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MENTORS AS PARTNERS IN TEACHER EDUCATION PROCESS

Abstract: Quite soon it became clear, as understood by the Faculty of Education Koper that mentors are one of the most important partners of Teacher Education, which was also the reason that the faculty began to think about the common work, which results in the projects, named “The Partnership of Faculties and Schools” “Partnership of schools and kindergartens” in the years 2004/2005 and 2006/2007. The aim of those two projects was to find a common language through the dialogue about what are mentors’ and faculty’s expectations and about the meaning of students’ practice. Our presentation will show to the audience the findings of the projects, which pointed out the need for very intensive communication between those two partners. The main questions discussed were the following: Why are mentors so important? What kind of mentors students and faculties need if we think from the perspective of lifelong education, and self-regulative professional development? And also, what mentors expect from the faculties to address those expectations.

Key words: teachers, mentors, experience learning, partnership, professional development

Introduction

A mentor, historically and traditionally defined, is an older, more experienced person who is committed to helping a younger, less experienced person become prepared for all aspects of life.

(Odell 1990)

Why would we start with a definition and above all with only one? The reason may be found in the fact that the above stated definition illustrates very well the first association with the notion of mentorship. It includes the association and the experiences of the past generations on the mentorship and does not discuss the areas where we all make a stop today, all who meet with the question of providing a qualitative mentorship to students, future preschool educators and teachers.

In our contribution we shall present the main challenges and findings based upon an important project: "The Partnership of Faculties and Schools", which took place twice and where the facilitator and the manager was the University of Littoral (Univerza na Primorskem), Faculty of Education Koper. The first project took place in the academic year 2004/2005 and the second one in 2006/2007. The outline and the preparations for the two projects were based on discovered needs for the establishment of partnership between the faculty and schools as well as kindergartens. It is obvious that the ancient patterns and forms of mentorship are no longer in line with the needs of students, faculties, mentors as well as schools and kindergartens as the users and employers of future graduated teachers and preschool educators.

The reasons for simultaneous expression of the needs of all partners could most certainly be found in the difficulties of the establishment of the professional identification of a teacher/ educator, who is supposed to be crowned by professionalism and the autonomy as one of the key indicators of professionalism. Several centuries long and unilateral, safe and self-sufficient role of teachers as persons, who are the bearers of knowledge with the apriori social status and authority, has become outdated. Untouchability, ultimacy of knowledge and glorification of the existing and the actual has transformed into the awareness that: »Only teachers who are aware of self development and personal growth can help pupils and colleagues in this process. The latter is particularly important for teachers – mentors.« (Valenčič Zuljan, et. al.2007).

If we want to derive from the classic definition of a mentor, i.e., that one can be a mentor because he is more experienced, then it would be wise to define first of all what do we expect from himself, from a teacher with his fundamental mission: learning and teaching and in the context of his professional identification. Požarnik Marentič (1990) claims that real professionals in their actions are those who use for their work such procedures which are conceived in the system of theoretical recognitions, who are in decision making independent, who are relatively independent from pressures and outside control and who are committed to the benefits of their „clients“. And then Altrichter and Posch claim that the most characteristic feature of teachers - professionals is »the capability of autonomous vocational development with the systematic study of their work, with the study of the work of other teachers and by verifying the educational (pedagogical) ideas through research grades « (1991, p. 12).

As we are going to find out in the continuation, we can agree with such expectations and at the same time it is necessary to underline the awareness that it is *possible to detect the same professional needs in the professional development and the role of students as well as their mentors*. It is a matter of an insight into one's actual situation which is reflected in the difficulties of facing social and

professional expectations as well as in the need for mentorship – thus the presence of more advanced – also for mentors. Here we might have materials, books or a more advanced partner for communication or for a dialogue. The issuing point of thinking is thus: if a student needs a mentor because he is just at the beginning of his professional career, and it seems wise to expect experience, since it is a question of the process of acquisition of specific knowledge, skills and the formation of vocational ethics, we can equally claim that a teacher – professional needs, regardless the level of his development, a professional support as well as someone next to him, who besides him and with him defines expectations and opens new options as well as aspects of professional identification. Development is never finished. Thus also the development of professional – mentor does not finish in the moment when he becomes, or is capable and a successful mentor or, as Terhart (1997 in Zuljan et al., 2007) emphasises that the teacher's vocational development starts by entering into the process of education and ends by retirement or by abandoning the profession. *Thus, the partnership with mentors should therefore be seen also from the point of view of the mentors' needs and not only from the point of view of the needs that faculties and students have in the process of their professional identification.*

