

MENTORSHIP AND TEACHING CAREER TRAINING

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Abstract: *The paper presents the results of a qualitative study carried out within the project "Professionalization of the teaching career - PROF" (POCU/904/6/25/146587) focused on the critical-reflexive analysis of the perceptions of mentor teacher trainers, students of the Prof I training program regarding the experience of their training and the values shared as mentor teachers. Trainers' training for the teaching career mentorship aimed to complete an up-to-date continuous training program, well-articulated, and structured on six topics. These are as follows: teaching career mentorship - from concept to action; elements of adults' education and the teaching career mentorship - values, principles, and characteristics; planning the mentoring activity; the management of the teaching career mentorship process; counselling for training and professional development in the teaching career mentorship, and assessment and validation of professional teaching skills. The conclusions of the study highlight the personal conceptions of the mentor teacher trainers participating in the study as regards the role and the importance of teaching career mentorship to ensure the quality of the work of novice teachers and of teachers who are in professional evolution. Moreover, it focuses on the skills and qualities required for the teaching career mentorship, supported by relevant examples from mentor teachers' teaching experience.*

Keywords: *mentoring, teaching career mentorship; mentor teachers' trainers; quality.*

1. Introduction

The complexity of social life, the changes that have occurred in the last two years, including the changes in the educational system, the post-Covid-19 recovery of the Romanian society, and the everyday problems of schools require, in general, a reconsideration of the professional teachers' training practices. Moreover, it necessitates redesigning the professional training for mentor teachers so that the educational mentorship contributes decisively to the reform of the training and professional development system of teachers in Romania.

Mentoring as an effective tool for the training and professional development of human resources is widely utilised in organisations and is frequently practiced with the aim of helping new employees adapt to specific work conditions, regardless of the field in which they operate. Recent studies on learning and skills at the workplace "show that 50% of large organisations have used mentoring in the past year, and in the United States, according to Forbes, approximately 70% of Fortune 500 companies have a mentoring scheme that is applied consistently for staff integration and development". (Starr, 2022, p.33)

Moreover, in education, specialised studies (Curry, Webb & Latham, 2016, Kearney, 2017, Colognesi, Van Nieuwenhoven & Beusaert, 2020, Mkrtchyan & Gurin, 2022) highlight that mentorship programmes for novice teachers, called induction/professional insertion mentorship, increase teachers' stability in the education system. This is a critical point for novice teachers if we also take into account the pandemic period which has considerably affected the practical training of future teachers. There are studies that have shown that teachers who have a mentor are less likely to leave the education system. According to the 2018 TALIS survey, in Europe, 43.6% of teachers stated that they took part in a formal or informal induction programme during their first job. In six European education systems, including Romania, this share exceeds the European level, reaching 72.0% in England.

European educational policy documents recommend that novice teachers benefit from reduced teaching time in order to fully participate in induction activities, using this time for lesson preparation and establishing their professional network. According to TALIS 2018 findings, "a reduced teaching load during induction as well as team teaching with an experienced mentor teacher are positively correlated with teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction". (OECD, 2019, p. 141).

We share the belief that, in the first year of teaching, it is very important for the novice teachers to benefit from mentoring, coaching and counselling at the beginning of their professional career in order to optimally integrate into the school organisation and successfully fulfil their role and mission as

teachers for the new generations. This type of mentoring is only one dimension of teaching career mentorship. Equally important is professional development mentorship for dedicated teachers concerned with career advancement and professional performance with students. Stan C. (2020, p.38) states that mentors "need plans for permanent improvement of communication skills, problem-solving ability, skills to approach support situations through mentoring methods and techniques".

Therefore, in education, mentorship is essential for professional development at all stages of a teacher's career, and all teachers should see themselves as mentors, not just students and newly qualified teachers. The necessary skills should be developed and updated through initial teacher training, induction and in-service training. In mentorship, these skills are used to support peer development as well as helping teachers to provide all young people with high quality personal support as part of the Curriculum for Excellence.

2. The context of the training of mentor teacher trainers for the teaching career

According to the legislation in force, the evolution in the teaching career in Romanian pre-academic education is achieved through the teaching degrees and begins with obtaining the final qualification in the teaching profession, then the acquisition of the teaching degree II and the teaching degree I, certification exams of the different levels of competence of the teachers. (242 paragraph 2./National Education Law no. 1/2011 updated). However, these levels of development in the teaching career must be directly accompanied by the increase in the complexity of teaching roles and the association of new responsibilities.

