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Does Mentoring Matter? On the Way to Collaborative School Culture

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Abstract

This study investigates beginning teachers' relationships with their mentors as well as the collaboration between beginning teachers and their colleagues after five years of practice. One of the important roles of a mentor is to support the beginning teachers' collaboration with other teachers. Authors investigated the sustainability of the collaborative aspect of the induction program in order to determine if collaboration between beginning teachers and their mentors continues after five years of work and whether this collaboration extends to the beginning teachers' colleagues. Open-response questions were chosen for discovering aspects related with the continuity of mentoring. More than a half of the beginning teachers continue collaboration with their mentors throughout a five-year period. These beginning teachers, whose collaboration with their mentors continues during the five years, are found to be more cooperative with other colleagues at school. One-to-one mentoring creates quality examples for teacher collaboration that are treated as the first step towards creating a professional learning community within schools. The novelty of this research lies in the longitudinal nature of the teachers who participated in the national induction year program and whose progress has been monitored throughout five years of work.

Keywords: beginning teacher, mentoring, collaborative school culture.



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Introduction

A substantial amount of research describes the role of the school organization in the professional development of beginning teachers (e.g., Day, Sammons, Stobart, Kington, & Gu, 2007; Gavish & Friedman, 2011; Hargreaves, 2003) which affects their professional performance in the workplace, especially during their first years of work (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010; Poom-Valickis, 2007). The quality of leadership, relationship with colleagues and personal support are factors of critical importance in the teachers' sustained commitment to an organization and their motivation to remain within the profession (Brown & Roloff, 2011). Furthermore, these factors are pre-conditions for a beginning teachers' professional learning and their implementation of the student-centered teaching approach (Day et al., 2007).

Supportive induction programs were designed to help the beginning teachers' adjustment to school culture and enhance collaboration with their mentors and other colleagues. Mentors, who have received special preparation, support the beginning teachers' adjustment to, and development within, the school context. These mentors support the beginning teachers' professional development by providing feedback and scaffolding their self-analysis and reflection (Poom-Valickis, 2007). An earlier research of the induction program confirms that perceived mentor support correlates with collegial support. The fact that there were teachers who felt that their mentor was one of only a few, or sometimes even their only contact with colleagues, indicates that beginning teachers are often left alone to manage their own challenges (Author et al., 2009).

Although the first year is critical, it is also important to investigate what happens after the induction period and during the first five years of work, when a beginning teacher is considered a new professional and requires heavier support from their organization. As the first two to three years are the most influential in developing the teacher's personal pedagogical concept, we should treat this period as a phase of learning to teach. It is necessary to surround the beginning teachers with a culture that supports teacher learning (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Research indicates that beginning teachers who are provided with multiple means of support, are less likely either to change schools or leave the teaching profession altogether after their first years of practice (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). Additionally, the mentors' supportive role for collaborative school culture has been implemented in the Estonian induction program.

This study investigates the beginning teachers' relationship with their mentors, as well as the collaboration between beginning teachers and their colleagues after five years of practice. Since one of the important roles of a mentor is to support the beginning teacher's collaboration with other teachers, the researchers' expectation was that the beginning teachers' cooperation with their mentors during the induction year would enhance their collaboration with other colleagues.

Theoretical Background

School context and beginning teachers' professional development

A teacher's development is a learning process rather than linear development from one stage to another. Schools are seen as learning organizations where teachers support each other's professional growth and professional learning communities are formed (Day et al.,