The system aspects of mentorship in Slovenia

Slovenia has put in place a system of professional promotion which makes possible that teachers and educators acquire different professional status. Promotion depends on additional educational activities and permanent professional qualification and training which has to be proven in a special process of the acquisition of certain status. Teachers and educators can thus get promoted into different titles: mentor, adviser or councillor. A precondition for having a position of a mentor to students on practice, is having the title of adviser, councillor or mentor for not less than three years. Here, it is not the intention to check whether someone complies with the necessary qualifications for doing the job of a mentor. It has been foreseen that a teacher/educator has certain professional experiences which are at the same time verified by the title of mentor and later adviser or councillor, and that he has certain knowledge necessary for the role of a mentor. However, as we know from the theory and practice it is not quite like that. Burke, Walsh, Levien, Howard, (2004) claim that mentors, if they want to exercise their role of a mentor, have to have professional competences and experiences, communication skills and established interpersonal skills.

The purpose and the objective of the project »Partnership of Faculties and Schools«:

The first project »Partnership of Faculties and Schools« in the years 2004/05 invited to cooperation all the schools with which the faculty developed cooperation and which provided mentors for students during their undergraduate studies for the profession of a teacher/educator. The project involved 64 mentors who participated in the preparation of the model of qualitative practice, which really was the purpose as one of the sub-areas of the project. Within the practice model the purpose was as follows:

- To ensure the link between theory and practice,
- To ensure student practice in high quality programs,
- To ensure high quality mentorship to students,
- To ensure efficient organisation and coordination of students practice,
- To create programs and contents for different kind of student practice,
- To create conditions for observing, practical exercises and learning in authentic situations with focus on assuring critical reflection in relation toward practice and theory,
- To define and harmonise expectations of students, kindergartens, schools, faculties toward students in pedagogical practice.

The project »Partnership of Faculties and Schools« in 2006/07 was based on the recognised needs of mentors discovered in the first project. The problem of providing and developing mentors' role was exposed.

Working methods

In the frame of both, development and research projects, we first of all ensured the orientation to do the snap-shot of the existing situation and the analysis of the organisation, the contents and the impact of the practice held so far. In the phase of the conceptualisation we carried out a joint creation of practice models and mentorship. In the phase of introduction, evaluation and upgrading we held the training based on the discovered needs and the implementation of the new forms and approaches of ensuring qualitative practice and mentorship. The last phase of both projects took place as a dissemination of results in the frame of the joint consultations of all partners and other interested stakeholders; proposals for the upgrading of studying programmes and system changes to ensure qualitative practice and mentorship at the national level. (Rutar, 2005; Vonta, 2005).

The issuing point of establishing the mentorship relation - reflexive professional - mentor

The fundamental recognition of teachers, mentors, involved in the practice model was that a good teacher, equipped with all components of professional knowledge, is only a precondition for ensuring qualitative mentorship, which means that professionally qualified teacher in pedagogical-psychological area with long term working experiences does not (necessarily) ensure a qualitative mentorship to students in their practice. Moreover, years of working experiences may be even misleading particularly in cases when teachers repeat one and the same experience in a non-reflexive way for several years. In this case we cannot speak about years of working experiences but rather about how many years teachers have repeated one and the same experience. Thus, paralelly to the formation of the mentor's role, there were also serious questions within the working sessions on what does it mean to be a good teacher/educator. Common findings have indicated a conclusion that, when forming mentor's role, first of all it would be necessary to define standards of qualitative teacher/educator – at the level of a class or his colleagues. Namely, there is a question: if we expect transfers of mentors' roles from apprenticeship model (when students observe and »imitate« mentor) through the competence model (when students act according to the instructions of teachers and/or mentors) to the so called reflexive model, where students are expected to critically evaluate their own and their mentors' teaching and the acting of participants in the process (Maynard and Furlong 1994 in Magajna 2005), then we can logically expect that teachers -mentors are first of all teachers of high quality, capable of reflexive relationship of their own and their students' practice, which means that teachers - mentors should be able first of self-questioning on their practice as well as on the contents and process aspects of their practice. In order to be able to that, they have to know them and bring them to their awareness. Nowadays it is expected that mentors should cooperate closely with the faculty lecturers; they are supposed to encourage students to reflect on the connections between learning objectives, goals, convictions and actions, to doing permanent self-questioning, to connecting practical experiences with theoretical frameworks, to reflect as the bridge between the theory and practice (Cvetek 2003, Pachler, Field 2001 in Marentič Požarnik, 2005).