In order to become an internship mentor teacher, it is required to pass a specific contest that consists in assessing the candidate's portfolio and taking a practical test, a procedure regulated by the methodology regarding the establishment of the body of mentor teachers for the coordination of the practical internship in order to occupy a teaching position (Order no. 5485/2011). Moreover, the legislation provides an important aspect regarding the mentorship of the teaching career and the assignment of the role of mentor for professional development, the teaching personnel who obtained the teaching degree I, with special performances in the teaching and managerial activity, can acquire the title of professor-emeritus in the pre-academic education system and... benefits from the quality of a mentor for the continuous training of teaching personnel". (art. 243 (2) b) /National Education Law). There is a need for the mentorship of the teaching career to be much better normatively regulated both for novice teachers and for teachers who have been in career development.

Moreover, the presidential project "Educated Romania", the strategic

framework of the current educational policies in our country has, among the goals related to the teaching career, the objective (4) which aims to "develop a flexible career management system, with differentiated paths, with the role of attracting and keeping in the system teachers with performances in teaching practice, in order to ensure effective learning". Among the measures that operationalise this objective, the following are mentioned:

"a. Restructuring the ways of assessing career progress (qualified teacher status degree, teaching degrees). It is important to shift the emphasis from academic training to authentic evidence of didactic activity, in relation to the competence profile of teachers.

d. Correlation of teaching career stages with new responsibilities assumed methodologically and extra-methodologically, to be included and valued within the teaching hours". (p.61)

Among the professional development opportunities and tools intended for mentor trainers and mentor teachers in Romania, there is the continuous training programme PROF I-Teaching career mentorship within the project "Professionalization of the teaching career - PROF" (POCU/904/6/25/146587), which aims, among the specific objectives, to create the national institutional framework for pre-academic teaching career mentorship, until 2023, through the setting of the teaching career mentorship as a separate domain, structured as a network under the coordination of the National Teaching Career Mentorship Centre (<https://www.edu.ro/PROF>).

The beneficiaries of the PROF I training programmes were selected based on the criteria below, established by the experts of the Ministry of Education (according to ME address no. 51/POCU_146587/2021):

- trainee teachers have not benefited from a training programme with the same objectives and funded from the Structural Funds, during the reference period for the POCU programme;
- trainee teachers have benefited from only one training programme within the project;
- trainee teachers either are part of teacher's training bases, or can demonstrate their qualification as mentor teachers or the trainee teachers have at least two-year certified teaching experience and methodological activity;
- trainee teachers own skills according to job position held;
- trainee teachers hold full-time positions in pre-academic education system;
- trainee teachers own at least Second Teaching Degree or the scientific title of Doctor;
- trainee teachers obtained the annual grade Very Well, for each of the last four school years.

In the selection process, the principal criterion utilised for trainee teachers' distribution was that of maintaining homogeneity within the training groups and of including trainees from all levels of education (e.g. pre-school teachers, primary teachers, secondary school teachers, and high school teachers). By attending the PROF I training programme (table 1), the trainees were provided with a set of general and specific skills necessary to successfully exercise the role of mentor trainer for the teaching career in today's Romanian school. In essence, the general skills aimed at: "the trainees' awareness of the importance of the axiological component in professional performance, the formation of a professional culture focused on the command of modern communication techniques, the development of critical and creative thinking, the promotion of research as an essential criterion of professionalism, the development of the capacity to rethink the contents and model the teaching and evaluation techniques according to the requirements of the reform, the requirements of the local community, the peculiarities of the students of the respective class, the characteristics of students' age, the development of the ability to adapt to the plurality of instructional contexts by writing alternative textbooks, structuring of programmes and course materials for the curriculum at the decision of the school, the development of new teaching methodologies, the development of the capacities to positively value differences, the development of the capacity to build interdisciplinary and intercultural approaches based on openness, flexibility and effective communication, continuous professional and personal development with a view to career promotion, both for themselves and for the mentees". (According to the accredited PROF I training programme, pp.21-22)

Table 1. Curriculum of the PROF I training programme – content units and key concepts

Content units of the PROF I programme	Key concepts deepened within the training
U1. Mentorship of the teaching career - from concept -to action	Professionalization of the teaching career Mentor's personality Mentor's roles Mentor's skills Mentoring relationship Culture of mentorship
U2. Elements of adult education and mentorship of the teaching career - values, principles, characteristics	Professionalization of the teaching career Adult learning Learning styles Interpersonal relationships Mentoring strategies
U3. Design of the mentoring activity	The ethics of mentoring relationships Professional development

U4. Management of the process in mentorship	Teamwork Team dynamics Teambuilding
U5. Counselling for training and professional development in the mentorship for the teaching career	Assertive communication Counselling techniques Coaching techniques Situational leadership Assessment
U6. Evaluation and validation of teaching professional skills	Self-assessment Professional standards

3. Research Methodology

A qualitative interpretive research project was utilised. The focus was on experiences, perceptions, history of professional development, beliefs, attitudes and opinions about mentors' role as mentor trainers and insights and attitude towards the mentorship of the teaching career.