2007). The literature on beginning teachers' professional development highlights schools as organizations with substantial effect on the beginning teachers' *professional development* and their attitude towards reflection, as well as on the development of their own practice (Poom-Valickis, 2007). Research has shown that teachers' first years of work are a period of adaptation to the school organization and environment, as well as through the support provided by the beginning teachers' colleagues (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Guzman-Valenzuela & Cabello, 2017; Levine & Marcus, 2010). The main concerns of beginning teachers' are related to the lack of emotional support, positive feedback (Day et al., 2007; Oplatka & Eizenberg, 2007) and clear understanding of the school's culture (Sabar, 2004). A teacher's adaptation to a new organization is easier when colleagues support each other's professional development, as is characteristic of a collaborative culture. Shen, Leslie, Spybrook, and Ma (2012) found that an orderly environment, principal leadership, and communal school organization are positively related to teacher efficiency and job satisfaction. As Harris and Muijs (2005) pointed out, collective creativity, shared values and vision, supportive conditions and shared personal practice, guarantee teachers' participation in the decision-making process. Clausen, Aquino, and Wideman (2009) stress the importance of long-term commitments by formal leaders in order to maintain a balance between support and pressure. This commitment, together with other factors such as the need for a well-developed understanding of reality and learning; shared goals, flexibility within the organizational structure, open communication; on-going and internal in-service opportunities, promotes a culture of collegial trust and respect (Clausen et al., 2009). These conditions refer to a targeted, reflective and supportive environment with constant interaction between colleagues in which beginning teachers feel, acknowledge and adopt professional models of thinking, action and behavior.

Mentoring

Mentoring, as the main feature of teacher induction programs (Hobson, Ashby, Maldrez, & Tomlinson, 2009; Klinge, 2015; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004), is one form of collaboration between inexperienced and experienced teachers. It has been found that continuing collaboration with the mentor influences a teacher's adjustment to school culture (Author et al., 2013) and has an impact on the organization as a whole. This collaboration fosters the beginning teachers' socialization in work and their professional development (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Although mentoring as a concept has many interpretations that focus on the support for beginning teachers, this concept provides reciprocal opportunities for more experienced teachers' through continual learning from colleagues.

Research on the conceptual idea of mentorship identified three approaches to mentoring: (a) *therapeutic* approach – emphasizing personal growth, which can be facilitated through a common understanding of the mentees' experiences; (b) *instructional* approach – mentoring is the modeling of various behaviors to be developed by the mentee; and, (c) *reflective* approach – the mentor facilitates a dialogue in order to support the beginning teacher's learning (Orland-Barak & Klein, 2005). Norman and Feiman-Nemser (2005) distinguish between "educative mentoring," technical advice and emotional support as being forms of support for individualized professional development. Wang and Odell (2002) mention that psychological support, technical assistance and guidance about local customs and policies dominate in mentors' and beginning teachers' relationships. Mentoring

necessitates clear articulation of expectations and practices, as well as provides the mentee with various viewpoints about teaching.

Mentoring may have different aims and forms that are not always supportive of the beginning teachers' adjustment to the school organization. For example, the extent to which other colleagues support the mentoring of beginning teachers is not always clear. Moor et al. (2005) found that, through mentoring relationships, the teaching staff came to know each other better resulting in increased collaboration and perceived workplace satisfaction. The study suggested that the program had fostered a culture of professional development and support within participating schools. The primary effectiveness of mentoring depends on the school culture and the perceived mentors' support correlates with colleagues' support. Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) see mentoring as an opportunity to recreate the teaching profession, not only as an enterprise for supporting the individual newly qualified teacher, but also as a reformation of school culture. Mentoring could reform the school culture, provided it is not only a way of helping individual teachers, but also a means of contributing to the construction of strong teaching cultures in schools that have made a commitment to the promotion of teaching, learning and caring (Jokinen & Välijärvi, 2006). From this perspective, mentoring is indoctrinated into the school culture and creates conditions for collaboration among teachers.

Supporting the beginning teachers' adaptation to an organization characterized by collaboration, sense of involvement and senior management support, is a very important factor of the Estonian induction program. Earlier research has revealed that teachers who are involved in their school development highly regard their own progress and collaboration with colleagues during their first year of work and perceived mentor support correlates with collegial support. It has been found that beginning teachers who have stopped collaborating with mentors give lower evaluation to their organizational involvement, collaboration with colleagues and senior management support (Author et al., 2013). There is also a connection between perceived leadership support and interest expressed to colleagues' work (Author et al., 2015).

Collaborative school culture

Studies on educational reform have evaluated the significance of teacher collaboration for building teacher capacity and student achievement (Moolenaar, Slegers, & Daly, 2012). Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes, and Kyndt (2015) made a systematic review on teacher collaboration that analyzed numerous studies that described preconditions for teachers' cooperation and found a large amount of positive outcomes. They found positive impact on three levels – students, teachers and the whole organization: students' academic progress increased and their learning skills improved; teachers were reported to be more motivated and their instruction strategies became more innovative, and; teachers became more supportive of organizational change (Vangrieken et al., 2015).

