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**COMMUNICATION ASPECTS OF MENTORSHIP IN THE SYSTEM OF PRESCHOOL  
AND SCHOOL EDUCATION**

**Marinella Mihova**

Faculty of Education, St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo – Veliko Turnovo,  
Republic of Bulgaria; [marinela.mihova@gmail.com](mailto:marinela.mihova@gmail.com)

**Darinka Kostadinova**

St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo – Branch Vratsa, Republic of Bulgaria;  
[kostadinova\\_d\\_hr@abv.bg](mailto:kostadinova_d_hr@abv.bg)

**Abstract:** The communication between the main participants in the process of new teachers' practical training and their introduction to the profession has a number of different aspects and substantive characteristics. Good communication crucially depends on people's social skills; it has its context and it aims understanding. This communication is a prerequisite for effective coordination, successful adaptation of the new teachers and their meaningful socialization in the professional community. The paper focuses on the features of the communication between the young teachers and their mentors, which may serve as a bridge to their motivation for success, or may turn out to be a challenge and even a reason for the young person to give up her plans to enter the teacher's profession. The theme is studied from an organizational perspective and the conclusions drawn are towards improving and optimizing the organization of mentorship from our position of university professors who also participate in organizing and implementing the future teachers' practical training.

**Keywords:** mentorship, communication, cooperation, professionalism, inclusion, professional community.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The world is different. We are different. The children and the students are different. Is the teacher's profession different then? Is the content of the future teachers' professional-pedagogical training different? Is it that the answer cannot be definite – it is yes, and at the same time it is no? Completely equivocal, however, are the claims that the society's attitude towards the teacher's profession is different; less and less young people are interested in becoming teachers; it takes less time for the young teachers to decide to leave the profession when they first face challenges at school and/or another opportunity for professional realization opens up for them? What are the causes? Formulating them does not seem to be a problem. The real difficulty lies in finding the answer to the question of how to deal with these issues. The question of how the intern-teachers to gain good training and the respective professional confidence at the university, and the newly employed teachers to adapt quicker to the requirements of the professions?

Those whose responsibility is the education policy are trying to find a solution by assessing the potential of mentorship and the regulation of this process within the system. It is beyond any doubt that a body of legislative regulations is a necessary for its organization and functioning, but this alone is not enough for reaching the desired effect. The key to effective mentorship – which is in nature a two-sided process of interaction – lies in the character of the communication between the mentor teacher and the intern-teacher/the newly employed teacher.

What are the specifics of the communicative interaction in the process of mentorship? What is its role for the future teachers' adaptation and encouragement to remain in the profession? What are the prerequisites for successful professional communication? These are just a few of the questions that a thematic research conducted within the framework of the inner for the University of Veliko Turnovo project *The Art of Mentorship on the Transition Between the University and the Educational Institutions* is looking to answer.

## **2. THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF COMMUNICATION IN THE PROCESS OF MENTORSHIP IN THE PRESCHOOL AND SCHOOL EDUCATION**

Among the most commonly cited definitions of mentorship is the one provided by Ann Rolfe, who defines mentorship as a unification which creates space for conversation that leads to insight, action and learning [3]. Therefore, the level and the quality of communication are of key importance for acquiring the desired mentorship results.

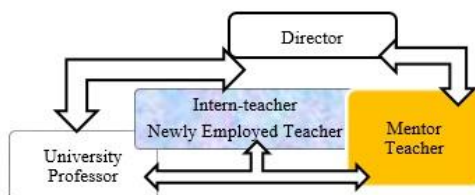
Conventionally, communication is defined as an informational process through which two persons exchange messages between themselves.

Within the system of preschool and school education, it bears the features of a social communication which's three structural sides can be differentiated – contentful, interactive and perceptive. The contentful side is linked to the

information exchange between the subjects of the communicative process; the interactive one – to the interaction exchange; and the perceptive one encompasses the mutual acceptance and understanding of the subjects of the process. Mentorship in the sphere of education is happening between mentor teacher and the newly employed teachers, as well as between the mentor teacher and the intern-teacher. The process of communication between them is realized in two aspects – interpersonal and organizational.

