key figure in induction programs who support the introduction of PD into the school context and their professional development (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Pertinent questions concern the role and tasks of the mentor, the selection process and preparation for a successful cooperation with the newly qualified teacher.

A mentor teacher supervises and advises another teacher, who lacks experience in solving teaching-learning-assessment problems, provides professional support and guides the development of PD through reflection, collaboration and evaluation, helping to integrate into the school collective.

When someone is integrated into the organization through mentoring, they must have access to the experience and professional perspective of the mentor, to the knowledge necessary to obtain a position within the organization, to improve personal capabilities and skills such as personality traits (flexibility, openness, communication, mutual understanding) (Pânişoara, 2009).

5. Responsibility of the manager of the educational institution

The educational institution must create the conditions development of the PD's professional skills in order to persist in the career.

The manager understands the teachers' professional needs, develops PD skills and provides emotional support by listening and solving their problems as well.

The manager is responsible for developing and maintaining a healthy climate conducive to insertion and providing positive work, conditions, collegial structures for insertion and individual interactions with PD, as well as supporting teacher autonomy (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010)

6. Research methodology

6.1. The goal

The purpose of this research is to identify the relationships that are established between mentor teachers (PM) and beginning teachers (PD) during the insertion period and how they can be influenced by institutional management..

6.2. Objectives of the study:

O1– Identifying the perception of beginning teachers regarding the difficulties of adapting to the requirements of the school environment;

O2– Identifying the perception of mentor teachers who work with beginning teachers on the activities of a quality mentorship;

O3– Making correlations between mentor and novice teachers' opinions regarding their strengths and the ability to cope with adaptation difficulties;

6.3. Procedures, methods, techniques, tools

The research complied with the rules of ethics and professional deontology by conducting transparent communication with the subjects, ensuring their confidentiality, preserving anonymity, and participation being voluntary.

In carrying out the research, the analysis of documents was used, the holding of two focus group meetings and participatory observation.

The specialized literature states that focus groups have a maximum duration of two hours in which five major questions are presented, and the participants can get involved in the discussion in this way (A. Băban, 2002, apud Bocoș, 2003):

- answering, in turn, a certain common question (circle technique);
- engaging in the discussion generated by launching a controversial idea;
- constructing answers based on the presentation of a scenario of ideas;
- participating in brainstorming (which can be considered totally unstructured interviews).

The success of focus groups depends on the skills of the moderator (Chelcea, 2007). He, after presenting the rules of ethics, assuring the participants of the confidentiality of the answers, will ask for consent to record the discussion; will mention that he is honored to conduct the focus group interview. The moderator will show confidence in the judgment of the participants, show that their opinions are important to the research.

The advantage of this method lies in the fact that group members can share their experiences, discuss and react to the opinions of other participants and therefore come together with conclusions that would not have resulted from individual interviews.

Both focus groups were conducted online and recorded after each session, later the discussions were transcribed and analyzed, the period of implementation - October 2022.

6.4. Focus group 1

The first focus group was conducted with 10 beginning teachers recruited according to the following sampling criteria:

- 1) have a teaching experience of at most three years;
- 2) to be active both in the urban environment and in the rural environment.

All recruited teachers were informed in advance about the subject of the study and then gave their consent to participate in the focus group.

During the focus group, the following topics were addressed:

- problems, difficulties and the support offered within the school during the professional debut period;
- mentorat/guidance and its usefulness in professional socialization;
- the involvement of the institution's manager and the usefulness of PD training courses.

The moderator was the one who opened the meeting, introduced himself, presented the topic of the discussion and the rules for conducting the meeting. After that, it was followed by a self-presentation game of the participants, after which the first question was formulated: "What were the most frequent problems you faced at the beginning of your teaching career?" The DPs interviewed agreed that they encountered problems that they would have easily overcome if they had benefited from the guidance of a mentor teacher:

- Lack of a mentor to support and train me in my teaching activity;
- *The resistance of my colleagues, who did not take me into account when I took the initiative on account that I was a beginner and had no experience;*
- *Understanding the parents' attitude towards the school, the educational process with all the difficulties of the didactic act, the results of the assessment...*
- *It was difficult to manage the relationship with the parents, because I had a class with many students and with multiple discipline problems;*
- *Difficulties in class management and correct time management;*
- *Lack of experience in completing school documents;*
- *Realization of didactic activity (teaching-learning);*
- *Preparation of an open lesson attended by my colleagues;*
- *Adaptation of learning as well as the relationship with students with CES;*
- *Management of the group of students.*

I came up with an unplanned but necessary question at the time of the discussion: "How do you rate the quality of your training through initial training programs?" and all the respondents without exception rated the practical training as insufficient.

