



Research on mentor education for mentors of newly qualified teachers: A qualitative meta-synthesis



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HIGHLIGHTS

- A qualitative meta-synthesis of research on education for mentors of new teachers.
- 10 studies met the criteria for full inclusion and were synthesised.
- Three overarching dimensions were found as a final synthesis.
- A systematic, long-term and research-informed mentor education is stressed.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this meta-synthesis is to deepen the understanding and knowledge of qualitative research focusing on education for mentors of newly qualified teachers. Altogether, 10 studies were included and synthesised. Four common themes emerged in the initial analysis: *School and mentoring context*, *Theory and practice*, *Reflection and critical thinking* and *Relationships*. Furthermore, three overarching dimensions were found as a final synthesis guiding the further development of mentor education: 1) *Contextual dimensions*, 2) *Theoretical-analytical dimensions*, and 3) *Relational dimensions*. The synthesis stresses the importance of a systematic, long-term and research-informed mentor education that develops mentors' (self-)understanding of teaching and mentoring.

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1. Introduction

In educational research there has been a long standing focus on newly qualified teachers (NQTs). Challenges have been identified that underpin arguments as to why mentoring may be justified or even important (Aspfors & Bondas, 2013; European Commission, 2010; Fletcher & Mullen, 2012). While much is known about mentoring, relatively little is known about mentors' professional knowledge and needs (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009), and even less is known about their professional development, how mentors are educated, and how their skills and knowledge develop during mentor education (Bullough, 2012). In

this context, it has been claimed that the preparation of mentors has to be a priority for policymakers, teacher educators and researchers (Hobson et al., 2009). However, it is surprising that some countries or states with well-established mentoring programmes do not seem to have any systematised mentor education. For instance, New Zealand has a long tradition of induction and mentoring for NQTs, but has no mandatory mentor education. Training is provided as professional development, often by professional or academic consultants or as university courses. The same is offered in Scotland, where training delivered by education authorities is often related to documentation, rather than the mentoring process. Similar, in Japan the induction programme 'Shoninsha-kenshu' is mandatory, but most mentors are not trained (Asada, 2012). Thus, as research on mentor education is scant, the aim of this qualitative meta-synthesis is to deepen the understanding and knowledge of research focusing on education for mentors of NQTs (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007).

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In doing this our focus is not on the literature that simply describes how mentor education is provided, its content and structure etc., but on global-wide studies with an explicit research focus on mentor education. The following questions are addressed: What does the qualitative research on mentor education focus on? What do the studies contribute to the further development of mentor education? By addressing these questions, the ambition is that this synthesis will offer a basis for further studies of mentor education.

Mentor education cannot be studied in full without problematising how mentoring and mentor education are understood and defined. The problem is that there is no universal definition of mentoring (Gold, 1996; Mullen, 2012), and that mentoring is a contested practice (Kemmis, Heikkinen, Fransson, Aspfors, & Edwards-Groves, 2014) in which different concepts, such as mentoring, supervision, coaching etc., are used (cf. Sundli, 2007). Mullen (2012) offers an illustrative quote: “While some theorists think of coaching as a type of mentoring, others see the exact reverse – that is, mentoring as a type of coaching” (p. 9). Mentoring can be performed in many contexts, be based on a variety of purposes and theoretical approaches (Dominguez & Hager, 2013; Hobson et al., 2009) and be performed under different circumstances in a variety of ways with different duration and intensity (Bullough, 2012; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Strong & Baron, 2004).

For instance, in some research studies mentoring and mentor education are discussed in general terms and are often related to different kinds of contexts or experiences in different professions (Garvey & Westlander, 2013). When it comes to teachers, the terms ‘mentor’ and ‘mentor education’ are sometimes used in the context of ‘pre-service education’ and focus on initial teacher training, student teachers and their mentors (Ballantyne & Mylonas, 1991; Hudson, 2014; Sundli, 2007). In research on mentoring or mentor education, a clear line is seldom drawn between ‘mentoring’ and mentor preparation with regard to initial teacher education and mentoring and the training of mentors for NQTs. However, in this article, we base our overview on the literature and research that focuses on mentoring and mentor education for mentors of NQTs. We do this because we consider ‘mentoring’ in initial teacher education and for NQTs to be two different practices with (somewhat) different logics, contexts, relations and effects. A second reason is that the majority of research seems to focus on the professional development of ‘mentors’ for student teachers in initial teacher education (cf. Hobson et al., 2009; Hudson, 2013; 2014), rather than considering the professional development of mentors for NQTs.