Age, gender, experience, subjective personal perception between the participants in the communicative process are all factors of influence with regard to the specifics and the character of the interpersonal interaction. According to Tsvetanska, the communicative competence and the cognitive development of the communication partners, the attraction and the interpersonal computability define the character of the contact to a considerable extent [2, 25]. The interpersonal communication in the mentorship process unfolds on a formal, official level, but also on a non-formal, friend level. The different positions that the newly employed teacher and the intern-teacher have with respect to the mentor teacher predetermines the specifics of the interpersonal communication in the two respective cases. In the former case, the mentor teacher and the newly employed teacher interact as colleagues, members of one and the same pedagogical team, and the possibility that non-formal communication will dominate over the formal one is high, whereas in the latter case – the formal interaction prevails because it happens within the framework of the training process.

The organizational aspect of the communication in the mentorship process mirrors the objectively set frame of the interaction. Within it, a key part has the social status and the participants' roles, as well as the hierarchic dependence between them [2, 27]. In Bulgaria, they are to a large extent set out in Decree-Law No. 12 on the status and the professional development of teachers, directors and other pedagogical specialists (Bulgarian State Gazette No. 75 of 27 September 2016) and in the educational documentation of the training institutions – the universities.



The communication in the mentorship process possesses the same characteristics as the social communication. It is dynamic in nature, because it happens between two conscious subjects who constantly exchange places, and it is not stagnant but ever-developing. It is a means of inclusion, because through it the participants in the mentorship process adapt to their specific roles and expectations that these roles place upon them. The individual particularities of the mentor teacher, the inter-teacher and the newly employed teacher are projected over the communication and also the level of their social competence. A particular significance for the mentorship process has activity, as for achieving the desired results is very important the participants to remain active. Activity consists in devotion on the side of the mentor teacher to his/her role of a professional who shares experience, and devotion on the side of the inter teacher/the newly employed teacher in their role of a trainee gaining from the shared experience in order to develop professionally and adapt to the requirements of the environment.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The survey that is under discussion in this paper is an integral part of an inner for the St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo – Vratsa Brunch project implemented in the period May – July 2018. It was conducted via an on-line questionnaire. The *object* of the research are the mentor teachers and the intern-teachers/the newly employed teachers in the educational institution. The research *subject* are the communicational aspects of mentorship in the system of preschool and school education. The *goal* of the research is to study the specifics of the communicative process within the framework of the mentorship as a condition for a problem-free transition for the young professionals between the university and the educational institution. This goal is broken down to the following research *tasks*: 1. Studying the opinions of the mentor teachers about the requirements for a successful communication with the intern-teacher/the newly employed teacher and the features of the communication between them. 2. Summarizing and analysing these opinions and drawing conclusions regarding the professional

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communication's specifics in the course of mentorship and the opportunities for improving this communication as a requirement for a good reception and support for the young people in the teacher's profession.

The main research *method* is the survey. The target group of the study are the teacher that are mentoring inter-teachers and newly employed teachers in the educational institutions: kindergartens and schools. The questionnaire was developed in line with the defined research tasks in order to explore in detail the communicative characteristics of mentorship that influence the mentoring teachers' motivation and willingness to work; their own professional behaviour; and their attitude towards the other stakeholders in the overall mentorship organization and the results reached. We were also interested in the respondents' opinion on the main features of mentorship, professional qualification and trust relationships in the process of adaptation to the profession given the importance of these all for the effectiveness of the transition between the higher education and the institutions from the system of secondary education. The questions aimed at studying the main aspects of conversation and interaction with the young teachers. Contentwise, they also pointed at a certain kind of self-assessment on the preparedness for mentorship, which – on its own part – corresponds to the opportunities to effectively manage the role of a mentor.

For conducting the survey, we opted for the commonly used for on-line surveys *Likert scale*. The respondents' answers (statements) are being classified in five levels of agreement: strongly disagree; rather disagree; no definite opinion; rather agree; strongly agree. Unlike questions that require short and clear yes or no answer, this procedure allows for gathering more precise information from the respondents, namely – it allows for assessing the different levels of agreement or disagreement. Through the added option for open-ended responses, the participants in the research have been given the chance to express their perspectives and to share freely opinions that were not included in the questionnaire, the presumption being that the later may direct our attention to important practical aspects of the communication between the young teachers and their mentors.