To the second question: "At the beginning of your teaching activity, did you benefit from the support of a mentor designated for this role?" Briefly describe what this person has done for you and how it has influenced your teaching career" some teachers have found help from more experienced colleagues at school or on Facebook:

- *My colleagues only helped me if I asked them, they never cared if I was good at teaching or not;*
- *A colleague explained to me how to complete the school documents, and another offered me materials for one of the school celebrations; otherwise I managed on my own;*
- *In my school I only received some verbal encouragement, from a professional point of view I received no help;*
- *A retired primary school teacher gave me her pedagogy books;*
- *My mother, she was my methodological and psychological support...;*
- *No one supported me in my first years as a beginning teacher. I can say that I stole some crafts where I could, enrolling in training courses, going to teaching meetings and asking for help from experienced colleagues;*

- I found an experienced colleague on Facebook who had the same 1st grade as me and who helped me a lot in organizing the lessons and I also took training courses;

- In the school, the director suggested that I go to the classes of my experienced colleagues during free hours, this helped me a lot.

- No one helped me, I made many mistakes that generated high stress situations. I wanted to give up at one point.

To the question: "What do you think are the ways in which school managers can get involved in the socio-professional development of teachers at the beginning of their teaching career?"

- The school manager must have a relationship of trust with the beginner;

- Must know PD needs;

- Must establish objectives and action strategies consistent with the needs of the beginner;

- Organizing an appropriate climate for teaching activities;

- By reducing stress by adopting a positive attitude;

- Communicating effectively;

- Through fairness in decision-making;

- Be a role model;

- To help him by participating in training courses to become an independent practitioner;

- Designate a mentor teacher and monitor how the collaboration between the two proceeds.

Introducing reflexivity into mentoring periods is a crucial condition. The need for the PD to become a reflective practitioner following the mentoring process is evident.

At question: "In your opinion, do you think that a beginning teacher only needs a mentor or the support of the entire team? Argue.", all the beginning teaching staff, without exception, agreed that the relationship with office colleagues plays a very important role

- Indeed, it is extremely important to involve the entire teaching team in terms of receiving, relating and integrating the debutant teacher;

- Without the support of colleagues it is very difficult to integrate;

- When you have everyone's support you can carry out your activity much better;

- The involvement of the collective helps the harmonious and personal development of the beginning teaching staff;

- I believe that every teacher in the educational unit leaves his mark on a beginner, whether he gets involved in the relationship with him or "ignores" him. Therefore, the involvement of the entire team can positively influence the accommodation and development of a beginning teacher;

- Collegiality Teamwork/Cooperation is the most important in stressful situations;

- Integration into the school collective is essential for teachers' responsibilities outside of class hours;

- The involvement of the entire collective provides confidence and more security in the organization of the activity;

- Suggestions, exchange of experience;

- The relationship with the entire teaching staff of the school creates security and confidence in one's own strength.

At question: "Do you think that the newcomer's participation in continuing education programs with his school colleagues would lead to an improvement in relations with them? Justify your answer." respondents unanimously agreed:

- Yes, of course, it is a good time to socialize and connect with colleagues from the same educational institution;
- *Yes, since communication has an important role in improving relationships with others;*
- *Yes. Teamwork is very important;*
- *Yes, because they are all in continuous development;*
- *Yes, the beginner's relationship with the rest of his colleagues can easily improve within the training programs because a different climate is created where communication is also different from the institutional environment;*
- *Yes, because it would be a great opportunity for interaction and information sharing;*
- *Yes, because they can collaborate during the program, they can get to know each other better;*
- *Yes, it is in favor of both parties;*
- *Yes, because a relationship is established which is indispensable for good communication.*

So we can conclude that for a successful insertion of PD, the involvement of the entire collective in a school institution is needed.

6.5.Focus group 2

The second focus group was conducted with 8 specialists involved in the PD training process: methodologists, school counselors, pedagogical practice coordinators, directors, inspectors, university teaching staff.

The task of the group was to analyze the activity of the mentor, highlighting the role of the mentor and the manager of the institution, as well as establishing quality standards regarding the activity of the insertion mentor. The data obtained are presented in the form of behaviors for PM (Table 1):

