Mentor teachers' practical reasoning about intervening during student teachers' lessons

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Mentor teachers in primary education intervene during student teachers' lessons.
- Mentor teachers balance situational, value, and empirical premises.
- Mentor teachers intervene rather frequently and mostly by guiding the pupils.
- Mentor teachers continuously try to fulfill both their mentor and teacher roles.
- Awareness of mentoring role is related to MTs' interventions.

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ABSTRACT

In this exploratory study, we analyzed mentor teachers' (MTs') reasoning about whether, when, and how to intervene during student teachers' (STs') lessons. We applied Fenstermacher's theory on practical arguments and found that MTs intervene primarily by guiding their pupils. MTs balance situational premises (e.g., ST and pupil characteristics, and triggers such as pupils behaving disruptively or STs making mistakes in the lesson content), value premises concerning mentoring and teaching, and empirical premises about the effects of intervening on STs' and pupils' well-being and development. We suggest MTs' intervening to not only cater to pupils' but also to STs' development needs.

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Mentoring during student teaching has been reported to be an important aspect of teacher training (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009), and mentor teachers (MTs) significantly influence the development of student teachers (STs) (Anderson, 2007; Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Borko & Mayfield, 1995). Good MTs help STs become effective practitioners, for example, by modeling good professional practice (Roehrig, Bohn, Turner, & Pressley, 2008). Other studies, however, describe mentoring as having a low impact on STs' learning (e.g., Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Wang & Odell, 2002), which might be a result of the complexity of being a *good* mentor (Hall, Draper, Smith, & Bullough, 2008; Hawkey, 1997; Orland, 2001). Particularly challenging for being a good mentor is the combination of being a mentor and a teacher in one's own classroom (Jaspers, Meijer, Prins, & Wubbels, 2014). As mentors, MTs support STs in practicing and acquiring the knowledge, beliefs, and skills that enable the STs to teach in ways that are fundamentally different from how the MTs themselves were taught (Borko & Mayfield; Hammerness et al., 2005). As teachers, MTs are responsible for the development and well-being of their pupils. These two responsibilities might compete with each other (e.g., Collison & Edwards, 1994; Edwards, 1998; Goodfellow, 2000; Jaspers et al, 2014; Rajuan, Beijaard, & Verloop, 2007). An earlier study (Jaspers, et al., 2014) revealed that MTs felt that being a teacher of the pupils was their primary task, and being an ST mentor was generally perceived as an aside, an additional task. A typical and challenging situation for MTs occurred when an ST was teaching the MT's pupils and the MT observed an interruption to the normal course of events. Such situations might be valuable learning

experiences for STs, giving them the opportunity to learn from mistakes and thus improve their teaching. Jaspers et al. (2014), however, found that in these situations, MTs tend to intervene by guiding the pupils. When MTs intervene, for example because they are more concerned about the well-being of pupils than of the ST's learning, the latter can be at risk (e.g., Edwards, 1998). As a result, STs are not provided with adequate responsibility, autonomy, and freedom in the classroom (e.g., Collison & Edwards, 1994).

MTs might have various reasons, as mentor as well as teacher, for their intervening or abstaining from intervening when the normal course of events in the classroom is disturbed. Insight into such reasoning and MTs' explanations for intervening or abstaining might help improve the impact of mentoring, and specifically, the quality of MTs' ST guidance during ST teaching. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore the practical reasoning concerning whether, when, and how to intervene during STs' lessons. After describing what is known about MTs' interventions and considerations during STs' teaching, we will summarize Fenstermacher's theory on practical arguments, which we will use as a heuristic to obtain insight into MTs' practical reasoning.

1. MTs' interventions

Various articles on mentoring have mentioned MTs' tendency to intervene (e.g., Glenn, 2006; Kent, 2001; Rajuan et al., 2007; Woods & Weasmer, 2003), but few explicitly examined the characteristics of interventions. Ben-Peretz and Rumney (1991) reported that MTs differ in terms of their active involvement in lessons. Some MTs tend to interrupt during STs' lessons, while others do not. MTs corrected the STs as well as the pupils when pupils misbehaved or became too noisy. Wang (2010) distinguished three categories of interventions: 1) active intervention, including both direct (the MT intervenes in the lesson herself) and indirect (the MT prompts some pupils to ask the ST questions); 2) passive intervention (an MT responds to a question by the ST); and 3) no intervention. Post (2007) described six intervention strategies that increase in the extent of classroom process disruption and in pupils' and ST's awareness of MT's intervention. The lowest disruption evolved from "ignore" (the MT does not respond at the time a problem occurs). The most disruptive is "intercept," which means the MT takes over the lesson and brings it to closure, such as when the class is out of control and the ST lacks the skills to reestablish authority. Post (2007), Ben-Peretz and Rumney (1991), and Wang (2010) describe various interventions, but these do not cover all interventions mentioned by the MTs in our previous study. Specifically, the tendency of these MTs to intervene by guiding the pupils is underexposed (Jaspers et al., 2014).