Collaboration with colleagues has a positive impact on teachers' morale (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008) which builds trust and opens dialogue between teachers about their work. This helps to bring focus on what students do, think, say, and shifts teacher practices to meet student needs (Kuh, 2016). In strong collaborative school communities, teachers often discuss student and class affairs with their colleagues leading to the teacher's willingness to adopt a student-centered teaching style (Opdenakker & Van Damme, 2006). Collaboration

encompasses lesson observations, discussions and reflections about teaching practices, and is required for school improvement and collegial learning (Doppenberg, den Brok, & Bakx, 2012; Levine & Marcus, 2010; Meirink, Meijer, Verloop, & Bergen, 2009).

Although both practitioners and researchers agree that teachers' collaboration is one of the preconditions for successful teacher development, there are not enough opportunities created to establish supportive culture for continued teacher learning. Mentoring, as one efficient possibility, could support beginning teachers' collaboration with other teachers, and should not be considered completed by the first year of work. The scope of the mentorship could be broadened to help create sustainable collegial collaboration (see Figure 1).

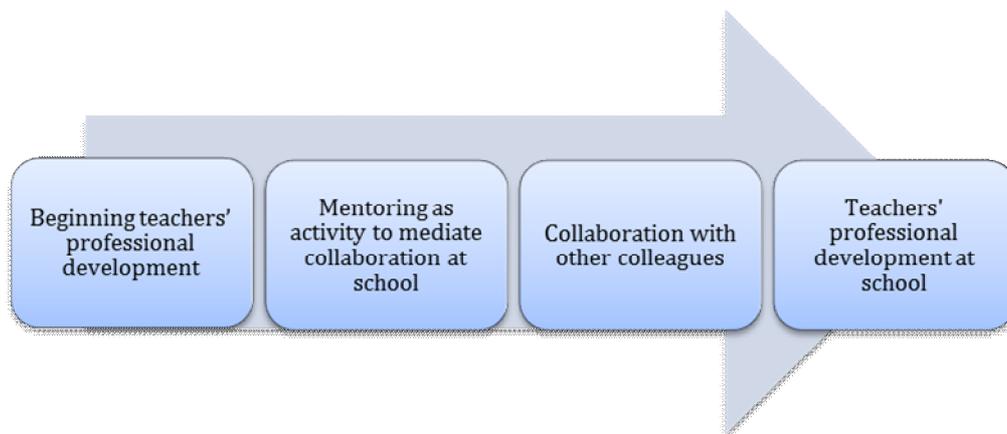


Figure 1. Beginning teachers' professional development and teachers' collaboration at school.

The aim of this current research is to reveal to what extent and in what form collaboration between beginning teachers and their mentors continues after the induction year. Additionally, this research aims to identify if there is a connection between continuous collaboration with mentors and other colleagues. The following research questions are addressed in this study: (a) What are the areas of beginning teachers collaboration with their mentors during their first five years of work? (b) What are the areas of beginning teachers collaboration with their colleagues during their first five years of work? (c) Are there any patterns between mentor collaboration and collaboration with other colleagues?

Methodology

This survey is part of a larger mixed methods research project that attempted to identify what interactional processes take place in the school organization during the teachers' first five years of work and how these processes are connected with mentoring. In the Estonian educational system, all first year full-time teachers participate in a two-fold induction program. First, they have a mentor at school (one-to-one mentoring) and second, they have two two-day peer-group mentoring sessions held at the university four times a year. All mentors pass mentoring education and topics which cover beginning teachers' professional development, mentoring skills (i.e., reflective listening, feedback, etc.) and mentor's role in school development (i.e., supporting teachers' collaboration, teamwork, peer learning etc.). In this model, the school's organization and culture plays an important role in the beginning teacher's socialization process and professional development.

This research project contained both closed- and open-response questions. The results of the closed-response items, that have already been published elsewhere (Author et al., 2013; Author et al., 2015), showed that during the first five years, teachers become more critical of their senior management support. Their cooperation with others and opinions regarding some factors of school context became more negative (Author et al., 2013; Author et al., 2015).