3.1. The aim of the study was the critical-reflexive analysis of mentor trainers' perceptions, trainees in the Prof I training programme, regarding the values shared as mentors throughout their teaching career and the experiences gained during training.

3.2. The objectives of the present study were aimed at:

- identifying participants' view regarding mentors' role in the mentorship of teaching career in order to increase the quality of education;
- highlighting the pedagogical procedures of implementing innovative tools in the mentorship of teaching career.

3.3. Participants

In order to achieve the aims of the research, the qualitative study involved a number of 69 trainees (mentor teachers with mentoring experience), who completed the PROF I - Mentorship of the Teaching Career training programme between October 2021 and January 2022.

3.4. Methods

The training activities took place in the format of distance practical learning communities, bringing together participants from all over the country, who implemented the new acquisitions in the application schools, practicing specific skills acquired during the training. To capture rich descriptions of the mentoring interactions and to improve the understanding of the specific

context, the structured group interview and storytelling in mentoring were utilised.

4. Results

Throughout the training programme, the participants were required to respond to several questions focused on the content unit addressed during the training. Hence, at *U4Management of the process in mentorship*, the training expert launched several open questions to identify the learners' innovative view regarding the mentorship of the teaching career.

To the question "Why do we need an innovative approach in the field of mentorship of the teaching career in Romania?" the training participants construct several convincing arguments. To exemplify further, a list of arguments that the participants may state is presented below:

- ., *to link permanently theory to practice;*
- *to remove the routine when you have been a mentor for a very long time;*
- *for a real professional guidance, if the mentor is trained continuously;*
- *to become more aware of the role that the mentor has permanently;*
- *to apply new methods in the classroom and to utilise new technologies;*
- *for specialised intervention, by field of study, from an entire team in schools (mentor, manager, fellow professors, fellow directors, etc.);*
- *to restore the status of this profession among young people;*
- *for teachers to assume complex and various roles, to work with students with different learning needs, from various cultural backgrounds, with different learning potentials;*
- *to identify a possible strategy for efficient training and professional integration of future teachers, through a variety of activities that represent, in shaping the future teacher, a condition for the transfer of skills to other educational contexts;*
- *to inspire novice teachers and motivate them for the teaching career;*
- *to teach novice teachers how to apply new methods and new technologies in the classroom;*
- *for a change of perspective on the profession of teacher, which will emphasise the importance of the teaching profession for the society;*
- *for career success, including promotions, increased opportunities;*
- *for support in the teaching career according to mentees' needs;*
- *for a sense of satisfaction and professional achievement;*
- *to be up to date with legislative and curricular changes;*
- *for the need of models and support for novice teachers in the teaching profession;*
- *for successful professional integration".*

Among the reflective questions addressed to the trainees during the training activities was the following: "How can the mentor build a relationship of trust with the mentored teacher, taking into account the variables specific to communication?". The opinions of some of the respondents are listed below (table 2).

Table 2. Examples illustrating the importance of the mentor-novice teacher relationship of trust

Categories	Opinions of mentor trainers
a. Mentor-novice teacher relationship of trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - „The success of a mentoring programme for novice teachers depends, mainly, on the quality and effectiveness of the mentor-mentee team. It has been shown to be essential for novice teachers to be accompanied by a mentor with whom they can develop a relationship of trust ...Therefore, it seems a priority that the relationship should be based more on personal affinities between the parties involved... I have met mentors who are not always aware of the specific needs of their mentees...”(B.R.I, trainee); - „In order for the mentors to build a better relationship with the mentee, they must know their psychological profile in order to be able to identify their needs and establish a communication code according to their psychological characteristics. Moreover, it must take into account the cognitive variables, in order to build the mentoring plan, which includes the most appropriate actions to achieve the novice teacher's progress... it must be attentive to the social variables, because stereotypes and possible cultural and gender differences can be overcome if identified in time and managed carefully” (B.A.L., trainee);; - „The relationship of trust developed between them is very important as it provides support and helps the mentee not to adopt an avoidant attitude. The needs of both partners are significant for the relationship that is in continuous transformation. How the mentor defines herself / himself, after all, and through constant reports to those she / he mentors, to the environment, her / his position offers her / him one of the most effective ways of knowing the educational climate, so the mentoring process is a source of improvement and efficiency including for herself / himself” (D.M., trainee);;
Subcategories:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • professional needs • assertive communication • motivation • self-determination • self confidence • trust in the team 	

To improve professional practice, mentor trainers will promote instructional coaching (table 3) for novice teachers focused on raising the quality level of performance in design, teaching and evaluation.

