Key Teacher Competencies for Mentoring Student Teachers in Primary Schools

Valentina Gulevska[1], Jove Talevski, Dobri Petrovski

Faculty of Education, "St. Kliment Ohridski" University in Bitola, Macedonia

A professional teacher today is bound to demonstrate a large and an ever-expanding repertoire of personal and professional qualities. The teaching practice is related to effective classroom learning and thus rests upon numerous aspects: well-structured classes, student achievements, supportive classroom climate, tuition, one-to-one instruction. Hence, the objective of the practicum is to find and achieve the right balance between the theoretical and fundamental contents of the curricula – on the one hand, and the development of student's practical skills on the other.

As in many South European and East European countries, the Higher Education Acts in the Republic of Macedonia does not include the institution of the training school, the so-called faculty school. That is why close collaboration is based on the faculties' initiative and bilateral institutional agreement between the faculty and the schools without the existence of a higher legislative anchorage. In these conditions, supervising teachers are not specially trained for their mentors' activity either, but they are willing to work with students.

This paper attempts to rethink the key competencies of the teacher mentors and to provide some recommendations regarding establishing standards in this area of teacher education.

Key words: *teacher mentors, student teachers, competencies, practical training.*

Introduction

Mentoring is an effective way of sharing skills, helping to build professional capacity. It is an important part of preparing future teachers for their successful including in the teaching process and in the school life generally. In teacher education training mentoring relationships are realizing through the systemic programs. Today, schools are embracing the concept of mentoring as a professional development tool through which the teachers improve their efficiency and productivity. The supervising teachers (or mentors) play psychosocial role and interact with the student teachers providing encouragement and support.

Whether the mentoring relationship is organisationally driven or informal and more personally driven, it is likely that the overall purpose of the relationship will be for both parties to learn, engage in knowledge transfer, and support one another's development and growth. There is no magic formula for making mentoring relationships or mentoring programs work effectively. What is known through

1 vgulevska@gmail.com

the research is that the effectiveness of any mentoring relationship is contingent on the quality of the relationship between the two parties. Where there is mutuality, respect and knowledge transfer, the mentoring is likely to work well. Where there is little mutuality and a mismatch in expectations, this is a recipe for difficulty (Ehrich, 2013).

Entering into a mentoring arrangement requires planning in advance and a careful consideration of the teacher's other commitments. Teachers must remain aware of the differing roles of mentor and teacher and ensure that the two remain separate.

Macedonian Legislative Framework for Practical Training of Future Teachers

The legislative framework in the education sector in the Western Balkan countries has received considerable attention in the last two decades. In most cases, the acts adopted in the 1990s have been replaced by new legislation that reflects the changes introduced in the education system during the last decade. These efforts were often influenced by European trends in education and directed towards harmonising the legal framework with the EU developments in this area, particularly the Bologna process.

Discrepancy between teacher education programs, school needs and practice, emerge as the key shortcoming of the teacher education systems across the region. Also, the general trend in the countries of South East Europe is to increase the possibility of organizing practical training for the future teachers from the start of the study. At the faculties of education in Macedonia, this educational trend has been accepted and the students already in the first semester realise practice in the schools. However, the situation in this field indicates a lack of legal legislation that would regulate this process. The faculties themselves have to arrange the admission of their students in primary schools and to build relationships of trust with potential teachers - mentors, who

would accept to work with students. Fortunately, the teachers are always at the height of their professional task and they always found enough time to devote to practical teaching and working with students.

The only document regarding this issue is this paragraph in the national Law of Higher Education: "the practical training cannot take less than an hour, no more than eight hours a day. The scope and duration of the practical training cannot be shorter than 30 days" (Služben vesnik RM, 120/2010). Therefore, educational policy makers claim that the national legislative framework for this segment of the teacher education shows lack of school on-site teaching practice and a greater demand for establishing uniform licensing programmes, developing a merit based pay system, rendering publications by teachers for teachers, ensuring summation research reports/publications, enabling the realisation of all major initiatives and the implementation of strategies, etc. Further, their recommendations include establishing a market for demand-driven in-service teacher training, criteria for accreditation of and monitoring teacher-training services, as well as basis for conditions and criteria for career promotion of teacher's model proposed (Skikos, 2013).

In order to avoid differences in the way of implementation of practical training in the country, at the request of the education department of the OSCE Mission to Skopje, Faculties of Education in Macedonia have prepared the Guidelines for the implementation of practical training and organize training for those teachers in primary schools, which have already been or who wanted to become mentors to student teachers. The faculties have prepared and useful documents, which should facilitate the work of both students and mentors. These activities were dedicated to advancing the theory and practice of preparing future education professionals in Macedonia and it promoted collaborative exchange between academia and practitioners involved in the practical training of future teachers. In order to guide the practical instruction for all stakeholders

(students, university professors, elementary school, teachers i.e. mentors et cetera) involved in this process, the document contributes to improvement of the practice in teacher education on national level (Gulevska, 2014). However, despite these on-going attempts to meet the modern-day needs regarding teachers' professional skills and competences, it has been reported that in the Initial Teacher Education programme insufficient efforts are made to prevent future teachers from facing "reality shocks" when launching their teaching career. Although school-based practice usually constitutes a major part of the curriculum, it is the most underdeveloped component of teacher education. To put it briefly, it is usually too short, follows out-dated models (maximum observation – minimum involvement), lacks proper mentorship, or is overseen by university staff with little practical knowledge of what is actually happening in the classrooms (Skikos, 2013).