This article is based on the qualitative data gathered from the teachers' answers to the open-response questions. The open-response questions as a research tool was chosen because they generate more expansive responses and allow deeper exploration of mentoring and collaboration in the school context. The teachers were asked the following questions: 1) Do you still cooperate with your mentor? If yes, please give examples of your collaboration; 2) Who else has helped and supported you at work at school? What kind of support have you received?

The sample consists of the same teachers (total 145) who participated in the induction program and who had stayed in the profession for a further five years. All of the teachers that participated were contacted by e-mail and 129 responded. Out of these 129 teachers, 105 had remained in the profession and out of those teachers 29 were on the maternity leave at that time and could not answer the questionnaire. A total of 54 out of 76 available active teachers (71%) took part and answered the open-response questions for this current study. The teachers were not asked to identify their name nor school and were requested to forward their replies back to the sender's e-mail address as an attachment. To guarantee the anonymity of the respondents, all answers have been assigned a number (e.g., T1, T2 etc.).

The sample consists of teachers of science (24%), English (20%), class teachers (19%), math (13%), mother-tongue (i.e., Estonian) (13%), and music and physical education (11%). According to the Estonian school-levels the sample distributes as following: I level (grades 1-6) 33%; II level (grades 7-9) 41%; with 44% of the teachers work at both I and II level (grades 1-9). 46% of the participant teachers work in rural areas (schools with 40-470 students), and 54% work in city areas (schools with up to 1,400 students).

The respondents were divided into two groups: (1) teachers who had continued collaboration with their mentor; and, (2) teachers who had stopped collaboration with their mentor. *Inductive content analysis* was used, in which the key content emerges during the process of reading the responses, to interpret the answers (Mayring, 2000). *Qualitative content analysis* usually chooses individual themes as the unit for analysis; a theme might be expressed as a single word, phrase, sentence or paragraph. When using a theme as the coding unit, one is primarily looking for the expressions of an idea. Thus, a code may be assigned to a block of text of any size, provided that the block represents a single theme or issue of relevance (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1990). Two researchers categorized the answers and compared their results, inconsistencies were identified and settled by the process of negotiation.

The analysis had the following steps: 1) based on the analysis of what the beginning teacher's collaboration with their mentor is about, two categories emerged: *professional* and *emotional* discussions; 2) next the perceived support from other colleagues was analyzed, and beginning teachers' responses categorized into two: *teacher-oriented* and *student-oriented* collaboration; 3) the answers of two different teacher groups – those whose

collaboration with their mentor had continued over the years and those whose collaboration had stopped – were compared with their perceived support from other colleagues. Coding categories and examples are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Results and Discussion

The results are presented in the following order: (a) collaboration with the mentor; (b) collaboration with other colleagues; and (c) patterns between mentor collaboration and collaboration with other colleagues.

Collaboration with the Mentor

After the induction year, and still within the first five years of work, 58% of teachers confirmed that collaboration with their mentors continues in some form. No more collaboration with their mentor was reported by 35% of respondents. A total of 11% of the teachers had changed schools during their first five years of work and as a result there was no further cooperation with their mentor. In some cases the mentor had either retired or changed schools (6%).

Almost three-quarters (74%) of beginning teachers who confirmed that collaboration with their mentors (in the same or from different schools) continued in some form reported maintaining professional discussions with their mentors, e.g. issues concerning students’ behavioral problems, teaching activities, school development etc. Continuous contact of teacher’s with their mentor regarding emotional issues was mentioned by 48% of the respondents. These teachers described their mentor as a good friend with whom the beginning teacher had a trusting relationship. 22% of teachers reported having both professional and emotional discussions with their mentor (see Table 1).