In the article we regard mentoring as an activity, a process and a long-term relationship between an experienced teacher (mentor) and a less experienced NQT that is primarily designed to support the NQT’s learning, professional development and well-being and to facilitate their induction into the culture of teaching and the local school context (cf. Hobson et al., 2009). We define *mentor education* as: a) formal courses or education involving universities, teacher education institutions or researchers, b) professional development activities, such as coaching or reflective seminars for mentors, and c) action research projects involving mentors and researchers.

We begin with an overview of previous research in the field of mentor preparation before describing the methods and criteria for this qualitative meta-synthesis and its results.

2. The professional development of mentors – informal and educative practices

2.1. Focus on mentoring for newly qualified teachers

The professional development of mentors embraces the transition from experienced teacher to the position of mentor and having to master teaching practices and mentoring practice, which can be

seen as two separate practices (Orland-Barak, 2001). These transitional processes imply knowledge and skills to master the processes of communication, learning and identity formation, as well as the micro-political manoeuvring that is necessary in both practices (Achinstein, 2006). In the mentoring practice, these skills are manifested and exposed in the processes of *mentoring*. In many ways the professional development that is necessary to become a mentor is similar to the developmental stages that new teachers experience in their first years of teaching (Orland, 2001).

There seems to be at least two main approaches in research when conceptualising the professional development of mentors for NQTs. The first approach focuses on mentors’ informal learning and interactions with mentees. The second focus on formal courses or programmes or on more informal but still organised opportunities for professional development while serving as mentors, for instance via coaching or reflective seminars. These two approaches are highlighted below.

2.2. Mentors’ professional development and informal learning

Mentors’ professional knowledge has been found to be highly practice-oriented and emanates to a great extent from mentors’ own professional experiences and preferences (Clarke, Killeavy, & Moloney, 2013; Ulvik & Sunde, 2013) and instructional contexts have been found to have a strong influence on mentors’ conceptions and practices of mentoring. This is clearly illustrated in Wang’s (2001) study of mentors in China, England and United States.

The informal learning of mentors is well documented in terms of how the mentors themselves benefit and learn from mentoring (Patrick, Elliot, Hulme, & McPhee, 2010). According to Hobson et al. (2009), the largest body of research evidence seems to deal with mentors’ critical reflections and mentors’ own way of acting or understanding their own teaching practices (Abell, Dillon, Hopkins, McInerney, & O’Brien, 1995; Clarke et al., 2013; Patrick et al., 2010). It is also highlighted that mentors can learn current knowledge or new perspectives from the NQTs. For instance, in a Norwegian study of new upper secondary teachers and their mentors, Ulvik and Langørgen (2012) find that mentors learn from NQTs about issues such as youth culture, ICT, gain up-to-date-knowledge about curriculum and subject matter, and listen to the alternative perspectives of NQTs. In their study of 25 mentors in Missouri, Gilles and Wilson (2004) find that mentors learn how to work with adults, how to ‘read situations’ and their mentees, when and how to challenge mentees’ thinking, and how to make tacit expertise visible and conscious. It is concluded that a lot of mentoring is learned by engaging in it, and that it is a learning process that takes time, i.e. years rather than months (cf. Koballa, Kittleson, Bradbury, & Dias, 2010). In another study, Orland-Barak (2001) uncovers the learning and evolving competence of two Israeli mentors as they develop their competence over time, partly by contrasting the practice of mentoring and the practice of teaching children. In a similar study from New Zealand, Langdon (2014) shows how mentors learn and develop their mentoring, for instance by changing their conversational strategies to more co-constructivist approaches, or by viewing themselves more as “learners” than “problem-solvers” or “tellers”.

Mentors’ professional development has also been found to be connected to the professional development of the mentors’ own teaching. In a study from Ireland, Clarke et al. (2013) found that mentors regarded the acquisition and improvement of their own teaching skills to be of importance in their role as mentors. Reflecting on their own teaching and reflecting on and sharing experiences with colleagues was also found to benefit mentoring. Thus, it would seem that the factors or activities in the mentor’s

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