Table 3. Examples illustrating several teaching methodology instances during the training provided by the mentor to novice teachers

Categories	Opinions of mentor trainers
b. Training of novice teachers Subcategories: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • design focused on skills training • the quality of teaching design • designing assessment tools • organisation of assessment activities • application of the assessment methodology • organising a meeting with the parents • organisation of extracurricular activities 	- „... the presentation of the competences from the school curriculum, a planning carried out on the competences, as well as the activity models through which they are formed... Depending on the observations in the classroom or the difficulties reported by the mentee, the mentor teacher can recommend further study of the official school documents and the specialized bibliography, apply new methods, update their design on learning units, etc. In addition to this, the mentor teacher can recommend training in teaching or in the discipline of study and the use of open educational resources” (D.M., trainee); - „Lesson planning is an approach to anticipate in detail the teaching activity for a school class and is designed following the curricular objectives. The teacher has the freedom to imagine, to build attractive and useful lessons for students. But this "freedom" should not have an optional meaning (that is Of course, I innovate, adapt; not that of already verified models which undoubtedly work,) but should be perceived as an asset in the voluntary fight against routine. The lesson is a creative act” (L.A., trainee); - „Since the activity carried out in the lesson is anticipated, pre-establishes by the teacher in the lesson plan, it represents teacher's working document or action guide. Each lesson or activity needs planning that concretises the teacher's preparation for the lesson, even if it acquires increasingly condensed forms over time, illustrating the teacher's experience and the fact that she or he has internalized and mastered methodological techniques, scientific content, effective practices. Design activity takes time. That is why lesson planning should not be complicated with unnecessary headings or be excessively detailed” (M.R., trainee);

To the question "What can we learn from beginning teachers/mentors throughout their teaching career?", the opinions of the mentor trainers were relevant and support both the professional development of the mentee and the

mentor. In table 4 below, we will quote several examples of students' arguments.

Table 4. Examples illustrating the importance of the relationship of trust between mentor and novice teacher

Categories	Opinions of mentor trainers
<p>c. Develop together professionally</p> <p>Subcategories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • value exchange • exchange of experience • mutual stimulation • mutual learning • mutual appreciation • self-analysis/self-assessment • research • innovation • development 	<p>- „Throughout the teaching career, we learn a lot through the exchange of experience, values... This means not only new teaching methodology knowledge, but also shared and above all tested innovation, with existing feedback, evaluated and valued. At the same time, another experience determines the self-assessment. Even if there may be cultural, group, etc. peculiarities, conflicts, this interaction also means stimulation to imagine new ideas and to involve ourselves towards improvement. The mentor could remember what it was like at the beginning of the career and thus trigger a process of self-analysis important for personal development” (B.J.D., trainee);</p> <p>- „From the novice teachers, we can take over the enthusiasm and freshness of the beginning. They are also a bridge between the university environment from which they have just come and the pre-academic environment, of which we are a part. From this perspective, they bring innovative ideas and techniques, perhaps even products of higher education research” (L.A., trainee);</p> <p>- „This training experience was and is very valuable for me and all my colleagues. It confirmed things I knew and I learned many new things, which I reflected on during the courses and while solving work tasks. I was impressed eventually by how much a novice teacher has to know and do in order to turn into a professional, and by how laborious the mentoring activity is. And, without wanting to, I asked myself: Do only novice teachers need to go through this mentoring process? How many of the senior teachers, tenured for years, would need to go through a similar process, through which to redefine themselves and assume the role of renewing the educational system?” (D.R., trainee)</p>

Moreover, during the training, the participants were asked to present their own perspective on the criteria by which the effectiveness of mentor-mentee teamwork is assessed, and to argue their own choices as convincingly as possible. Below, we present the opinions of several mentor trainers regarding important criteria identified in the assessment of the effectiveness of teamwork in the mentorship of teaching career:

