Mentor teachers: Their perceived possibilities and challenges as mentor and teacher

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Combining the teacher and mentor teacher role in the classroom.
- Challenges when simultaneously performing both roles.
- Transferring (or not) responsibilities to student teacher?
- Intervening (or not) during student teachers' lessons?
- Teaching perceived as primary task. Mentoring felt only as an additional task.

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ABSTRACT

This interview study, including seven case studies of mentor teachers in primary education, explores the possibilities and challenges these mentor teachers perceive when they (sequentially and simultaneously) combine the teacher and mentor roles. Mentor teachers perceive two challenges while simultaneously performing both roles in the same classroom: to transfer (or not) responsibility for the class and pupils to the student teacher and to intervene (or not) in classroom procedures. Mentor teachers felt that being the teacher of the pupils was their primary task, and being a mentor of the student teacher generally was perceived as an aside and additional task.

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1. Introduction

Student teachers (STs) in primary education learn to teach at the teacher training institute as well as at their teaching practicum school. The placement in the school, and in particular the contribution of mentor teachers (MTs), is very important for students' teacher training (Furlong, 2000; Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009; Wang, Odell, & Schwille, 2008; Williams et al., 1998). STs and MTs consider the student teaching experience to be the most important aspect of school-based teacher training (Hobson, 2002; Richardson-Koehler, 1988) and MTs appear to be the most influential actors in the student teaching experience (Collison & Edwards, 1994). If MTs, who are responsible for pupils in their class and for supervising a ST, have such a prominent role in STs' learning to teach, it is worth exploring the MT role more deeply.

Mentoring is considered a complex task (Hall, Draper, Smith, & Bullough, 2008; Hawkey, 1997; Orland, 2001). An MT needs to have specific mentoring skills, such as interpersonal skills (Rippon & Martin, 2006), and knowledge about mentoring, such as being able to teach about teaching (Leatham & Peterson, 2010). In general, MT's do have a lot of knowledge about teaching. However, some MTs find it difficult to talk about their teaching (Edwards & Collison, 1995; Malderez, Hobson, Tracey, & Kerr, 2007) or are not used to teaching others how to teach (Leatham & Peterson, 2010). Also, MTs may find it difficult to guide adults in their learning process, for example by challenging them enough (Elliott & Calderhead, 1993). Often, MTs are not trained to help others learning to teach (Hobson et al., 2009) and do not know what is expected from them (Grimmett & Ratzlaff, 1986).

The combination of the mentor role and teacher role might be especially challenging. MTs, as mentors, must support STs in practising and acquiring the knowledge, beliefs, and skills that will enable them to teach in ways that are fundamentally different from

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how they were taught (Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Hammerness et al., 2005). On the other hand, MTs, as teachers, are responsible for the development and wellbeing of their own pupils, and these two goals may diverge. More specifically, the learning of the STs can be at risk when MTs are more concerned with pupils' wellbeing than with STs' learning (e.g., Edwards, 1998). For example, STs may not have been given sufficient freedom, autonomy, and responsibilities in the classroom (e.g., Collison & Edwards, 1994), resulting in no, or insufficient, ST learning or in learning that is even contradictory to what was taught at the student training institute.

How MTs address and perceive these two roles during mentoring remains unknown. Knowledge about these perceptions and experiences may help MTs in their development as MTs and may increase the effectiveness of MTs' guidance of STs. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine MTs' perceptions and experiences of the combination of the mentor and teacher roles.

2. Theoretical framework

The study of mentoring and various mentoring roles is blossoming (e.g., Hawkey, 1997; Jones, 2001; Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2005; Orland-Barak, 2001; Zanting, Verloop, Vermunt, & Van Driel, 1998), but the majority of these studies focus on specific mentor roles, such as assessor and supporter (e.g., Tillema, Smith, & Leshem, 2011), initiator, imperator, encourager, and advisor (Crasborn, Hennissen, Brouwer, Korthagen, & Bergen, 2011). Research on the combination of the mentor and teacher roles is scarce, especially on MTs' *perceptions* of this combination. According to Pajares (1992), peoples' beliefs and perceptions strongly affect their behaviour. Knowledge about MTs' perceptions will provide insights into their classroom practice, as mentor and teacher. We will address indications from the literature that describe characteristics of the combination of the teacher and mentor roles. We also address the development of both roles and describe implications of performing both roles in MTs' classrooms.

