

SCHOOL AS A LEARNING COMMUNITY: PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL GROWTH OF TEACHERS THROUGH MENTORING

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Introduction

Without doubt, prospective English language teachers can develop their knowledge and teaching skills considerably in practice-based courses. However, how mentor-teachers benefit from mentoring these student-teachers is an issue that needs to be further explored. This article is an initial report on a research project that explores how English language teachers who are involved in teaching practice as mentor-teachers benefit from mentoring. More specifically, it focuses on their perceived personal and professional gains from this experience.

Background to the Study

As an English language teacher and as an educator of English language teachers, I have witnessed how much student-teachers benefit from practice-based courses. In the English language teacher education curriculum of Middle East Technical University, student-teachers take a Practice Teaching course which requires them to work with a mentor-teacher in a primary or secondary school in the last semester of their Bachelors degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. The Practice Teaching course is the last required course in the ELT methodology component of the degree. The six previous courses in this component focus on the theory of second language acquisition, an overview of language teaching methods, language testing, materials development, teaching English to young learners, and theory of grammar, vocabulary and skills teaching together with micro-teaching activities to provide insights into how to transfer theory to practice. The Practice Teaching course is therefore a culminating course which aims to transfer the knowledge and skills acquired in the previous courses to authentic teaching situations.

In the Practice Teaching course, student-teachers spend one day a week (six hours) at an assigned secondary school and attend a weekly two-hour lesson at the university. Although the academic semester is 14 weeks long, the practice component

is limited to 10 weeks. At the practice school, mentor-teachers are randomly chosen from a pool of experienced teachers who have volunteered to assume this role, and student-teachers are randomly assigned to a mentor-teacher in pairs. The mentor-teachers themselves participate in a short (10-hour) training program offered by the university instructor. The main aims of this course are to raise mentor-teachers' awareness on issues such as lesson planning, lesson observation, providing constructive feedback, and materials design and adaptation. Although course attendance was voluntary, all of the mentor-teachers participated the year this study was conducted.

After observing the lessons of the mentor-teacher for twenty hours, student-teachers start teaching, at first parts of lessons, and then full lessons. By the end of the course, they are required to have taught a minimum of three full lessons. All of the teaching done by the student-teacher is observed by the partner and the mentor-teacher, who provide feedback afterwards. The university instructor observes at least one of the lessons and assesses it together with the mentor-teacher. The two-hour lessons in the university aim to provide the skills and the knowledge demanded by the specific teaching situation each student-teacher faces. In their end of semester feedback and in other forums, student-teachers report benefiting from this course in multiple ways. Through this course, they both improve their teaching-related knowledge and skills and develop a positive attitude towards the teaching profession (Daloglu, 2001).

Being convinced of the positive learning gains of the student-teachers, I have often wondered what mentor-teachers themselves get out of this experience. Do they view mentoring as a worthwhile experience? What are their own perceived learning outcomes? Does mentoring contribute to their professional development? What role does mentoring play in establishing a learning community in the school? How does participating in a mentor-training program influence mentors and their student-teachers? Informal positive feedback from the mentor-teachers and their enthusiasm to mentor were hints that showed me they too were benefiting from this experience, but I wished to explore further what their perceived personal and professional gains might be.

The Possible Benefits of Mentoring

Without doubt, it is time-consuming and costly to implement practice-based courses. The main challenges lie in staffing, budgeting, and establishing effective liaison between the practice schools and the university. Research studies, however, provide some evidence that guiding and supporting student-teachers or novice teachers provide valuable professional development for both new and experienced teachers. Danielson (1999) found that mentoring helps novice teachers face new challenges through reflective activities and professional conversations. The main conclusion Danielson reaches is that mentoring fosters the professional development of both new teachers and their mentors. Further persuasive evidence regarding the value of mentoring is reported by Scott (1999) who analyzed the effects of the Beginning Teachers' Induction Program in New Brunswick, Canada. He reports that 96% of the novice teachers and 98% of the experienced teachers in the study felt that they had benefited from the program. The experienced teachers were particularly pleased because mentoring not only allowed them to help others improve themselves but enabled them to receive respect, develop collegiality and profit from the novice teachers' fresh ideas and energy. These conclusions demonstrate that the perceived benefits of mentoring may be both professional and affective. However, contrary to these findings, Edwards (1998), based on the results of her study in England and Wales, reports that interactions between mentor-teachers and student-teachers were limited to facilitating low error performances by student-teachers in classrooms and were unlikely to encourage learning and development at individual and community levels. These findings suggest limited or no gain of mentoring for the mentor-teachers.

As Holloway (2001) states, to be effective, mentoring programs need focus and structure. If mentor-teachers are provided with appropriate training for their expanded teaching role, the quality of the mentoring program is improved. In addition, Kyle, Moore, and Sanders (1999) believe that prospective mentors should participate in professional development to find out what is expected of them as mentor-teachers before they assume their new roles. They further state that mentors need support and opportunities to discuss their experiences with other mentors. There is, then, evidence to support the view that participating in a mentor-training program improves the benefits of mentoring.