- *„Assertiveness and cooperation are solutions for resolving the difficult situations inevitable in the mentoring process, and attention to results, assuming responsibilities, commitment, and trust help to create a strong team. Allowing time for members to develop relationships and the fact that the team is dedicated to the goal become rules for creating a team with a strong relationship. A particular style of interaction within the team can ensure the continuity of the mentoring process even in the case of special scenarios during the pandemic. Imbalances can be used to the advantage of the team as an engine for improvement and acceleration of the mutual learning process, taking into account the needs of the partners, therefore, I believe that even the emergence of conflicts can lead to development within the group, having a regulatory function” (C.D., trainee)”;*
- *„The work in the mentor-novice teacher team has a double orientation: towards the fulfilment of the established objectives, following the needs analysis of the mentee, and towards each member of the team, who has her or his own expectations, different from the other. The mentoring activity is not one-way. In addition to the common objectives, oriented towards the novice teacher, the mentor and the mentee have their own, separate objectives, derived from their own needs. For example, a mentor seeks satisfaction from her /his work and has a desire for continuous personal development” (F.A., trainee)”;*
- *„The team involves two adults who have chosen the same profession, so we are talking about a high level of motivation and about common goals, aimed at the novice teacher, as an individual and the two, as a team, but also at the pupils, as beneficiaries of the educational services. Therefore, the team activity becomes effective as long as it responds to the requirements/needs that the two identified at the beginning of the mentoring activity and the common objectives that they established, but also to the requirements of the pupils and the staff of which the novice teacher is a member. Meeting standards is the normative stage of the mentoring relationship, but only performance has truly transformative power. The efficiency of work in the mentor-teacher team is validated only when the partnership ends and the teacher manages to successfully meet the requirements on her or his own” (B.M., trainee)”;*
- *„Teamwork means a flow of information and emotional states. The efficiency of any relationship depends on the quality of communication, and trust is an absolutely necessary premise for the mentor-teacher relationship. Conflicts do not occur with no reason, but as a result of emphasising different points of view, which are, moreover, absolutely natural, considering the objective differences between the two poles. Through assertive communication and mutual trust, the initial personal*

distance is reduced and the risk of different points of view turning into conflicts is eliminated” (B.J.D., trainee)”;

- *„ To assess the effectiveness of work in the mentor-mentee teacher team, several levels may be considered - the process, the content, the relationship, and the results. The areas that can be evaluated are: commitment of mentors and mentees, having a serious attitude whilst attending the training programme, satisfaction of mentors and mentees, benefits in the team climate and in pupils' results, feedback from parents regarding positive achievements in class of the mentored teacher, etc. Another aspect/criterion that can be observed and evaluated is the degree to which teamwork makes the mentor and the mentee feel part of the process of improving the quality of teaching in the school” (C.D., trainee)”.*

Moreover, there are aspects that are more difficult to quantify but very important and whose presence determines the effectiveness of work in the mentor-teacher team: respect from those involved in the relationship, mutual trust, active listening, and mutual knowledge - strengths / qualities. Another evaluation criterion would be the manner and the condition to go through the four stages: initiation into the relationship - accommodation, cultivation - if there is further learning, development of skills by carrying out activities in the team, separation and redefinition in a new form, the evolution towards a friendly relationship between team members - a sign of an effective relationship that has achieved its goals. Furthermore, it is possible to assess the way of cooperation, of collaboration with win-win results on both sides, each to learn something from the respective relationship, from the professional situations encountered, from the conflicts that inevitably occur - the manner and the level conflicts emerge and the management of conflicts, the extent to which conflicts are resolved.

5. Conclusions

The continuous training of mentor trainers is the guarantee of increasing the quality of the teaching staff in our country (Romania). The process of professional development of the participants in the training is real and has materialised by acquiring new knowledge, new skills, which will be tested in the school as mentor trainers for the teaching career. The conclusions of this study highlight several important categories, subcategories and criteria in the mentorship of the teaching career. Through mentoring, the experience accumulated by the mentor teachers is passed on and the transition from one generation of teachers to another is offered. Mentoring enhances experienced teaching staff and their professionalism, offers opportunities for learning and professional development to all actors involved either individually or

institutionally: mentors, novice teaching staff, heads of departments, school managers, etc. The mentoring process becomes an increasingly effective tool in career development, having a particular impact on the school, on the development of human resources and careers, thanks to which teachers progress faster, have a sense of satisfaction and professional achievement, become more confident in their own strength, have much more effective coping skills and adapt more quickly in the community. This form of mentoring is important for the development of skills necessary to ensure a quality educational process and the career advancement of teaching staff, necessary for the personal and professional development of each teacher. The mentoring activities support the key message in the permanent education, of guaranteeing access to continuous education in order to form new basic skills, which constitute the essential foundation of active citizenship and the development of human resources, in which key European skills are included.

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