



Mentors' Perception of the Undergraduates' Teaching Practice

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Abstract

The purpose of our research is to identify the mentors' perception of the characteristic aspects of the teaching practice coordination activity. In the theoretical part, the role of the teaching practice mentors is analyzed, following current theories and approaches. Teaching practice mentors, usually known as teaching practice tutors, are teaching staff who have extensive experience, and enjoy a special professional prestige within the professional community of which they are a part, contributing to the process of initial training of teaching staff through direct monitoring and coordination of the implementation of teaching practice within a school educational unit. 96 mentors from several pre-university education institutions in Bacău, Neamț, and Focșani, Romania have participated in the study. The qualitative study based on a focus group with mentors highlighted important results on three dimensions: the qualities of a successful mentor, the positive aspects that the mentors noticed in the students, the difficulties encountered by mentors in carrying out pedagogical practice.

Keywords: Focus group; initial training; mentors; teaching practice; undergraduate

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1. Introduction

The role of teachers in the progress of society, and humanity, in general, has been approached in numerous studies and research that have focused on a series of related themes, such as teaching styles and student academic performance, and/or teaching strategies and learner motivation (Keerthigha & Singh, 2023; Zhao et al., 2022); teaching experience and teacher effectiveness (Graham et. al., 2020); team teaching and co-teaching in student teachers' teaching practice (Mononen, Havu-Nuutinen & Haring, 2023; Soslau, Gallo-Fox, & Scantlebury, 2018); challenges faced by teaching practice tutors and their student teachers during the teaching practice, for example, financial support for teaching materials and the sometimes loose connection between schools and universities (Msangya, Mkoma & Yihuan, 2016); improving teaching practice for students with disabilities (Brownell et al., 2020).

Studies show that when students preparing for a teaching career participate in practical training programs under the coordination of a mentor, the quality of their training increases, their subsequent retention in the education system is higher and the waste of material and human resources is reduced. Also, beginning teachers who participate in practical training stages have increased effectiveness in classrooms, higher satisfaction, and greater engagement than those who do not benefit from this type of support (Schwan et al., 2020). Some recent studies (Larsen et al., 2023) develop models centered on future-building mentoring that leverages intellectual capacities to transform the teacher's self, relationships, and practice using imagination, courage, open-mindedness, and tenacity. The basic element is transsystemic intelligence (Kegan 1982, 1994), combined with bodily and strategic bits of intelligence. This is combined with intellectual virtues (Baehr, 2013, Heersmink 2018) such as curiosity, open-mindedness, attentiveness, and intellectual courage (Baehr, 2013; Howes 2012).

Other studies have focused on the relevance of teaching practice, namely the impact of teaching mentors and/or tutors on the teachers' initial training (Komba & Kira, 2013), and on how the teaching practice experience impacts the student-teachers' future choice of a teaching career (Koross, 2016). Results of such studies highlight a series of qualities that good, effective teachers have, and that should be taught or handed down to student-teachers to ensure the latter's teaching practice efficiency and relevance namely, scientific and methodological knowledge, expertise, dedication, efficiency, commitment and desire to improve oneself personally and professionally, an inquisitive mind and a certain amount of research skills, good communication, collaboration and relational skills with superiors and peers, open-mindedness and willingness to ask for help (Kyndt et al., 2014; Rots et al., 2007; Rots & Aelterman, 2008; Simons & Baeten, 2017; Simons, Baeten, & Vanhees, 2020; Sorensen, 2014).

However, there have been fewer studies on the mentors' perspective of teaching practice, namely challenges of both mentors and student-teachers, best practices, and mentors' anticipations and expectations regarding the performance of student-teachers during teaching practice, or how the mentor's teaching style may affect the student-teachers' experience and performance during the teaching practice.

2. Current approaches to teaching practice mentoring

2.1. The relevance of teaching practice in teacher initial training

Teaching practice is an essential dimension of initial teacher training, allowing students to experience teaching in real classroom settings, fostering teacher specific competences and skills. Teaching practice encompasses the experiences of student teachers in real classrooms and schools (Meier, 2008: 221). Teaching practice efficiency may sometimes be negatively impacted by certain factors, for example, geographical distance, poor teacher expertise, absence of resources, poor learner and/or teacher discipline (Quick & Sieborger, 2005). Viewing teaching practice as apprenticeship has shifted to approaching it as field/school experience (Menter, 1989: 460), but

irrespective of how we approach it, teaching practice learning relies on experience-based learning (Dewey, 1938), social cognitive theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and situated learning (Lave & Wegner, 1991).