The basis of establishing mentorship situation

On the assumption that professionals are capable of self-reflection and recognition of elements of quality in the educational process, where they act as teachers and educational process where there are students in practice acting as teachers, it is important that we consider the findings and the requests that men-

tors explicitly exposed to students in practice and students themselves in the projects »Partnership of Faculties and Schools« as conditions for good practice and mentorship situations.

Mentors and students are convinced that there should be:

- defined expectations of all stakeholders in the mentorship process; they have to be written and verbalised by which a high level of understanding is achieved as well as the approaching towards and reaching common understanding ,
- defined purposes and objectives of mentorship situation,
- conceived plan of mentorship situation with clearly defined objectives and strategies for reaching those objectives.

The above pragmatic and rational scheme does not seem to be problematic. Everyone could /can identify with it: mentors, students and university lecturers, however, it does not contain the aspect of contents. It represents the framework of agreement, but does not give the answers to the most important questions: what are our expectations, purposes, objectives, and what are the basic strategies of mentorship situations and the strategies of educational process, which are a part of the concept of modern comprehension of teachers'/educators' role.

It is thus logic that simultaneously with the conceptualisation of mentors' role the need of the conceptualisation of professional teachers'/educators' process quality appeared, as well as the need for the definition of what does it mean to be a good teacher/educator. It is interesting that we can easily define what it means to be a good mentor, but we feel reluctant to establish a definition of a good teacher - professional. In any case, a good teacher has to dispose of the following knowledge:

- *Contents knowledge* – expert knowledge on subjects (the contents that teachers are going to teach),
- *General educational/pedagogical knowledge* (at the theoretical level, empirical findings and also visions, concepts and attitudes on instruction, formation, school, assessments...) from the area of pedagogic, didactic and some other disciplines),
- *Psychological knowledge* – knowing pupils (development particularities, individual differences), and learning process,
- *Special didactic knowledge* (named also educational content knowledge),
- *Curricular knowledge* as »the tool of profession« (about syllabus, regulations, legislation, organisation of education system,...),

- *Practical knowledge*, which is otherwise named: practice wisdom (Elliott 1991 in Marentič Požarnik, 2000), action knowledge or action repertoire (Bauer 1999 in Marentič Požarnik, 2000), experience or implicit knowledge (de Vries, Beijaard 1999 in Marentič Požarnik, 2000), situation knowledge, vocational skills or competences, »know-how«, (Marentič Požarnik, 2000, p. 6)

In the frame of establishing the definition of process quality and qualitative mentorship, and the development research work in both treated and presented projects, the following threats and occurrences were exposed:

- Certain teachers have the knowledge, and above all have developed expertise and skills, which ensure a qualitative process, however that knowledge is non-reflexive, non-aware and they therefore cannot share it with others, with students, since they do not contemplate about the principles of their action, but rather on techniques, concrete activities with children and adults.
- Some teachers do not have a clear idea and orientation in their professional development – where they are, what they want to achieve, what to change, why they want to reach this, and change it.
- Certain teachers do not have a clear image about what does it mean to be a qualitative teacher and what is significant for the quality of formation and education on the structural and process level.

From the above threats we found out that teachers/educators – mentors in order to be successful in their action, need for themselves and for their imagination first of all instruments for their self-evaluation. We have also learned that the level of self-criticism at self-evaluation matches with the level of understanding standards. Larger self-criticism appears with better understanding of process standards. For the self-evaluation we cannot oversee the problem of homeliness, expressed in their own way of action, and the protection of pride about what Macbeath and McGlynn (2006) speak. We have learned that without the support of adequate materials, experts and more developed teachers, it is impossible also for mentors to reach a higher level of understanding of their own practice and the practice of other colleagues, as well as students. Here we can, among different sources and ways, include also the following: e- learning materials, mentor consultations, self-evaluation instruments, professional forums, exchanges.