Table 1. Collaboration with the mentor

<i>Collaboration with mentor</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Example theme</i>
Professional discussions	64	<i>Our collaboration is still effective, we get along well, we discuss school development and professional problems and she has always helped me when I have had a problem (T11)</i>
Emotional relations	36	<i>As to work, we do not communicate really too much, but she is a person whom I can and always want to turn to, because we still have a very warm relationship (T15)</i>

Professional discussions with mentor. One theme mentioned by beginning teachers was *problem analysis*, where they turn to their mentor for solutions mainly after the problems have already developed:

My mentor and I – we mainly discuss different problems. It is really nice to analyze various solutions, their pros and cons. It is comforting to have someone to turn to. (T14)

Although this kind of problem solving is reactive in principle, it is a prerequisite for beginning teachers’ professional development, because it is important to reflect on a critical

situation after the event. As beginning teachers do not often dare to turn to other colleagues to analyze their critical incidents, they still trust their mentors and ask for their advice for problem solving. This demonstrates the sustainability of mentoring as a means to reduce the stress and isolation of teachers. Opportunities for collaborative learning and feedback should be available for teachers, not only during their first year of practice, but throughout their career. A mentor committed to investing time and skill to support the beginning teacher's professional growth is vital for their performance in later years (Ellul & Fehring, 2017).

A beginning teachers' experience is challenged when they *attempt to use new methods of teaching*. For example, learning processes outside of the classroom are currently gaining more importance and are more demanding for the beginning professionals. It is easier to organize outdoor learning when teachers collaborate with each other. About a sixth of respondents (15%) said that they organize events and excursions together with their mentor.

Collaborative relations and joint activities between the mentee and mentor are sustained when they either teach the same subject or students of the same grade. This might indicate that teacher communities are gaining a more important role in teachers' professional development (Vescio et al., 2008) and that mentoring could be one of the measures to enforce collaborative teaching.

Planning the teaching process together was one of the most common themes of teachers' collaboration (55% mentioned):

As my mentor is a teacher of English like myself, I always turn to her for professional advice. Although I feel rather confident in my subject, one sometimes needs a more experienced colleague's advice. (T44)

Collaborative teaching starts from joint planning. Hobson et al. (2009) mentioned that collaborative teaching by teacher-mentors and their mentees, including shared planning and reflection, has great potential to facilitate the early professional learning of beginning teachers. Yet with a few exceptions, research on such a strategy is so far notable by its absence. There is great potential for step-by-step mentoring to create a collaborative culture in schools. Ingersoll and Smith (2004) found that beginning teachers benefit the most when they have mentors of the same subject or grade level. It might be that collaboration between teachers of the same subject and grade is one of the most popular forms of cooperation, while observing other colleagues' classes and analyzing colleagues' teaching practices is not as popular (Munthe, 2003). Research from the mentors' perspective has shown that mentors also benefit from observing their students' in other teachers' lessons (Hudson, 2013).

It is important to mention that generally the respondents did not mention the discussion of school development with their mentors. The reason for beginning teachers' lack of interest in school organization could be that even after five years of practice, teachers are still more concerned with their own problems and do not feel that school development, in general, is their concern. However, teachers' participation in school development is a key question for school improvement as teachers' reflection of their colleagues' work also influences their understanding of innovative teaching (Hoyle, 2015).

Emotional relations. About 48% of teachers mentioned that they have an emotional relationship with their mentor. Beginning teachers in our study seemed to value their mentors' emotional support, as the need for a trustworthy colleague, one they can turn to not only with professional issues, but also someone whose presence, appreciation and "backup" can be felt. The fact that both mentor and mentee have a good, trusting relationship forms a pre-condition for successful mentoring. According to Fantilli and McDougall's (2009) research, a mentee who was included in the selection process of their mentor reported gaining benefits from mentoring. This confirms how important the "chemistry" is between a mentor and mentee. Good collegial relations can develop into professional cooperation that in turn, enriches both teachers and helps decrease teacher isolation. There were cases where either a mentor or mentee had changed schools, but have still maintained the relationship:

Although I changed schools, I still communicate with my mentor. We just have such a kind of chemistry between us, so that it only seems natural to share our school worries and support each other or just keep track of each other's actions. (T26)

To summarize collaboration with the mentor, this research reveals that both emotional and professional approaches were mentioned by the respondents, and this is in line with Little's (1990) approaches to mentoring. The fact that mentorship has continued for the majority of teachers for five years, sometimes even for teachers who are working in different schools, might indicate the importance of mentorship continuity. This may reflect the significant impacts which a mentor can have on a beginning teacher's professional development.

This premise is also supported by findings from an earlier study (Author et al., 2009) in which the importance of the socialization process comes into focus because it involves the transfer of tacit knowledge, including norms and values of the organization. The research drew attention to the fact that, despite the importance of an emotional connection between a mentor and mentee, it is important to maintain focus on the beginning teachers' professional development, knowledge acquisition and involvement in organizational development.