Students perceive teaching practice as the essence of their training for the teaching profession because it provides them with the “real interface” between ‘studenthood’ and ‘teacherhood’ (Menter, 1989, 461). Teaching practice challenges students to make anticipations, as anxiety, excitement, and apprehension may flow hand in hand; these should be addressed as they occur because the students’ first contact with the teaching profession will eventually shape their perception of teaching and their relation to it (Bergmark, 2018; Mockler, 2022; Voss et al., 2017). By providing undergraduates with experience in the real teaching-learning environment, teaching practice becomes essential to teacher training (Canipe & Gunckel, 2020; Chen, Zu & Chia, 2022; Marais & Meier, 2008; Ngidi & Sibaya, 2003; Takala et al., 2023). Teaching practice gives students the opportunity to try teaching before undertaking a teaching job (Kasanda, 1995). During teaching practice, the academic former teacher training in terms of teacher knowledge and skills based on lectures and seminar is applied to designing the teaching activity, conducting teaching-learning, and elaborating and applying evaluation tools. Secondly, the student engaged in the teaching practice process comes into contact with the class of learners from a teacher’s standpoint, and experiences the complexity of teacher responsibilities concerning efficient communication with the students, classroom, and conflict management, encouraging positive relations, etc.

2.2. The role of mentoring in the professional development of future teachers

Mentoring is a way of supporting the process of initial training and professional development on the practical dimension, especially to successfully navigate the challenges of the profession. It is usually understood as a professional qualification strategy or a type of pedagogical support used to achieve certain standards of teacher education (Larsen et al., 2023). Since “mentoring is a relationship” (Gobena, 2022, p. 1), one of the relevant challenges is called relational challenges (Boyington, 2021; Ensher & Murphy, 2011).

Besides the student’s level of personal and professional development, and interest in the teaching career, another key factor that makes the difference between successful and unsuccessful teaching practice is the mentor. The mentor is a teacher/ member of the pre-academic teaching staff, with a certain amount of officially recognized and certified professional experience and skill. The mentor’s role is, briefly, to allow students to attend his/her teaching classes during the interval of what is known as observational teaching practice, provide students with guidance and support regarding lesson planning design and other issues related to teaching the respective subject (e.g., use of teaching aids and materials), as well as assist them during their teaching. The mentor fulfills the following responsibilities: schedules the instructive-educational activities established by the teaching practice syllabus; draws the weekly schedule of students and their teaching activities; provides students with specialized scientific and methodological guidance for all the categories and types of practice activities performed during the teaching practice; reviews and approves the students’ lesson plans for their teaching activities; supports students in building self-critical and self-reflective skills concerning their teaching activities; observes and assesses the teaching activities of the students based on formal teaching standards, and provides feedback to students on their teaching performance; elaborates final reports with final evaluation marks for each student. Despite its importance, teaching practice sometimes becomes a demoralizing and very frightening experience. Such a perception of the teaching practice, and implicitly, of the teaching profession, may be removed or improved through support provided by mentors and peers.

More often than not, the undergraduates’ teaching practice experience eventually translates, briefly, as their conclusion on whether teaching would be a career option for them, or not.

Usually, based on our observations, we may argue that by the end of the teaching practice, which takes place in the 3rd year of studies, students can label the teaching career either as their dream job or „career plan A”, and that means the job that they would pursue as soon as they graduate, or a temporary job, also referred to as „career plan B”, namely a job that they would undertake only in case they have no other/better job options.