2.1. The development of the mentor and teacher role

One branch of the literature covers the mutual influence of the development of the teacher and mentor roles. The relation between the teacher and mentor roles is found to be positive for the development of both roles. Being a (good) teacher allows one to become a (good) MT (Hobson et al., 2009). Conversely, Lopez-Real and Kwan (2005) concluded based on a large-scale evaluation that mentoring STs could enhance professional growth as a teacher.

The combination of the mentor role and teacher role does not only give possibilities to grow in both roles but also may challenge the combination of these roles. In various studies, Orland-Barak (Orland, 2001; Orland-Barak, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2010) described the learning processes of experienced teachers who become mentors. She concluded that reading a mentoring situation does not naturally emerge from being a good teacher (Orland, 2001). She described learning to mentor as "learning a second language of teaching" (Orland-Barak, 2001, p. 54). Orland-Barak (2002; 2005) explained the complexity of the translation from the teacher to the mentor role. Because the research by Orland-Barak concerns mentoring of in-service (colleague) teachers in secondary education, the applicability of her findings to mentoring STs in primary education remains to be seen.

Mentoring in secondary education may differ from primary education, because in secondary education usually one subject is taught for several classes, whereas in primary education all subjects are taught to one class of pupils (Wang, 2001). This difference might influence the role of MTs in both contexts. For example, in the Netherlands, STs in secondary education may teach their "own"

class, whereas in primary education the ST and MT generally are both in the same class; in primary education the ST performs activities, while the MT is also present as the teacher of that class (Goodfellow, 2000). Therefore, MTs in primary education are more frequently exposed to STs' mistakes and may be more triggered to be concerned about the pupils' learning. As a result, in primary education MTs might perceive more and greater challenges between the mentor and teacher roles than in secondary education. Furthermore, the relationship between teachers and their pupils may differ because primary teachers educate fewer and younger pupils than secondary teachers and spend more time with these pupils. This stronger relationship might reinforce MTs' concerns for their pupils (Stanulis, 1995) and spur them to give little autonomy to the STs (Goodfellow, 2000). Thus, giving STs room for practising teaching skills might be more challenging for primary education MTs than for secondary teachers. These differences suggest that findings on mentoring in secondary education may not be directly applied to primary education and that research on mentoring of STs' learning to teach in primary education may be worthwhile.

Generally, in the literature on mentoring in primary education, the combination of teacher and mentor roles appears as an aside in some studies (e.g., Goodfellow, 2000). For example, 35 MTs in Jacques' (1992) study mentioned that being a successful teacher of children did not guarantee success in teaching adults and Hopper (2001) suggested that teachers may find teaching STs without treating them like children difficult. Furthermore, MTs may not have been required to talk about teaching in the past, although they may have been teaching children for many years, as suggested by Malderez et al. (2007). MTs might even be disinterested in participating in mentor training and choose to teach themselves to mentor, like one of five MTs followed for 5 months by Stanulis (1995). However, these studies on mentoring in primary education do not intentionally investigate MTs' perceived problems when mentoring STs in their classrooms.

2.2. The performance of the mentor and teacher roles in the classroom

Another branch of literature concerns the implications of performing the teacher and mentor roles in the classroom, and some positive aspects of combining both roles have been found. For example, MTs feel that having a ST allows for the possibility of working with pupils in smaller groups (Collison & Edwards, 1994), and MTs regard their STs as a useful additional resource that increases their freedom to undertake other work in the school (Edwards & Protheroe, 2004).

Conversely, also challenging aspects of combining both roles were described. We will mention three difficulties that directly impact MTs' mentoring of the ST in the class. The first difficulty is the possible lack between STs' new insights and more traditional school routines of the MT (Alsup, 2006; Boyle-Baise & McIntyre, 2008; Cabaroglu & Tillema, 2011; Graham, 1997). This may prevent STs from learning more general applicable principles during their teaching experience. MTs may be practically oriented (Williams et al., 1998), making insufficient use of reflection on the relation between the theoretical concepts from the teacher training institute and the practical principles within the schools (e.g., Sundli, 2007; Wang & Odell, 2002).

The second difficulty is the time constraint that prevents MTs from effectively carrying out both roles (Jacques, 1992). Cross (1999) found that when there was a conflict of interest, it tended to be the STs, rather than the pupils, who suffered.

The third difficulty is the tension between mentor and teacher roles and MTs dual loyalty to STs' learning as well as pupils' learning (Rajuan, Beijaard, & Verloop, 2007). Due to this dual loyalty, or dual