Beginning Teachers' Collaboration with other Colleagues

The majority (85%) of beginning teachers reported that they continue collaboration with their colleagues and have asked for their support. Various support structures (psychologists, social pedagogues) were mentioned as a source of help by 17% of teachers. Some teachers (9%) have maintained good professional relationships with their former classmates from pre-service teacher education.

With regard to support from colleagues, there is a similar pattern as with mentors – beginning teachers most often identified teachers of parallel classes as those who provide the best quality support. Methodological questions were discussed mainly with teachers of the same subject, while support for solving disruptive behavior problems was discussed mainly with class-teachers.

None of the respondents mentioned being involved in the decision-making process at the school level. This could be explained by the school principals' limited knowledge about

the learning organization and its development, or it may be that senior management expects mentors, even after the induction year, to take the whole responsibility for supporting beginning teachers' professional development. With regard to support from the school administration; according to Harris and Muijs (2005), the administration should clearly understand their responsibility as part of the collective body, in sharing values and vision, encouraging collective creativity, providing supportive conditions for the professional development of the staff and enabling teachers' participation in the school decision-making process.

Although the majority of teachers have reported collaboration with their colleagues, only 35% specified the theme of the cooperation. A total of 68 different themes were mentioned, forming two categories with sub-categories: (1) *teacher-oriented* collaboration (67% of themes); and (2) *student-oriented* collaboration (43%) (see Table 2). Under the teacher-oriented category the following sub-categories emerged: teaching methods and materials; organizational and management problems at school; and emotional support, while under the student-oriented category: disruptive behavior; learning disabilities; and extra-curricular activities.

Table 2. Collaboration with colleagues

<i>Teacher-oriented collaboration (67% of respondents)</i>	<i>Student-oriented collaboration (33% of respondents)</i>
Teaching methodology, materials (58%) <i>I always turn to our history teacher to discuss possibilities to enrich teaching methods and share experiences. (T28)</i>	Disruptive behavior (46%) <i>There have been classes with discipline problems, then I have asked help from my head-teacher. (T3)</i>
Everyday practicalities, projects and school documentation (17%) <i>Filling in various documentation takes too much of my time, so I feel that I have not enough time to work with my students individually, for example prepare stronger students for various student competitions etc. (T36)</i>	Learning disabilities (27%) <i>I have always got help from our senior administration, whenever I ask how to deal with students' who have learning disabilities. (T27)</i>
Various problems at school (12.5%) <i>Sometimes I feel that I work at too big a school, because there are more than 30 students per class and I cannot give enough attention to them all. (T39)</i>	Extra-curricular activities (27%) <i>I have close relations with my parallel class teacher who has always given me support with various projects and extra-curricular activities. I am very grateful for that! (T40)</i>
Emotional support (12.5%) <i>I feel very lonely at a big school... I get help from colleagues. (T24)</i>	

It is worthwhile to stress that after five years of work, beginning teachers still seem more concerned about their own situation and how they manage as teachers than issues concerning their students' learning and development.

Teacher-oriented collaboration focused mainly on methodology issues (58%) to improve teachers' everyday teaching practices:

I get professional advice about how to teach certain topics, what is important and what is not so important; (T22)

We share interesting ideas, materials and 'hand-outs.' (T3)

Little (1990) divides teachers' collaboration into a) collaboration for improving teaching and b) collaboration for co-learning. While in the first case teachers share their materials and experiences in class, the latter concentrates on collegial problem-solving and learning. Emphasizing low-level collaboration, such as the sharing of materials, illustrates weak collaborative culture in schools. There was no evidence of joint planning or co-creation of teaching materials.

One of the mentioned areas was connected with emotional collegial support, which was also mentioned as an important aspect with mentor-mentee collaboration. Fostering positive interactions with colleagues around work is an important part of developing professional relationships, networks and collaborations. It seems simple, but conversations and interest in others does go a long way as you establish working relationships (Normand & Morriss, 2017).