There are convergent perspectives of the authors regarding the characteristics that define the profile of a competent mentor (pedagogical expertise, interpersonal skills, communication, the ability to provide constructive feedback, to ensure proper management of lessons, etc.) (Crișan-Tăușan, L., 2023). Other authors (Popescu-Mitroi, Mazilescu, 2014) have drawn theoretical and methodological syntheses of the competencies of a mentor in which they include different perspectives:

- a. According to the Methodology for teacher-mentors coordinating teaching training (2011), the assessment criteria are: (1) Skills and methods: knowledge, execution, communication, capturing and keeping student interest and ability for differentiated activities; and (2) Social skills and personality (sociability, clearance, different registers of language, emotional balance, stress resistance, ingenuity, flexibility, determination, tolerance, rigor, objectivity, availability);
- b. Hudson et al. (2009) proposes the Five-factor model for specific subject mentoring: (1) The mentor’s Personal Attributes for facilitating the mentoring process; (2) Mentoring related to the essential System Requirements; (3) The mentor’s Pedagogical Knowledge; (4) The mentor’s Modeling of teaching practices, and (5) Quality Feedback provided by the mentor. Concerning Personal Attributes, based on many studies, mentors need to be: (a) supportive; (b) attentive; (c) comfortable with talking about specific primary teaching practices; (d) instill positive attitudes in their mentees; (e) instill confidence in their mentees and (f) assist the mentee to reflect more positively on practices for improving the teaching of specific primary subject areas;
- c. McDonald (2002) said that a good mentor needs to have: (1) interpersonal skills; (2) knowledge about the organization, field, or profession, including technical competence; (3) teaching skills (4) management skills; (5) commitment to the mentor role and (6) other personal attributes, namely: considerable experience, adaptability, awareness of own personal strengths and weaknesses, receptiveness to new ideas, and the ability to communicate hope and optimism to the mentee, willing to take calculated risks, and supportive if the mentee falters.

An important result based on a literature review study achieved by Ehrich et al. (2011) of over 300 research papers on mentoring in the fields of education, business and medicine was that mentoring has a potential to determine learning, training and skills development. Even if most of the studies analyzed on this occasion argue that mentoring generates positive results for mentees, for mentors and for organizations, although it must not be forgotten that there is always a dark side (Long, 1997).

2.3. Research objectives

This study aimed to investigate the mentor’s perspective on several essential aspects of the teaching practice, namely: the traits of a successful mentor, the most relevant aims of mentorship, what a mentor should hand down to student-teachers, and how should a mentor inspire their student-teachers, challenges of being a mentor, the impact of teaching practice on the mentor’s life perspective, mentors’ expectations about teaching practice.

The research objectives are the following:

RO₁: to identify mentors’ perspectives on the qualities of a successful mentor;

RO₂: to identify, according to the mentors, the positive aspects of the students coordinated during the teaching practice;

RO₃: to highlight the difficulties encountered in the mentoring activity;

The research questions have been formulated in correlation with the research objectives. Based on the mentors' answers, we aimed to provide answers to the following research questions:

RQ₁: What are the qualities that make a successful mentor?

RQ₂: What aspect do you particularly appreciate in the students you have coordinated during teaching practice?

RQ₃: What difficulties did you encounter in the mentoring activity during the coordination of the teaching practice?

3. Research methodology

3.1. Participants

96 teaching practice mentors from pre-university educational institutions in Bacău, Neamț, and Vrancea counties, in Romania, participated in the study. The mentors who coordinate the pedagogical practice have at least 15 years of professional experience and have obtained the didactic degree I.

3.2. Research method

The research relies on the focus group method, which is a structured interview applied to a specially constituted group. We used this method because it promotes spontaneous interaction between participants (Gundumogula, 2020). The application of this method allows for obtaining in-depth knowledge about the attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and opinions of individuals regarding a specific issue (Then et al., 2014). The main characteristic of focus group research is to put opinion makers in an effective interactive situation, engaging them in semi-structured debates based on an interview guide. The interview guide comprised 4 items on respondents' data (school institution, level of education and study programs for which they provide mentorship, and length of service), and 6 items on mentors' opinions regarding teaching practice particularities (the successful mentor, relevance of mentorship for the mentor, the mentor as model for student-teachers, impact of mentorship on mentor's life perspective, mentorship challenges, mentorship expectations).

3.3. Research procedure

8 groups of 12 teachers were organized. The groups of mentors were homogenous, as interviews were carried out according to specializations: preschool education, primary education, Romanian language and literature, foreign languages (English, French), technological education, physical education and sports, sciences (Mathematics, Biology), and Economy. The duration of a focus group varied between one and two hours.

