

Early Career Teachers with Mentoring during the Induction Phase: Assessments of the Mentoring Relationship and Design of the Mentoring Process

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the results of a survey of early career teachers on their experience with and perception mentorship during their first year of teaching are examined using a quantitative approach. A total of 100 early career teachers (80% female) of which 43 taught at primary school level participated in the study. Half of those surveyed agreed that mentors should be implemented during the induction phase. Primary school teachers, however, were less likely to not need any further mentoring to improve their quality of teaching beyond the induction phase ($p=0.028$; $p=0.007$). In general participants rated the mentoring relationship as a particularly trusting collegial and exemplary supportive working relationship. Nevertheless, more primary school teachers considered their mentors to be motivated for carrying out their task compared to secondary school mentees ($p=0.036$). Half of the respondents already recognized a personal learning success or further development process through the mentoring process in the induction phase. Taken together these results provide initial insights into the benefits of a mentoring process for novice teachers during their first year and highlight some benefits along with some concerns regarding this process.

Keywords: Career Starters, Mentorship, Mentor-Mentee Relationship, School Teachers.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In Austria, a mentoring program is available for future teachers during their program of studies as well as for early career teachers during their first year of service. Formal mentoring is provided by trained and assigned mentors. In most cases, informal mentoring is carried out by colleagues and/or school management. For career starters in their first year of service, the law requires mentoring during the induction phase, which represents the first year of independent teaching (BGBl. No. 86/1948, last amended by BGBl. No. 211/2013 with §39 (1-12)). It was designed as a support system for young professionals to facilitate the introduction to the teaching profession based on the recommendation of the expert group according to the European Commission handbook (European Commission 2010). The entire process is grounded in the basic structure of the Bologna system's three-phase model: bachelor's degree, master's degree with professional introduction to the profession and postgraduate additional training opportunities (BMUKK/BMWF 2010, 10).

Even though the induction phase has been established in Austria in the 2019/20 school year it still has to be fully established in the educational system via professionalization measures and system coordination (training institution – school – school authorities). Mentors are required to complete formal training in the form of a university course to the extent of 30 ECTS credit points in order to carry out their work. Contents in the seminars discuss criteria and principles of mentoring, which are based on a conscious handling of resource-oriented, development-promoting, personalized, non-judgmental experiences in the context of a double dichotomous system (hierarchy, knowledge). The mentor is expected to prepare an expert report at the end of the induction phase that documents professional and resource-oriented developments (Dammerer *et al.*, 2022). The mentees are required to attend accompanying courses at the teacher training colleges in the amount of 15 to 36 teaching units. Results on the Curriculum and analysis of accompanying university courses for the induction phase using the example of the federal state of Tyrol have been published previously (Haas *et al.*, 2021).

The mentor and the mentee, who are officially assigned by the school authorities and receive financial compensation over a period of 12 months, have some flexibility on the specific design of the mentoring process. The school, however, provides the social context for this process. The mentoring support in the induction phase is usually expressed in the form of social practice with cooperative teaching activities (Wittek *et al.*, 2017, p. 45). When the participants first get to know each other, areas of responsibility are defined and then systematically followed. From a psychological perspective, the form of mentoring aims to provide coping and support functions (Fuge, 2016; Haas, 2021). Guidelines on phases, concepts and models for the mentoring process are available (Kram, 1983; Graf *et al.*, 2017; Faix *et al.*, 2017; Niggli, 2005). These documents usually provide recommendations for implementation concepts, observation schemes, structural guidance to facilitate critical reflection and/or explanations on the scope of action (Haas, 2021, p. 102). A comparison of implementation forms of the mentoring process during the induction phase has shown that personal, social, and profession-specific support measures are relevant (European Commission, 2010; Symeonidis *et al.*, 2022). Kemmis *et al.*, (2014a) compare three different programs, namely "mentoring as supervision, mentoring as accompanying support and mentoring as a form of cooperative personality development." (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014 in Wittek *et al.*, 2017, p. 46) Studies on successful mentoring processes and successful concepts of mentoring, however, are still needed.

Even though the mentor-mentee relationship is considered a key element (Bayer *et al.*, 2015, p. 4) there remains limited research on the mentoring relationship during the induction phase. Studies within the framework of practical school mentoring show that essential criteria for a successful mentoring relationship are trust and respect (Schweer, 2004, p. 204; Ziegler, 2009, p. 11; Hudson, 2013, p. 16), support, a joint approach to solving problems and professional exchange (Hudson, 2013, p. 17). Accordingly, it can be assumed that these criteria are also essential for a successful mentor-mentee relationship during the induction phase.

The aim of the present study, therefore, was to analyze the experiences and perceptions of early career teachers on the mentoring process during the induction phase.