Key Teacher Competencies for Mentoring Student Teachers

The role of teachers in school today becomes more complex due to the new tasks facing education today. Hence, the student, future teacher, would be sent into the classroom to learn to teach as an essential part of their training. The individual qualities of the teacher would develop as he taught his subjects. He would develop the characteristics of the good teacher in classroom, "use common sense and acquire confidence rather than be taught generalised theories irrelevant to good teacher" (Furlong and Maynard, 2012: 21). However, one of the tasks of the teacher education is to develop large number of professional, personal and specific teacher competences. According to some experts, competences are a complex combination of knowledge, skills, understanding, values, attitudes and desire, which leads to effective embodied human action in the world, in a particular domain (Deakin Crick, 2008). Similarly, teacher competences can be defined as the sum of

professional knowledge, skills and abilities, attitudes and values that lead to concrete engagement in the teaching process. Therefore, there are many desired characteristics of the good teacher mentors. At first, teacher mentors should be experienced educators and have model supervision skills. Also, they should view mentoring a student teacher as an opportunity for their own continued growth. In that context, the list of key competencies of teacher mentors is flexible, adaptable, and we can never say that it is finally established and completed. According to other experts, it is perfectly possible and educationally advantageous to involve the student teachers in discussion of which competencies they want their mentor to focus on (Hagger et all, 2013). The research that we conducted on mentor teachers' competencies has largely confirmed this consideration. However it has raised some new issues which will also be discussed later on in this paper.

This research, the results of which are outlined in the subsequent sections, was conducted in order to gain insights into how teacher mentors think about the impact of their professional capacity upon the effective practice teaching, as well as how the student teachers think about the teacher mentors' competencies necessary for the practicum.

Methodology

The methodology of this research rests upon the preparation and design of a standard questionnaire with a list of 10 most important competencies that, in our opinion, mentor teachers should have for a quality implementation of practical training. The respondents were 10 teachers from primary schools in Bitola who have already been teacher mentors and 10 students from the Faculty of Education in Bitola who are in their final year of studies. The selection of the students was based on the principle of random sampling: the selection criteria used was the total number of students per class divided by 10. Thus, the selection of the student teachers was based on the figure of quotient (for instance,

in a classroom of 30 students, this number (30) was divided by 10 giving the quotient 3, and according-ly every third student was included in the survey). The survey was conducted during classes. Question-naires were handed out to all student teachers se-lected to participate in the survey, providing enough time for their completion. Once completed, the questionnaires were collected in a way that ensured anonymity. Data collection was worked on from Oc-tober 15th, 2015, through November 10th, 2015. Re-spondents were given the task to evaluate the im-portance of competencies by checking one of the offered answers: "very important", "important" and "not very important" competence. There was also an option for the respondents to add some more com-petencies, according to their opinion, and to evalu-ate them in the same way as stated above. The pro-posed competencies in the list were the following:

– Modeling effective teaching practice;
– Subject knowledge, pedagogy and curricu-lum;
– Ability to use interactive teaching methods;
– Monitoring, assessment and evaluation;
– Communication strategies and building good relations with students;
– Ability to inspire curiosity and encourage students;
– Ability to implement in practice the princi-ples of good discipline;
– Showing sensitivity to ethical dilemmas;
– Ability to provide frequent feedback in a va-riety of teaching or professional situations;
– Willing to let the students take reasonable risks in the student teaching experience and will turn over the class to the student teach-er at an appropriate time.

Unfortunately, neither of the respondents added any other competencies to the already listed ones.

2.2. Findings

The data analysis findings show that teacher mentors (up to 9) believe that the most important competency for successful mentoring is *the ability to use interactive methods in the teaching process*. The second competency checked by the same respond-ents as important is *successful modeling of effective practical training*. The *knowledge of the subject, ped-agogy and curriculum* comes third in importance, and the *observation, assessment and evaluation of students' engagement in the classroom* comes fourth (See Table 1).
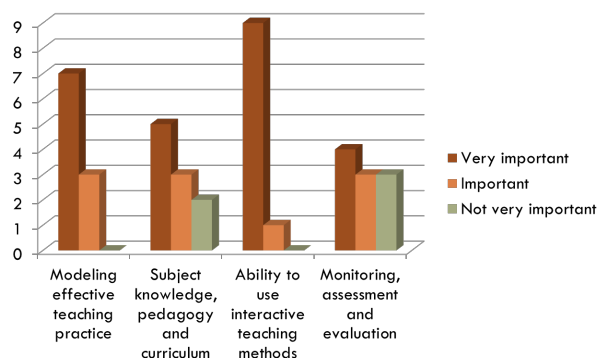