3.4. Data analysis

Thematic categories were established with the help of content analysis, and at the level of a category several themes were included, associated with the central idea. The data were entered into tables, where the themes were coded. Content analysis offers a set of advantages: it allows both quantitative and qualitative operations; allows statistical analysis of the coded form of the text; represents a means of analyzing interactions; it offers a deep knowledge of the complex patterns of human thought and language use (Agabrian, 2006, p. 24). The value of analysis depends on the quality of the prior conceptualization (hypothesis, variables), of the analysis scheme or the categories, of the agreement between the investigated reality and the ideal-conceptual elements.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the thematic categories and specific themes regarding the qualities of a successful mentor. According to the data in the tables below, professional qualities (42) as well as personal qualities (29) are most frequently mentioned by mentors.

Table 1. Thematic categories and specific themes regarding the qualities of a successful mentor

Thematic categories	Specific themes	Frequencies
Professional qualities (42)	professional conscience, good professional	9
	model of conduct, source of inspiration, and examples of good practices	18
	motivates students to pursue a teaching career	3
	distributing students to different classes	1
	the responsibility to lead and coordinate the teaching practice of students	1
	properly preparing students for a successful career	1
	facilitating access to resources and information	1
	continuous self-improvement	2
	expertise in the subject's area of interest	2
	conveying quality information to students	4
Adaptability (4)	adaptation to working conditions, permanent changes in legislation, and learning styles	2
	flexibility	1
	updating the mentor model to current conditions	1
Relational skills (13)	getting close to the students, to help them understand what is being conveyed to them with ease and pleasure	3
	the ability to work together with the mentored student	1
	developing a relationship based on trust, respect, and openness	4
	the ability to learn from the students they work with	2
	social skills, collaboration	3
Mentoring skills (22)	adequate guidance for future teachers	7
	providing support in the design, teaching, and evaluation activities	9
	the development of specialized skills and for the didactic field	3
	stimulating the professional and personal development of students	1
	guiding the student to facilitate the transition from theory to practice	2
Communication skills (14)	efficient communication	8
	active listening	4
	providing appropriate feedback	1
	successful communication with student practitioners	1
Student centering (16)	adapting to the needs of students	3
	encouraging students to think critically, providing confidence and support	7
	providing development opportunities	4
	supporting students to find solutions to problems	1

	recognizing good ideas	1
Personal qualities (29)	self-honesty	1
	availability	1
	empathy	7
	generosity	1
	altruism, sharing his experience	15
	creativity, openness to the new	2
	consistency	1
	patience	1
Psycho- pedagogical skills (6)	capturing students' attention so that they return with pleasure and openness to learning	1
	identifying the best methods to induce the future teacher to exercise his profession with love and dedication	5

The thematic categories and specific themes related to the positive aspects appreciated by mentors in the students they coordinate during the teaching practice are presented in Table 2. The data in the tables indicate that the most appreciated aspect by mentors concerns the attitude towards the teaching profession (45) and students' personality traits (38).

Table 2. Thematic categories and specific themes regarding the positive aspects appreciated by mentors in the students they have coordinated during the teaching practice

Thematic categories	Specific themes	Frequencies
Attitude towards the teaching profession (45)	innovative ideas and different views of students	3
	the motivation to learn, to prepare thoroughly	17
	the desire to discover the most appropriate teaching methods that correspond to the learning styles of the students, the interest in giving the most attractive lessons	4
	creativity and originality in planning activities, creativity shown by students in choosing interactive didactic strategies adapted to students	4
	involvement and dedication to and in support of children	1
	how to design and deliver the teaching activities	3
	students' interest in the teaching career	13
Personality traits of students (38)	students' openness to novelty	5
	the perseverance, tenacity, and determination of students, the desire to succeed, to overdo oneself	12
	student involvement	8
	creativity	2
	empathy	1
	altruism	3
	responsibility	1
	enthusiasm	3
	sincerity	1
earnest	2	
Attitude towards the mentor (10)	the feedback provided to the mentor	6
	the student's request for help from the mentor	1
	trust	1

	respect for the mentor	2
The relationship between the mentor and students (5)	the special relationship based on trust and respect, openness and honesty	5

Table 3 includes the thematic categories and specific themes regarding the difficulties encountered in the mentoring activity. The barriers that the mentors specified more often are those related to the students' attitude towards the teaching profession (22) and those related to the organization of teaching practice (19).