Student-oriented collaboration was mainly concerned with students' disruptive behavior:

There have been cases when I need help about misbehaving kids; (T3)

When I have a problem with any student who does not behave well, I discuss this with their class teacher. (T44)

Student misbehavior is a serious problem for teachers at the beginning of their career when they lack knowledge, experience and self-confidence. Collaboration helps teachers find out the reasons for misbehavior and together, with colleagues, create supportive conditions to avoid disruptive behavior and help calm misbehaving children. In line with behavioral problems, students with disabilities and special educational needs were mentioned as areas of collaboration. As inclusive education is a rather new approach, it is quite natural that teachers are not adequately prepared for dealing with the variety of different needs of the students:

Our school administration is really supportive when I ask how to help children with learning disabilities and I have given this kind of help to colleagues myself. (T 27)

Although individualized educational programs and specialized services (i.e., psychological and social-work services) provided to the students outside of the regular classroom are of great support to the teachers, there is still need for collegial discussion as to how to help all students be fully active members in regular classes. Extracurricular activities is another area of teacher collaboration. As innovative teaching and student-centered teaching approach encourage teachers to widen their understanding of where and

when learning takes place, the role of extracurricular activities has gained importance in school planning.

To summarize collaboration with other colleagues, it is important to note that none of the respondents mentioned lesson observations in any form as a source for professional collaboration. This could be considered as evidence of a reluctance to permit colleagues to observe their classes. Similarly, there were no themes concerning organizational development and cooperation with parents, or with any other people outside of the school community. The results reveal that there seems to be, with few exceptions, lack of existing professional development systems that deal with teachers' professional issues in advance. Beginning teachers seek collaboration with their colleagues for more significant problems and the support they get depends on their colleagues' readiness to offer cooperation in the form of professional discussions.

Patterns of Collaboration with Mentors and other Colleagues

The research revealed that beginning teachers who had remained collaborative with their mentors by the fifth year of work, also continued to maintain more professional discussions with other colleagues. Teachers who still cooperated with a mentor engaged in professional discussions with other teachers (89%). Teachers, whose collaboration with their mentors had stopped, were also more reluctant to collaborate professionally with their other colleagues, with only 22% having mentioned collaboration with other teachers. Moreover, it can be assumed that sustainable mentorship creates a strong basis for collaboration among teachers within an organization. In earlier research of the same target group, it was found that teachers' involvement in their organization and collaboration with their colleagues correlated significantly with senior management support (Author et al., 2013). Therefore, it can be argued that enhancing the beginning teachers' involvement in generalized school development and collaboration should attract more attention from senior management. The reliance on mentoring and the influence of other colleagues might not be sufficient to create a supportive school climate for professional development.

Conclusions

This study aimed at finding ways to improve mentoring of beginning teachers' in order to create an environment for teachers' collaboration and professional development. The questions of how beginning teachers continue their collaboration with their mentors during the first five years and how strong co-operational relationships supports collaboration with other colleagues were addressed.

It may be concluded that a mentor's continuous support is essential for beginning teachers even after the induction year as both professional discussions and pure emotional support are valued. The research revealed that beginning teachers tend to have a stronger professional relationship with colleagues who either teach the same age group (i.e. grade) or the same subject. As to an extended mentoring relationship, it became evident that the mentor's personality and character plays a more important role in effective mentoring than previously thought, because professional relations between mentors and mentees depend on personal trust and understanding. In many cases an effective collaborative relationship ended because either the mentor or the mentee had changed schools.

Beginning teachers who have continued collaboration with their mentors are also more willing to collaborate with other colleagues, although their discussions with both mentors and co-teachers are more teacher-oriented, such as trying to find solutions to manage the everyday routines of a teacher. Nevertheless, it should not only be the mentors, but rather the whole staff who support beginning teachers development during their adaptation to the organization.

This study revealed that mentoring and collegial relationships tend to be more reactive than proactive, which is probably due to the existing organizational school culture. The beginning teachers receive help from other colleagues and the administration only when they raise their concerns as specific questions. Also, organizational culture does not encourage beginning teachers to ask for help. Studies have found that mentors are often given insufficient (or no) additional time in which to carry out their roles (Hobson et al., 2009). Even a heavy workload may not be a problem if school-leaders are aware of the issue and find flexible solutions to optimize working hours, or differentiate the duties allocated to beginning teachers and more experienced teachers.

