CHARACTERISTICS OF TRUE DIALOGICAL MENTORING PROCESS IN TEACHING PRACTICE

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Abstract

This study explores dialogical mentoring 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 Oulu University of Applied Sciences. The empirical data were collected from mentors and mentees during the teacher practice period. Dialogical mentoring is a process where both novice and experienced teachers can learn something new. Dialogue involves the participants' willingness to put forward and share new ideas. This study attempts to clarify the main characteristics of true dialogical mentoring process in teaching practice. According to the findings, the main characteristics in mentoring the teaching practice are: equal encounter and mutual appreciation of competence, mutual learning and growth of competence.

1. Introduction

Studies show that learning to be a teacher is a long and dynamic process that begins early in the process of education. The research has deepened the understanding, how teacher´s identity develops, which kind of phases teachers confront on their career, and how their pedagogical and practical thinking develop. (Elbaz-Luwisch 2011; Feiman-Nemser 2001; Kelchtermans 1993.) The research has also contextualized the knowledge gained in various educational environments showing that pedagogical and professional knowledge are constructed through an active interaction with the context of individual, social and cultural processes and variances with time (Aaltonen 2013; Nissilä 2006; Kelchtermans 1993). There is also a growing interest among researchers in the professional development of vocational student teachers.

The modern teacher is expected to possess the extensive knowledge, versatility and ability necessary to react immediately to changing work situations. Industry, educational institutes and society at large continually change and renew the work and work-related needs of a vocational teacher. The vocational and higher education teacher is not only expected to be an expert in his or her own field but to be tutors and developers of new work-related practices. The demands are high: not only do these educators need professional expertise, willingness to do research, ability to innovate and passion for developing new solutions but also international networking skills. The teacher must also be responsible for his or her work, maintain work-related ethical principles and mentor the students' ethical development (School of vocational teacher education study guide 2013-2014; VET teachers and trainers in Finland 2006, 12.)

The path leading to vocational teacherhood differs for example from the path of the primary or secondary school teacher. In the case of Finland, the general entrance requirement for vocational teacher education is a master's degree or the highest vocational degree in the major subject with three years of work experience in the field. Often, a vocational student teacher is embarking on a second or even third career. These teachers have deep knowledge in their respective fields and have often completed the master's or doctoral thesis. One result of the high entrance demands is that the average age of the teacher student is 40 years. To become a vocational teacher means combining two fields of expertise; expertise in a specific field and in education.

Research has revealed that 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. (Nissilä 2006; Smith 2010; Mukeredzi & Mandrona 2013).

2. The context of the Study

For years, in our work as a teacher educators, we have listened to our student teachers' experiences of their teaching practice period. We have heard a multitude of stories: some student teachers have had very successful teaching practice with excellent mentoring, but, on the other hand, some student teachers have brought out poor experiences, feeling that they had not received enough guidance or conversation with their mentors. We felt this to be so important an issue that we decided to start a research on student teachers' experiences concerning their mentoring experiences.

Our study project begun in 2009 to examine mentoring process. The project aims to understand the complexity of mentoring process during the teaching practice period. In the research literature, there are numerous concepts and definitions used to describe teacher training guidance (Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen & Bergen, 2008). 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.

In our 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' behavior, 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.

In the beginning of our research (The first phase of the research project, completed between 2009 and 2012) the supervising relationship between a mentor and a mentee during the teaching practice was examined. The empirical data was collected both from mentors and mentees) by essays and interviews. The study clearly indicated that the mentoring process was perceived as rewarding and that successful mentoring relationship can benefit both the mentors and mentees. Both parties emphasized in their stories the importance of equal and confidential atmosphere in mentoring. Both the mentors and mentees emphasized these expressions. In research literature equality and confidence are often connected with dialogicality. Also the informants talked about feeling empowered because of the mentoring process. These findings have gradually led us to study the characteristics of dialogical mentoring, which form the main concern of our present study. The results also revealed the importance of collecting new data from vocational student teachers. This became the foundation of the second phase of this present project. (see Perunka & Erkkilä 2011; Perunka & Erkkilä 2012.)

The second phase of the research project (from 2012 to 2013) focused on the student teachers' experiences. The research question was: 'What is the significance of mentoring in the vocational student teachers' professional development? The research participants were 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, organized by the researchers. The main finding was that successful mentoring is connected to at least two things: the self-directedness of a student teacher and the educational institution's working environment.

3. The third phase of the research project: What are the main characteristics of dialogical mentoring process?

In this third phase of the research project we will reflect the results that came out in phase I and II and analyse our data from a new perspective. The research question is: What are the main characteristics of true dialogical mentoring process? We have combined all the data gathered during 2009-2013 and analysed it from the point of dialogicality. Our data consist of 17 mentor interviews, 10 essays from vocational student teachers and 5 group discussions with 21 student teachers. According to our preliminary results, we created three main categories, which characterize dialogical mentoring. We named them as follows: 1) *the equal encounter*, 2) *the mutual appreciation of competence* 3) *the mutual learning and growth of competence.*

The equal encounter was highlighted clearly in our data. One student teacher said: *"I felt that I was equal with my mentor. I could say freely my own ideas. My mentor said, that she also learned new issues from me, so my 20 years work experience was an example for her."* (group discussion). One mentor said: *"It is an equal relationship, also I as a mentor can get many kinds of methods."* (mentor interview). In a research literature equity is often the most central feature in dialogical relationship. Ultimately, the mentor and the mentee are equal in their shared human value and existence. They both have equally valuable lives, which we as researchers underline. Still, we can ask if the mentoring relationship can be fully equal. It is said that the mentor must possess the kind of intellectual resources that the mentee lacks or the relationship will lose its importance. Otherwise the situation is not a professional developmental relationship at all. (Wang & Odell, 2002; Karjalainen, Heikkinen, Huttunen & Saarnivaara 2006.)

Epistemological equity refers to the capital of knowledge and skills. In a mentoring relationship one of the two has more knowledge and competence than the other. According to our study, the source of knowledge and skills can be either the student teacher or the mentor. The source can vary during the process. This phenomenon we named as the mutual appreciation of competence. One mentor described: *"We do not necessary look for a shared view to teaching, but also an additional points, even new innovations. It is so important to receive expert insight to one own perspectives and own narrowness."* (Mentor interview).

Mentoring is also defined to be professional dialogue in which both novice and experienced teachers learn something new and construct common understanding. (Wang, J. & Odell, S. 2002; Karjalainen, Heikkinen, Huttunen & Saarnivaara 2006). In our study, we named this as *the mutual learning and growth of competence*. One mentor said: *"I would like that in discussions we change ideas and create something new, not just using my ideas. So we would get into a situation, where one + one would be more than two."*

4. Concluding remarks

When looking the personal and professional growth of a teacher, we think that a successful mentoring relationship during teaching practice should be a rewarding experience to both partners. This requires that a mentor and a student teacher confront each other's genuinely and equally. In dialogical mentoring relationship the partners both give something valuable and receive something valuable as well. As teacher educators we have to regard these results as a challenge.

5. References

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