Table 3. Thematic categories and specific themes regarding the difficulties encountered in the mentoring activity

Thematic categories	Specific themes	Frequencies
The attitude of students towards the teaching profession (22)	the lack of interest of some students towards the teaching career, indifference	8
	lack of training of some students, partial knowledge of theory	4
	fear of some students to deliver the lesson	1
	students missing or skipping the teaching practice classes for various reasons	3
	some students give up the teaching practice as a result of their failure to succeed in certain activities	1
	dosage of teaching time	1
	the reluctance of some students to engage in student-student communication	1
	the difficulty in adapting the educational content transmitted to the students	1
	the low motivation of some of the students in their career choice	2
Personality traits of students (8)	the inertia of some of the students	1
	lack of punctuality	2
	the superficiality of some students	1
	lack of involvement	1
	students' lack of desire for progress, for self-improvement	1
	dishonesty	1
	reluctance towards novelty	1
Professional barriers (8)	maintaining a balance between the set of communicated requirements, energy, and time resources	1
	the different guidance, adapted according to the didactic design models with which each university operates	1
	explaining the particularities of the students' age	2
	motivating students to love teaching	1
	understanding new student problems	1
	constructive criticism of students	1
	student assessment	1
Obstacles at the level of organization of	bureaucracy	2
	lack of didactic materials	1
	limited access to materials specially designed for the	1

teaching practice (19)	mentoring activity	
	fundamental lack of initial training	1
	problems related to synchronizing the practice schedule with school and student schedules	6
	conducting pedagogical practice in the online environment	3
	lack of financial resources	1
	the inconsistency between the financial reward and the effort made	1
	pupils' reluctance towards students	3
	insufficient time that can be allocated for the mentoring activity/lack of time	7

5. Discussion

The purpose of the research was to evaluate the mentors' perception of how teaching practice is carried out with the future teaching staff. The results of the study were structured on three main dimensions: the qualities of a successful mentor, the positive aspects appreciated in the students they coordinate in teaching practice, and the difficulties encountered in carrying out teaching practice.

Regarding the qualities of a successful mentor, the most appreciated were the professional qualities, such as a model of conduct, a source of inspiration and examples of good practices, professional conscience, and high-class professionalism. These qualities were also found in other studies focused on identifying the qualities of mentors.

The results of quantitative research conducted by Popescu-Mitroi and Mazilescu (2014) highlighted the 11 most important qualities of mentors, appreciated by more than 50% of the students who worked with them during the teaching practice. These were, in the decreasing order of frequency: dynamism (evaluative support); expertise/specialist (informational support); involvement (instrumental support); rigurocity (evaluative support); pedagogical tact and model of integrity (instrumental support); reasonableness (evaluative support); sensitivity (emotional support); passion/enthusiasm (instrumental support); appreciative (evaluative support) and non-aggressive (emotional support). Closeness and trust between mentors and students are considered among the most important qualities of mentors (Tinoco-Giraldo et al., 2020) as these help students stick to their educational goals, patience and good judgment of educational situations that may support validation of mentee's professional competences (Carpintero, 2015, Akili, 2013). Pennanen, Heikkinen, & Tynjälä, (2020) highlight the importance of authentic and context-appropriate communication that should be correlated with the sense of social space, feeling of belonging, the idea of participation and co-participation in personal and professional growth of the mentees. The ability to self-assess and report on the standards of training and evaluation of the mentee is one of the important qualities of a mentor. From this perspective, a good mentor makes sure that he meets the standards by which he trains the mentee, but for this, he should also be an active collaborator of the institutions responsible for educating and training mentees (Ellis, et al., 2020; Mena, Hennissen, & Loughran, 2017). The efficiency of mentorship, beyond high-quality training (Mena et al., 2017) should also imply building a community of practice (Trevethan, & Sandretto, 2017) with the potential to integrate theoretical, experiential, and professional learning elements. According to Smith (2020), the mentor's personality type – the mentor should be proactive and patient as well as professionally clear, cooperative, open and practical; communication issues; time constraints; school issues.