Findings on possibilities of improving mentors' role

The above mentioned problem of teachers' professional identification is, as said before, the key issue also in the case when we want to define the role of

mentors. At this point we would not like to define what it means to be a good mentor, since it depends on general and specific expectations of concrete mentor situation. Anyway, we would like to share findings on that issue, and what, besides the findings on expectations, purposes, objectives and apriori professional teacher/educator and achieving high level process quality of teacher/educator, encourages the development of successful role of mentors.

We have found out that it is important to combine different learning sources, such as:

- face - to - face consultations: faculty experts and mentors /group, individual level/
- mentor - to - mentor meeting and supportive structured material/paper and e- learning materials/
- teachers' self-evaluation, since teachers/mentors are also themselves at the same time in the process of professional development and improvement
- learning web, e-learning environment
- supportive whole school culture, ICT technology.

The reasons for such diverse sources of acquiring knowledge, information and exchange of knowledge is conditioned by the fact of complexity and separate uniqueness of mentors' situation and relationship. The uniqueness, if conditioned by the diversity of partners, included in the mentors' situation and thus in the diversity of their needs. Such flexibility can be provided only by diverse sources and multiple comprehension situations which can be self regulated by each participant of the learning process, to his own adequate way: both in terms of the contents and organisation.

Conclusion

We can recapitulate that for the establishment of partnership among schools, kindergartens, faculties and mentors it is necessary to ensure a permanent and mutual development – research relationship, which is based on reflective professional experiences of all partners, on the potential of theoretical knowledge and know-how, which represents a condition for ensuring a qualitative mentorship. In case of mentorship we speak of establishing interaction in which the point is more the communication process and even more the dialogue of diversity. It is therefore necessary to bear in mind the latent traditional patterns which are shown in the desired transmission of knowledge and (potential) mentors' taking over the position of power, decision making and by that, paradoxally, taking over the key responsibilities of mentors for the quality of mentorship process,

which could in case of dialogue, joint and independent planning as well as evaluation and self-evaluation of pedagogical situations be surpassed.

Mentors' situation has to be based on agreed and expected indicators of pedagogical excellence if we want to identify in contents and in process the path of the development of future teacher/educator.

Beside the basic process quality of mentors as teacher - professional it is necessary to ensure the development of skills needed for the establishment of mentorship relations: reflection on values, convictions, views, understanding of professional mission and empathy in relation to students, communication skills as well as the skills of reflection and self-reflection. It is important to define the expectations of all involved in the mentors' process, and to make sure that the professional experience is only the lever for the professional reflection and experience learning, which is supposed to be raised on the level of principles and standards of the expected quality of pedagogical process as well as professional identity of teacher/educator.

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MENTORI KAO PARTNERI U PROCESU OBRAZOVANJA UČITELJA

Rezime: Veoma brzo je postalo jasno, kao što je Pedagoški fakultet u Kopru shvatio, da su mentori jedni od najvažnijih partnera u obrazovanju učitelja, što je bilo i razlog da fakultet počne da razmišlja o zajedničkom radu, što je dovelo do projekata 'Partnerstvo fakulteta i škola' i 'Partnerstvo škola i obdaništa' u 2004/05. i 2006/07. godini. Cilj ova dva projekta bio je da se pronade zajednički jezik, kroz dijalog o tome šta su očekivanja mentora i fakulteta i o značenju prakse koju studenti obavljaju. Naša prezentacija će pokazati nalaze ovih projekata, koji su istakli potrebu za vrlo intenzivnom komunikacijom između ova dva partnera. Glavna pitanja o kojima se diskutovalo bila su sledeća: Zašto su mentori toliko važni? Kakvi su mentori potrebni studentima i fakultetima ako razmišljamo sa stanovišta obrazovanja, kao procesa koji traje čitavog života, i samoregulativnog profesionalnog razvoja? Takođe, i šta mentori očekuju od fakulteta kako bi se pripremili za ova očekivanja.

Ključne reči: učitelji, mentori, učenje kroz iskustvo, partnerstvo, profesionalni razvoj.