II. METHODOLOGY

The participants in the study were early career teachers after their first 6 months on the job. The main focus was on the mentee experience of the mentoring process during the

induction phase. Three key questions were addressed. (1) How important is a formal mentoring program for early career teachers? (2) What was the perception of the mentor-mentee relationship? (3) Which key insights were provided on the mentoring process?

Data collection occurred via a questionnaire using 4-point Likert scale assessments (strongly disagree – partly agree – mostly agree – strongly agree). Of the 170 potential participants 100 returned the questionnaire, which resulted in a response rate of 58.8%. The sample Data collection occurred in March 2020 after participants completed the mandatory university courses of the induction phase at the Educational College. Relative frequencies of individual item responses are reported and differences by sex and type of school level the mentee was working at were examined via Mann-Whitney U tests. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. The item cluster "importance of mentoring" showed a low but acceptable reliability, and the other two clusters showed a high reliability (Döring *et al.*, 2016, p. 271). All statistical analyses were carried out with the statistical program SPSS 27.0 (IBM Corporation, 2020).

III. RESULTS

In the current research project, mentees are contract teachers in their first year of service, who receive legally mandated mentoring support in the induction phase. Of the 100 subjects, 20 were male and 80 were female. A total of 43 early career teachers taught at a primary school and 57 early career teachers taught at secondary school level. The teaching load of the early career teachers ranged from 7 to 22 hours per week with an average teaching load of 17.5 hours per week. Of the 100 participants, 33 already completed their master's degree while 67 were still finishing their master's degree during the induction phase.

Of the 57 secondary school teachers, 25 taught only one subject, 28 taught two subjects, and 4 early career teachers taught subjects in which they had no formal training. The average travel distance from the place of residence to their school was 32.2 kilometers. The socio-demographic data further showed that 11 mothers and 7 fathers (including 4 couples of early career teachers) participated in the study.

A. Importance of Mentoring

The following overview (Table I) shows the frequency distribution and significance of the two items that examined the importance of mentoring. A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.656 indicates low but acceptable reliability.

TABLE I: DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES ON THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTORING

Items		1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	<i>p</i>
The installation of mentors in the induction phase is essential for me in the first year.	Male	5.0	45.0	35.0	15.0	0.907
	Female	15.0	33.8	25.0	26.3	
	Primary S.	18.6	39.5	25.6	16.3	0.052
	Secondary S.	8.8	33.3	28.1	29.8	
I need mentoring to further improve the quality of my teaching.	Male	5.0	70.0	20.0	5.0	0.028
	Female	38.8	41.3	13.8	6.3	
	Primary S.	46.5	39.5	11.6	2.3	0.007
	Secondary S.	21.1	52.6	17.5	8.8	

1 – strongly disagree; 2 – partly agree; 3 – mostly agree; 4 – strongly agree.
p-values are based on Mann-Whitney U Test.

There were no significant differences by sex or school type for the first item. The frequency distribution shows that 50% of the male teachers and 51.3% of the female teachers see a need to install mentors in the first year of service. Secondary level teachers voted in favor of the installation of a formal mentoring program with 57.9% in contrast to 41.9% of the primary level teachers.

For the item "I need mentoring to further increase the quality of my teaching" there were significant differences between men and women as well as by school type. While 86% of primary school teachers report they do not need any further mentoring (combing response options 1 and 2) the prevalence is significantly lower in secondary school teachers (73.7%, $p=0.007$). Further, female teachers did not need further mentoring while there was less rejection for continuing mentoring in male teachers (38.8% vs. 5.0%, $p=0.028$).

B. Mentoring Relationship

A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.868 indicates high reliability of the responses on social support and work climate. Frequency distributions indicate high agreement with the items on collegial working relationship, maintenance of a collegial and friendly working relationship as well as being a good team with their mentor (Table II). Only 10.0% of the male and 16.3% of the female teachers as well as 14.0% of the primary and 15.8% of the secondary teachers, however, agreed that mentors learn from their mentees.

There were no significant sex differences in the responses, but primary school teachers were significantly more likely than secondary teachers to state that the working relationship was characterized by mutual trust ($p=0.005$). They also were significantly more likely to believe that the mentor supports them in an exemplary manner ($p=0.026$). No significant differences were observed for other items.

C. Mentoring Process

The evaluation of the reliability on responses regarding the mentoring process indicates high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.813. Within the cluster of the mentoring process during the induction phase, there were 10 items that address 5 dimensions: motivation of the mentor for the process, structure, content, acceptance of the mentoring processes at the school, and perceived effect of mentoring.