Regarding the positive aspects that the mentors noted in the students, whom they coordinate in the teaching practice, the data showed that the aspects related to the attitude towards the teaching profession were appreciated, such as the motivation to learn, to prepare thoroughly, the students' interest in the teaching career, the creativity shown by the students in choosing interactive

didactic strategies adapted to the students. Okumu et al. (2023) mentioned teachers' negative attitudes, lack of motivation and poor relationship between teachers and administrators, which leads teachers to distance themselves from mentors and avoid mentoring sessions, thus impacting on teacher effectiveness. There are different challenges of the mentoring activity, such as mismatching (between mentor and mentee, between explanation and understanding, between theory and practice) communication, training, and resources. Other challenges are following: training of mentors, relationship between mentor and mentee, relationship between workload and allocated time, lack of reliable access to content knowledge and resources (Boyington, 2021). For this reason, it is necessary careful selection of mentors, the need to reward mentors in some motivating way (Aderibigbe et al, 2016; Ehrich et al, 2011).

Related to the difficulties encountered in carrying out pedagogical practice, the mentors who participated in the study frequently indicated those that refer to the students' attitude towards the teaching profession: the lack of interest of some students towards the teaching career, the lack of preparation of some students, partial theoretical knowledge, the low motivation of some of the students in their career choice. For many of the mentors, "the difficulties related to initial doubts about the role, frustration with the students' attendance and overloading of daily tasks" (De Castro Nascimento Gonçalves & Lacerda Bellodi, 2012, p. 252). A series of obstacles related to the organization of teaching practice were frequently stated: problems related to the synchronization of the practice program according to the school and student schedules, bureaucracy, and insufficient time that can be allocated for the mentoring activity. Long (1997) also noticed that the lack of time, insufficient planning, poor matching and little understanding of the process mentoring intervene in the mentoring activity. Also, Uwamahoro (2022) pointed out the mentees' resistance to mentoring, and time constraints. Lack of time is a frequent challenge mentors face, finding mentors whose area of research aligns with the mentee, were often burdened with heavy teaching loads or disproportionate administrative duties, resulting in inadequate time for research, professional development, and mentoring (Talbert et al., 2021). A descriptive study conducted not long ago on a group of 330 respondents (Gobena, 2022) demonstrated that one of the significant difficulties of mentoring is the negative attitude, which, according to the results of other studies, is directly dependent on age (Ozcan & Balyer, 2012). Another difficulty refers to the lack of teachers' interest, multi-grade teaching, and overcrowded classrooms (Munir & Amin, 2018). Mentors are insufficiently recognised for their participation (Aderibigbe et al., 2016; Ewing et al., 2006). Regarding the administrative aspects of the organization of pedagogical practice, Davis et al. (2021) observed negative mentoring experiences, difficulty finding mentors, insufficient institutional support for formal mentoring, and lack of post-tenure mentorship among tenured faculty.

6. Conclusions

Teaching practice mentoring has as its main objective the promotion and improvement of the quality of training of students from pedagogical faculties and beginning teachers, to adapt to the requirements of optimal integration at the workplace and for didactic improvement. The role of mentors who coordinate teaching practice is essential in the training of future generations of teachers. Through teaching practice, students in initial training programs have the necessary framework for developing professional skills.

The qualitative study based on a focus group with mentors who coordinate the teaching practice of future teachers highlighted important results on three dimensions. The first of these concerns the qualities of a successful mentor. The data showed that the most appreciated qualities were: professional qualities, personal qualities, mentoring skills, student centering, communication skills, and relational skills. The second dimension concerned the positive aspects that the mentors noticed in the students, whom they coordinated in the teaching practice. The aspects appreciated by the mentors were those related to the attitude towards the teaching

profession and the personality traits of the students. The third dimension included the difficulties encountered by mentors in carrying out pedagogical practice. According to the research data, the obstacles that intervene are those related to the students' attitude towards the teaching profession, as well as those involving the organization of teaching practice.

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