Table 1 – Activities of a quality mentorship

questions	The activities of a quality mentor
1. What are the competencies (knowledge, skills) that a mentor should have?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication and relationship skills; - Methodological skills; - Carrying out the didactic activity (teaching-learning-evaluation); - Evaluation of the didactic activity; - Conduct and professional experience; - To show empathy, patience; - To be responsible, discreet, flexible.
2. What are the goals you set for yourself with the beginning teacher during the mentoring period?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support in the efforts to get to know the profession; - Effective relationship with students, with their parents;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Integrating PD into the school by accommodating the set of cultural norms and values; - the development of autonomy in decisions of PD; - Developing the ability to anticipate one's long-term actions;
3. What is the mentor's role in the socio-professional development of PD?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To guide the professional development of young teachers; - To establish objectives in accordance with the needs of the beginner; - To have a relationship of trust with the beginner; - To develop the beginner's ability to critically analyze and observe his own didactic activity; - To guide him both socially and professionally; - To create and maintain an atmosphere favorable to a good collaboration with the beginning teacher; - Formulate questions to simulate PD's personal reflection on teaching practices with the aim of improving them; - To increase self-confidence of the beginner; - To lead the beginner to become a reflective practitioner.
4. How do you communicate with the beginning teacher during the mentoring period?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication is free and based on sincerity; - We communicate whenever necessary; - Direct or indirect communication through messages or telephone; - I use constructive feedback in communication; - Communication is carried out during methodical meetings; - Effective communication is when the mentor constantly has solutions to PD's turmoil and insecurity
5. How do you think school managers can get involved in the professional integration of beginning teachers?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Approaching effective communication; - By introducing mentoring programs in the managerial plan; - Ensuring an appropriate climate for the relationship between the debutante teacher and the teaching staff; - Reducing stress by adopting a positive attitude; - Through fairness in decision-making; - By preparing and training teachers to be mentors.

As can be seen, both groups are of the same opinion that the initial training of teachers is insufficient from the point of view of practice. From here we identify some future research directions.

Following the analysis of the documents and the analysis of the results of the two focus groups, we can perform a SWOT analysis regarding the mentoring activity in Romania:

Table 2: SWOT analysis regarding the mentoring activity

<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Weaknesses</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Existence of legislation in this sense (see National Education Law No. 1/2011) - The status of the teaching staff mentor - trainee mentor (Order no. 5400 of 25.11.2004); - The existence of mentor teacher training institutions; - Establishment of the Commission for didactic mentoring and training in the didactic career in all schools in Romania; - The mentoring activity ensures quality in education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Defective application of the provisions of Law No. 1/2011; - Absence of a strategy at national level regarding the training of mentor teachers in each school; - Lack of studies and research on the evaluation of initial training programs; -the lack of a methodology regarding the conduct of PM and PD activities within the mentoring process and the involvement of the institution's management within the Commission for didactic mentoring and training in the teaching career; - Lack of a program at national level regarding the training of mentor teachers in all schools; - Weak involvement of professional associations regarding the training of mentor teachers; - Weak involvement of professional associations in terms of PD training; - Lack of programs to optimize relationships between mentors and beginners in order to motivate the latter; -Abandoning the teaching profession after the first years of teaching; -Lack of remuneration for mentor teachers; - Demotivating salary for PD; - Lack of platforms dedicated to the exchange of information for both PD and PM.
<i>Opporrtunities</i>	<i>Threats</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Courses for mentor teachers - Publication of studies and research regarding didactic mentoring; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Insufficient hours of pedagogical practice in the initial training of teaching staff and the entry into the system of poorly trained teaching staff;

- The inclusion in Law No. 1/2011 of the teaching master's degree;
- The introduction of the didactic master's degree starting from the 2020-2021 academic year - as a pilot program in 8 universities in the country.

- Uncertainty regarding the quality of the initial training of teaching staff;
- Lack of legislation regarding the reduction no. of hours for mentor teachers so that they can devote time to the mentoring program;

7. Discussion, conclusions and recommendations

The aspects observed in the DPs who participated in the study give us the right to appreciate that a change is needed in the initial training of young teachers to become responsible, to develop self-control and confidence in their own knowledge with an emphasis on increasing self-knowledge. The attitude of professional involvement, concern for personal and professional development must also be supported. Trainers from universities and mentors from schools have a major role in this regard.

A mentoring program designed in accordance with the professional training needs of beginners and current trends in lifelong learning will train future professionals in the work of the department. The key elements of the mentor-teacher relationship are: cognitive and meta-cognitive reflection, stimulation and interactivity.

In Romania, the mentoring activity benefits from support, but the lack of a formal framework and legislation related to the National Education Law No. 1/2011, did not allow the generalization of the system at the national level. Starting from September 2022, it was ordered that the Commission for didactic mentoring and training in the teaching career should operate in each school, but without a national level plan regarding professional insertion mentoring, a program to train mentor teachers to apply a particular methodology with emphasis on PD insertion. Then, PMs are actually teachers who have their own class, so the time dedicated to mentoring is limited and fragmented.

Consequently, the benefits are insufficient and not uniformly distributed both at the level of the PD and the mentors (they are not remunerated for the mentoring activity), and the experience gained for more than 30 years is hindered by the lack of a formal framework in the field of mentoring.

The contradiction between legislation, educational policy documents, educational research results and school reality highlights the lack of cooperation between decision-makers, theorists and practitioners.

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