Table III shows that only 10% of the male and 15% of the female teachers as well as 14% of the primary school and 14% of the secondary school teachers strongly agreed with the statement that the formal mentoring process was well accepted in the school they were working at. There was also remarkably low agreement with the statement that content of accompanying courses was discussed with mentors. In addition, only 10% of the participants strongly agreed with the statement that classroom management was addressed during the mentoring process.

No sex differences were observed for the response rate regarding the willingness of their mentors to do the job professionally, but primary school teachers were significantly more likely to agree with the statement than secondary school teachers ($p=0.036$). Primary school teachers also stated significantly more often that their mentors regularly attended classes ($p=0.010$). No significant differences were found for any other items by teaching level.

IV. DISCUSSION

In the present study, questionnaires were used to assess the importance of mentoring support, the mentoring relationship, and the mentoring process for novice teachers. Regarding the significance of supervision by trained mentors half of the interviewed primary school teachers ($n=43$) and three fifths

TABLE II: DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES ON SOCIAL SUPPORT AND WORK CLIMATE

Items		1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	<i>p</i>
My mentor and I have a collegial working relationship.	Male		5.0	20.0	75.0	0.517
	Female	1.3	10.0	20.0	68.8	
	Primary S.		9.3	14.0	76.7	0.236
	Secondary S.	1.8	8.8	24.6	64.9	
My mentors have a friendly relationship.	Male		15.0	10.0	75.0	0.056
	Female	8.8	23.8	15.0	52.5	
	Primary S.	7.0	16.3	14.0	62.8	0.301
	Secondary S.	7.0	26.3	14.0	52.6	
My mentor and I are a good team.	Male	10.0	5.0	25.0	60.0	0.866
	Female	7.5	8.8	21.3	62.5	
	Primary S.		7.0	23.3	69.8	0.069
	Secondary S.	14.0	8.8	21.1	56.1	
Our working relationship is based on mutual trust.	Male	5.0	5.0	40.0	50.0	0.210
	Female	2.5	8.8	21.3	67.5	
	Primary S.		4.7	16.3	79.1	0.005
	Secondary S.	5.3	10.5	31.6	52.6	
My mentor provides exemplary support.	Male	10.0	10.0	25.0	55.0	0.357
	Female	10.0	6.3	16.3	67.5	
	Primary S.	4.7	4.7	14.0	76.7	0.026
	Secondary S.	14.0	8.8	21.1	56.1	
My mentor also learns from me.	Male	20.0	10.0	60.0	10.0	0.542
	Female	10.0	42.5	31.3	16.3	
	Primary S.	4.7	41.9	39.5	14.0	0.520
	Secondary S.	17.5	31.6	35.1	15.8	

1 – strongly disagree; 2 – partly agree; 3 – mostly agree; 4 – strongly agree.
p-values are based on Mann-Whitney U Test.

of the interviewed secondary school teachers (n=57) were in favor of mentoring during the first year of service. Almost half of the primary teachers surveyed, however, did not think that mentoring beyond their first year would further improve their teaching quality. Among secondary school teachers, only 21% did not require further mentoring. These responses show that support from mentors was initially desired and considered important for novice teachers. While for primary school teachers mentoring during their first year of teaching appears to be sufficient, secondary school teachers may require additional support beyond the currently implemented model.

A majority of the participants considered the relationship with their mentors friendly, and more than three quarters of the mentees surveyed considered themselves and their mentors as good team. Primary school teachers in particular emphasized mutual trust (79.1%) and noted that they received exemplary support (76.7%) from their mentor. This may also be related to the fact that mentors were generally perceived to be motivated as experiencing motivated mentors that are eager to support their mentees is a critical component for a successful mentoring process.

With regard to the dimension of structure of the mentoring process, the frequency distributions indicate that more than half of the mentors initiate an active support process as early as the first week of school. Roughly one quarter of the participants also reported regular weekly meetings. Interestingly, the mentoring process was not predominantly addressing specific content taught or classroom management; rather it appears that different content-related topics were discussed during the monitoring process. It may have been possible that organizational or structural framework conditions of the school system were discussed. Particularly in secondary school teachers this may be attributed to a lower attendance of the mentors during class-time of the mentee. A previous study reported that discussions commonly evolve around teacher-student relationships (65.6%), classroom management (63.8%), teaching methods (59.8%) performance assessment (59.8%) as well as legal topics (36.6%) (Prenzel *et al.* 2021, 47).