Based on the results of this study, some ideas for future consideration can be developed. The challenge for school leaders, who have an important role in creating a professional mentoring relationship between mentors and mentees, is to develop teachers' professional capacity in the most effective way for the school context. Meaningful professional learning needs to take place over time, with opportunities to plan, learn and reflect with colleagues at the actual worksite (Ellul & Fehring, 2017). Therefore it is worth investigating how school leaders define their role and what kind of competences they demonstrate in order to create a supportive context for teacher collaboration. School principals can benefit from participation in leadership programs to become better qualified for the position. As Fullan (2008) mentioned, professional development for teachers is essential in order for education reform to occur, and leaders are responsible for creating conditions for this change. Leadership programs should focus on leader competencies in order to create learning communities for teachers in their organizations. School leaders should know how to create work in organization with teachers' systematic support to each other (Vanblaere & Devos, 2016). Transformative leadership is a suitable approach to enhance teachers' learning communities (Ross & Gray, 2006). Albeit Estonian school leaders involve teachers in the schools' development, there is little support for teachers' school-contextual learning (Author et al., 2015).

Over and again the question of mentor education arises. As previous research has shown, mentor preparatory programs are extremely variable in nature and often focus more on administrative aspects than on developing mentor's ability to support and facilitate their mentee's professional learning. Often these programs are not compulsory, and are poorly attended (Hobson et al., 2009). Hobson and colleagues point out that mentors' preparation should be considered a priority area for policymakers, researchers and teacher educators concerned about, or interested in, the support and professional development of beginning teachers (Hobson et al., 2009). Mentors are expected to be more effective if they have undertaken a mentoring preparatory program appropriate to their workplace context. Workplace learning is always contextual due to the variety of organizational needs that influence the mentors' support to beginning teachers' socialization process, their work with students with special needs, implementation of the changing teaching paradigm, etc.

Both mentors and mentees, as a means for professional growth, should be able to learn from each other, including an “openness to receiving constructive feedback and a willingness to provide it” as a part of two-way relationship (Hudson, 2013). Mentoring, as a developmental process, is mentioned by several researchers, for example Gilles and Wilson (2004) stated that “mentoring provides teachers with leadership opportunities that build confidence and professional courage”. It is evident that mentoring as a format for professional teacher development should be used more purposefully to transmit the positive experience of strong mentor-beginning teacher relationship to other areas of school culture. One-to-one mentoring creates good examples for teacher collaboration which could be treated as a first step towards establishing a professional learning community within schools.

The role of teachers’ collaborative work at school is still underestimated. As this study has revealed, teachers do not discuss school development issues among themselves. Although shared values and vision creates a good basis for teachers’ participation in the decision-making process, they prefer to take more responsibility to improve their students’ learning instead. To improve the situation, certain changes should be implemented at school: first, possibilities for open discussions should be created, with both time allocated and purpose provided; and second, flexible work arrangements should be introduced to allow collegial lesson observations, activity planning, etc. As the focus shifts from isolation to collective responsibility for students’ learning, the focus should be on the key characteristics of an effective professional community where teachers’ professional development is a constant activity or discussion facilitated by school leaders.

There are certain limitations of the current research. The respondents gave answers in writing which precluded the possibility of asking additional explanatory questions; or some of the answers did not focus on the issues actually under discussion. An interview format could have provided a more thorough and detailed insight into the teachers’ beliefs. This research format did not allow to find out why some beginning teachers had stopped collaborating with their mentors, although they still worked at the same school. Follow-up questions could have provided insight into the reasons why these teachers no longer collaborated with their mentors and if they were less likely to collaborate with other colleagues.

In this study the influence of personal characteristics in the collaboration process has not been taken into account. Earlier research has shown that school culture has a strong positive impact on teachers’ collaboration, motivation, self-efficacy etc. It would be interesting to study how beginning teachers’ and mentors’ personalities hinder or facilitate collaboration in an organization.

As this study has shown, mentoring seems to be more reactive rather than proactive. This is an important research topic for the future which could lead to a better understanding of how mentors support their mentees’ collaboration with colleagues at school and how much they consider themselves as mediators of a collaborative school culture. The broader question is how school leaders define collaborative school culture and how they see their role in supporting teachers’ collaboration.

Notes

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