Method of Research and Data Collection

In order to assess the extent to which mentors benefit from mentoring, I interviewed 15 English language teachers who had participated in a 10-hour mentor-training program and had mentored student-teachers for at least two semesters in the Practice Teaching course offered to Middle East Technical University students. The interviewees were identified by criteria of informativity and convenience (Miles and Huberman, 1994) from a pool of 35 English language teachers who work in the same primary school and who had previously completed the mentoring program as well as actually mentoring student-teachers. Mentors' willingness to participate in the interview and matches between their timetable and mine were the practical considerations. The interviews were semi-structured in format. After pattern-coding of the transcripts, an interview report was written for each participant (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The results reported here are based on relevant parts of the written interview reports.

Personal and Professional Growth through Mentoring

When asked if they had developed professionally and/or personally through being a mentor, all of the fifteen mentor-teachers replied affirmatively. The ways in which they said they had developed can be grouped into three main categories:

1. Growing on their own

Nearly all of the mentors interviewed said that they had developed professionally because they wanted to display the image of an 'ideal' teacher. In an effort to do so, they were motivated to prepare their lessons in detail, to read more than they usually do, and to try out new ideas that would inspire the student-teacher. A great majority of the mentor-teachers reported that they felt a high level of excitement and enthusiasm when planning the lessons the student-teacher would observe. Regarding personal growth, most of the mentors said they learned to self-assess their teaching and take action to remedy the weaknesses they self-diagnosed. Their self-development, therefore, mostly involved self-observation and taking the initiative to improve oneself.

2. Growing through interaction with the student-teacher

All the mentor-teachers that were interviewed reported that they improved their teaching skills and knowledge through interacting with student-teachers, a finding that highlights the value of mentoring in the process of professional development. More specifically, they said they gained new insights and received feedback on teaching-related matters from student-teachers. The most commonly reported domains of growth were language teaching methods and techniques. Discussing the observations of student-teachers made the mentor-teachers more aware of aspects of their teaching which they could improve. For example one of the mentor-teachers described her growth in the following way:

The student-teacher I was working with acted as a mirror that made me aware of my strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. As we spent a considerable amount of time together, observing each other's lessons provided more in-depth awareness when compared with doing peer observations. Through her eyes and her feedback, I could assess myself. Mentoring was the most useful professional development activity I have participated in. (NY)

Another point about professional development that is worth noting is that about 50% of the mentor-teachers who were interviewed reported that they felt more comfortable when implementing a new technique for the first time in the presence of the student-teacher because they could get immediate feedback. When personal growth is considered, most of the mentor-teachers reported that, after completing two semesters as a mentor, they felt more confident regarding their interpersonal skills, namely active listening and empathy. How to give and receive feedback were skills dwelled upon extensively in the mentor-training program, and mentor-teachers reported developing these skills greatly through the process of actual mentoring.

3. Growing through interacting with other mentor-teachers

The mentors who were interviewed expressed unanimous agreement that they developed professionally through interacting with other mentors. The most common explanation for this growth was that participating in the mentor-training program had naturally created a peer support group. In their first weeks as mentors, they said that they met informally in small groups to discuss issues that arose. Later, all of the mentors working with the English language student-teachers in the school decided to

meet as a whole group weekly during the lunch break. These meetings focused on the central theme of ‘How to support and guide the student-teacher in _____.’. The specific focus of each meeting was identified one week beforehand, allowing each mentor-teacher ample time to read on the topic and to discuss it with his/her student-teacher. All of the mentor-teachers reported benefiting from these weekly meetings which acted as extensions of the mentor-training program.

Through interacting with other mentor-teachers, nearly all of the interviewees reported developing personally. As with their development through interacting with the student-teachers, the most frequently mentioned domains of growth were interpersonal skills of active listening and empathy. The establishment of a peer support group made them aware of who the other mentor-teachers in their school were and through this support group they built enough trust to rely on each other for support and guidance.

Creating a Learning Community through Mentoring

When asked if mentoring contributed to making the school a learning community where teachers were also learners, all the interviewees answered positively. Nearly all of the mentors said that a close supportive relationship was created among them and that the creation of the peer support group enhanced a sense of connectedness and belongingness. In other words, mentoring provided a common purpose and an ideal for the participating mentor-teachers.

The findings also suggest that the mentor-teachers felt a commitment both towards the student-teachers and to the other mentor-teachers in the school. Most interviewees reported they felt motivated to improve themselves and to provide as much support to the student-teacher as possible. Regular opportunities to cooperate and sharing experiences in the peer group had contributed to the establishment of a learning community.

Towards a Mentoring Community

Through this study, the benefits of mentoring became more explicit to me. Firstly, in parallel with the findings of Danielson (1999) and Scott (1999), I was assured that, through mentoring, both the mentor and the student-teacher develop. Before

interviewing the mentors, I had thought that their professional gains would outweigh their personal gains. However, seeing that their growth was in both domains heightened my awareness of the importance of the affective or psychosocial aspects of mentoring and, more generally, of teaching.

Secondly, I realized that the mentor-training program had achieved more than its intended aims. When designing the mentor-training program, the main aim had been to create a forum for the discussion of some basic mentoring skills and knowledge. By turning it into a peer support group, mentor-teachers created an on-going learning community for themselves. As Edwards (2003: 240) states, ‘mentors, like student teachers, cannot be expected to develop their organizing schemata in isolation’, and active participation in the support group enabled them to interact with each other. Now I realize that mentoring provided a common purpose that created the need to cooperate. Through cooperation, trust and a sense of connectedness or belongingness developed. I believe that these feelings and values formed the foundation of a learning community for the mentor-teachers. The later phases of the research project will explore how this learning community will evolve and what specific skills the mentor-teachers will develop.

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