While there were discussions regarding the evaluation process of the mentee during their first year as teacher, conversations about the content of accompanying courses were limited. The lack of incorporation of external courses

TABLE III: DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES ON THE MENTORING PROCESS

Items		1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	p
My mentor is willing to perform the task in a professional manner.	Male	5.0	15.0	10.0	70.0	0.975
	Female	5.0	12.5	13.8	68.8	
	Primary S.		9.3	11.6	79.1	0.036
	Secondary S.	8.8	15.8	14.0	61.4	
My mentor supported me from the very beginning of the school year.	Male	15.0	10.0	20.0	55.0	0.481
	Female	26.3	11.3	11.3	51.2	
	Primary S.	30.2	7.0	11.6	51.2	0.595
	Secondary S.	19.3	14.0	14.0	52.6	
I have regular meetings once a week with my mentor.	Male	30.0	20.0	20.0	30.0	0.734
	Female	26.3	32.5	17.5	23.8	
	Primary S.	27.9	27.9	20.9	23.3	0.914
	Secondary S.	26.3	31.6	15.8	26.3	
My mentor regularly attends my classroom.	Male	30.0	10.0	40.0	20.0	0.586
	Female	15.0	33.8	21.3	30.0	
	Primary S.	7.0	30.2	23.3	39.5	0.010
	Secondary S.	26.3	28.1	26.3	19.3	
The mentoring process is predominantly related to the subject area.	Male	25.0	25.0	35.0	15.0	0.879
	Female	22.5	36.3	22.5	18.8	
	Primary S.	16.3	41.9	27.9	14.0	0.825
	Secondary S.	28.1	28.1	22.8	21.1	
The mentoring process is predominantly related to classroom management.	Male	15.0	30.0	45.0	10.0	0.669
	Female	11.3	43.8	35.0	10.0	
	Primary S.	9.3	46.5	34.9	9.3	0.861
	Secondary S.	14.0	36.8	38.6	10.5	
My mentor clearly explained my evaluation and grading process.	Male	5.0	10.0	20.0	65.0	0.419
	Female	10.0	12.5	21.3	56.3	
	Primary S.	7.0	9.3	18.6	65.1	0.201
	Secondary S.	10.5	14.0	22.8	52.6	
Contents of accompanying courses are discussed with my mentor.	Male	50.0	25.0	15.0	10.0	0.705
	Female	55.0	20.0	20.0	5.0	
	Primary S.	62.8	16.3	16.3	4.7	0.159
	Secondary S.	47.4	24.6	21.1	7.0	
There is high acceptance of the formal mentoring process at my school.	Male	10.0	45.0	35.0	10.0	0.668
	Female	17.5	42.5	25.0	15.0	
	Primary S.	11.6	46.5	27.9	14.0	0.617
	Secondary S.	19.3	40.4	26.3	14.0	
I recognize a learning process for further development via the mentoring process.	Male	15.0	30.0	35.0	20.0	0.968
	Female	13.8	31.3	35.0	20.0	
	Primary S.	11.6	32.6	41.9	14.0	0.788
	Secondary S.	15.8	29.8	29.8	24.6	

1 – strongly disagree; 2 – partly agree; 3 – mostly agree; 4 – strongly agree.
p-values are based on Mann-Whitney U Test.

and the practical experience in the classroom may, at least partly, be explained by the fact that less than 50% of the mentees felt that the mentoring process was highly accepted in schools even though there has been a legal basis for its implementation since 2019. Nevertheless, more than half of the participants recognized the value of mentorship at the beginning of their teaching career. It would, however, also be interesting to further explore the reasons why a large portion found only little benefit of the mentoring process for their personal development as a teacher.

Taken together more than half of the participants perceive mentoring as enrichment during their first year of teaching. These young professionals considered personal and social support during the transition from study to professional life to be very important. They also emphasized a high level of mutual trust between mentors and mentees and the collegial and friendly working relationship. Only secondary school teachers, however, considered a continuation of the mentoring process beyond the first year as important.

V. CONCLUSION

The induction phase, with its profession-related measures for young professionals, is intended to contribute to a successful teaching career start, particularly through support programs such as formal mentoring and accompanying courses at the universities of teacher education. Ultimately, the aim of the induction phase is to facilitate the entry of young professionals into the teaching profession, to experience the complex professional field of schools as a field of supportive advice and guidance and, in the sense of mentoring, to raise the mutual learning level in a reciprocal proactive process based on experience, evidence-based and meta-reflective exchange.

Novice teachers in Austria are given the opportunity of a cooperative and participative support process in the form of formal mentoring. The mentors' understanding of their role and the professional ethos of the mentee play a decisive role in this process. Mentors are assigned for a period of twelve months to support young professionals in the sensitive transition phase from being a student to becoming a teacher. Mentors usually teach at the same school as the novice teacher and should have completed additional training in the form of continuing education to the extent of 30 ECTS credits on effective mentoring. Despite the implementation in 2019, there remains limited research on values of mentoring as well as the mentoring process. Accordingly, further research on systemic questions such as the cooperation between the training institution, the school system, and the school authorities is needed in addition to studies that examine processes of the persons involved.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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