2. MTs' considerations

Whether, when, and how MTs intervene might be explained by a role conflict MTs might perceive because of the dual loyalty to STs' learning and pupils' learning (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014). Although MTs hand over their classrooms to the STs, observe lessons, and provide feedback, MTs have been reported to feel concerned about the children in their care (Edwards, 1998; Hopper, 2001; Stanulis, 1995). In order to protect both students and pupils from failure, MTs create safe places and carefully structured tasks for STs (Collison & Edwards, 1994) and their feedback aims to prevent potential ST mistakes (Edwards & Protheroe, 2004; Edwards, 1998). When STs make mistakes and face difficulty in teaching, MTs find it hard to refrain from directive interventions and to allow STs to fail when simple interventions during their teaching could have immediately improved the situation (Kent, 2001).

In research that explored MTs' reasons for intervening, Wang (2010) found that MTs' major reason for intervening was "caring about pupils." Other principles underlying a decision to intervene concern "ST self-esteem," "ST authority," "professional identity," "solving problems," "accumulating experience" (Wang, 2010), "teaching strategies," "content," and "discipline of pupils" (Ben-Peretz & Rumney, 1991). However, according to Wang, various other underlying values and principles for intervening have not yet been discovered.

3. Practical reasoning about intervening

The relation between MTs' actions and thoughts is complex (cf. Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Zanting, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2001). Teachers' beliefs and knowledge are often implicit and thus difficult to make explicit (Zanting et al., 2001). Fenstermacher (1986) presented a method (as suggested by Green (1976), based on an interpretation of the work of Aristotle) to illuminate teachers' reasoning about acting: the *practical argument*. Practical arguments are post hoc descriptions of practical reasoning that teachers indicate as fair and accurate accounts of actions and that serve to explain or justify what a teacher did (Fenstermacher & Richardson, 1993). When a person thinks about what he or she did or ought to do in a specific situation, given the commitment to the roles he or she has undertaken, this is a case of *practical reasoning* (Pendlebury, 1990). Practical reasoning takes place not only in retrospect when considering actions that have already been performed (Fenstermacher, 1986) but also when thinking about what we might do (for example, intended and hypothetical actions) in a particular set of circumstances (Pendlebury, 1990). In this study, we apply Fenstermacher's practical argument as a heuristic to investigate MTs' reasoning about intervening, without making a distinction between actual performed actions and actions described in another way.

A practical argument consists of a series of premises contributing to the decision or intention to act in response to questions such as "What shall I do?" or "Why did I do that?" (Morine-Dershimer, 1987). Fenstermacher and Richardson (1993) distinguished four types of premises:

1) The *value* premises indicate the desirable conditions, desired state of affairs, or a value or expression of moral good that the actor associates with these consequences. For example, *"As a teacher, I want my pupils to learn; as an MT, I want my ST to learn."*

2) The *stipulative* premises are statements that define, interpret or establish meaning, and are examined using theory or well-grounded conceptions of the learner, the subject matter, and the form and manner of instruction. For example, *"Well-managed classrooms yield gains in learning."*

3) The *empirical* premises are statements of principles denoting the consequences that might be expected to follow the action. The empirical premise can often be appraised using evidence gained from careful observation and study. For example, *"Direct instruction is a proven way to manage classrooms."*

4) The *situational* premises describe the context or situation in which the action occurs. For example, *"My ST is teaching my pupils not confirming the principles of direct instruction and the pupils are not behaving well."*

These four premises in the argument, whether explicitly stated by the teacher discussing an action, or implicitly found in the teacher's description of the event, lead to the action, or intention to act, or to avoiding the action (Morine-Dershimer, 1987). In the above, this might be, for example *"I am intervening/I will intervene by organizing my class according to the principles of direct instruction"*