Table 1: Research Findings: Teachers Mentors' opinion

The student teachers respondents demon-strated opinions different from those of the teach-er mentors respondents. As their answers show, they believe that the most important competency of teacher mentors should be the *ability to stimulate student teachers' audacity and to encourage their cu-riosity* for practical work. Further, they believe that it is very important for the teacher mentors to have *communication skills and correct strategy for building relations with student teachers*. It is indicative that these student teachers respondents place *competen-cy in showing sensitivity to ethical dilemmas* as third in importance and the *ability to implement principles of good discipline in practice* as fourth (See Table 2).
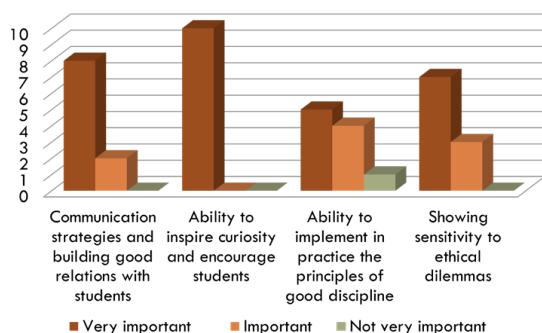
Table 2: Research Findings: Student Teachers' opinion

According to the findings presented, we can conclude that teacher mentors are to provide student teachers with experience in uncovering ethical principles and grounds for professional action. The skills, knowledge, capacities and abilities required for teaching children are either the same or similar to those needed for working with the student teachers. Thus, no training or support would be necessary for teachers in their new role (Della, 2013, p. 18).

Conclusion

In the context of the economic and social changes that make high-quality schooling more important than ever, the debate on teacher education has gained special importance as teachers are the most important resource in schools and their quality is being identified as decisive to student outcomes (Musset, 2010). Student teachers are required to undertake a classroom practice before obtaining their qualifications. As our research indicates, in the Western Balkan countries it is far by widespread form of cooperation between faculties and schools in Europe. Teaching practice as form of cooperation is often formal and not based on mutual learning between schools and faculties as such. On the other hand, teacher mentor during his working

should to enriche and perfecte the basic professional skills as a teacher. Teaching practice of teacher mentors should be recognized as high quality experience which is a step forward in achieving professional competencies.

Based on the above mentioned, we can conclude that the quality of the practical training of future teachers depends primarily on the mutual relations between the teacher mentors and student teachers. However, additional interventions and engagements by relevant stakeholders are required in several segments of the realization of teaching practice. Our recommendations refer to the following issues:

– The current education reforms in our country, aiming to restructure teacher education, need considerable improvement in terms of legislative, policy, and institutional framework development.

– Speaking about partnerships between faculties and schools, good will for a firm cooperation among the university education sector, teacher education providers, local authorities, and the community is vital.

Despite the great importance of demonstrating communication skills and empathy for mentored student teachers, teacher mentors do not find these skills and qualities as very important. Therefore, we recommend organizing seminars and trainings which would enrich teacher mentors' key competencies with emotional and ethical capacity as well as improve their interactive and communicational skills. Finally, what we consider absolutely necessary is the harmonization and standardization of the key teacher mentors' competencies via national or regional tuning because the quality of teacher education is the crucial factor for the success of every educational system.

References:

- Ehrich, L. C., (2013), *Developing Performance Mentoring Handbook*, Department of Education, Training and Employment at Queensland University of Technology: Brisbane.

- Musset, P. (2010), *Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Training Policies in a Comparative Perspective: Current Practices in OECD Countries and a Literature Review on Potential Effects*, OECD Education Working Papers, No. 48, OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5kmbphh7s47h-en.

- *Teacher Education and Training in the Western Balkans*, (2013). Final Synthesis Report, European Commission (Editor Helene Skikos), Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

- Gulevska, V., (2014). "The Impact of Student's Personal Philosophy on the Effective Practice of Teaching in Multicultural Classrooms", in *Practicum of Future Pedagogues, Teachers and Kindergarten, Teachers in Multicultural Environments - Experiences and Challenges*, Conference Proceeding, Faculty of Philosophy, Skopje, 127-134.

- Deakin Crick, R. (2008), "Key Competencies for Education in a European Context: Narratives of Accountability or Care", *European Educational Research Journal, Volume 7, Number 3*, 311-318.

- Furlong, J. and Maynard, T., (2012), *Mentoring Student Teachers: The Growth of Professional Knowledge*, Routledge: London.

- Služben vesnik na Republika Makedonija, br. 120, 2010.

- Della, F. (2013), *Quality Mentoring for Student Teachers: A Principled Approach to Practice*, Routledge, London.

- Hagger, H., Mcintyre, D., Wilkin, M. (2013), *Mentoring: Perspectives on School – based Teacher Education*, Routledge: New York.