The participants in the survey are 69 teacher mentors. The more significant **demographic characteristics** of this group are: 1) the number of women prevails over the number of men – 97,1% of the respondents are women, and only 2,9% are men; 2) with view to their work place – 37,7% are those who work at schools, and the rest 60,9% work at kindergartens; 3) these educational institutions are situated in different settlements: 27,5% are in big cities; 21,7% are in smaller towns and 2,9% are in villages; 4) with view to the respondents' educational and qualification status – the holders of Master's degree are 75,4% and those who hold Bachelor's degree are 23,2%; 5) among the respondents those with professional qualification 'kindergarten and primary school teacher' prevail; 6) according to the position that the respondents are appointed at, the shares are distributed as follows: 45 senior teachers; 7 chief teachers and 7 directors and other position in the secondary education system; 7) the respondents' pedagogical experience varies between the legislatively set norm of 10 years to more than 30 years where the greatest share is this of the teacher-mentors with 21 to 30 years of professional experience – 40,6%.

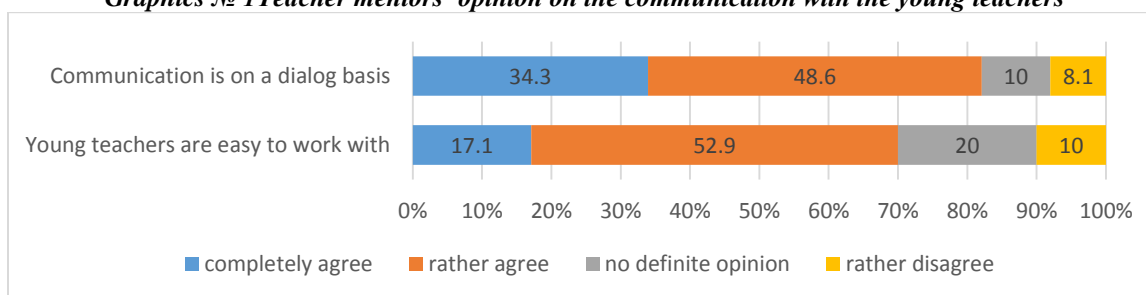
#### 4. ANALYSYS OF THE RESULTS

For the purpose of more clarity, the discussion provisionally splits the results from the survey into three groups: the teacher mentors' assessment on the communication with the young teachers; their assessment of their own behaviour in the context of this communication; and the requirements for successful communication in the process of professional interaction through the perspective of the mentors.

According to the responses of the first group of questions, the mentors assess mostly positively the communication with the young people in the teacher's profession. 59.9% of the respondents rather agree, and 17.1% of them completely agree with the statement that young teachers are easy to work with. This positivity is a good prerequisite for successful cooperation. Our observations show that when experienced teachers are willing and even eager to work with their new colleagues, they tend not to face difficulties. The easiness they feel while communication with the young teachers results from their experience and the communicative skills they have acquired as professionals. These observations of ours are further confirmed by the large share of positive responses on the questions of the dialogic basis of communication – 81.9%. The mentors who are highly motivated to work with the young professionals regard this dialogic basis as especially important within the context of working on the conceptual design of pedagogical situations in the kindergarten or lessons in school (according to the respondents' place of employment). In this form of dialog, pedagogical skilfulness meets eagerness for achieving success; the well-established practice meets the boldness of new ideas; the routine meets the discovery. This process deserves special attention exactly because it is within it where development happens: the mentors enrich their experience and the young people build their teacher's skills, the pedagogical practice develops, and the teacher's professions looks for its continuation. However, the cross-generational professional dialog is not easy. Its successfulness requires effort and this could be the reason why 10% of all the mentors hesitate how to answer this particular question and even 8.1% of them rather disagree. Teachers tend to turn dialog into monolog and they often have arguments about it:

they have to teach, to mentor. This responsibility of theirs has found expression in the shared assessment on another theme: 10% of the respondents rather disagree that working with intern teachers or newly employed teachers is an easy task. This assessment may be grounded in their feeling of generation differences. Another factor of influence here could be of purely personal character: in their long practice as mentors, they have probably met a number of young people (among the teachers who work with students there are professionals with more than 25 years of experience as mentors) with different level of preparedness and professional skills as well as communicative skills and this may be the reason why 20% of the respondents have no definite opinion on the matter.

**Graphics № 1** Teacher mentors' opinion on the communication with the young teachers

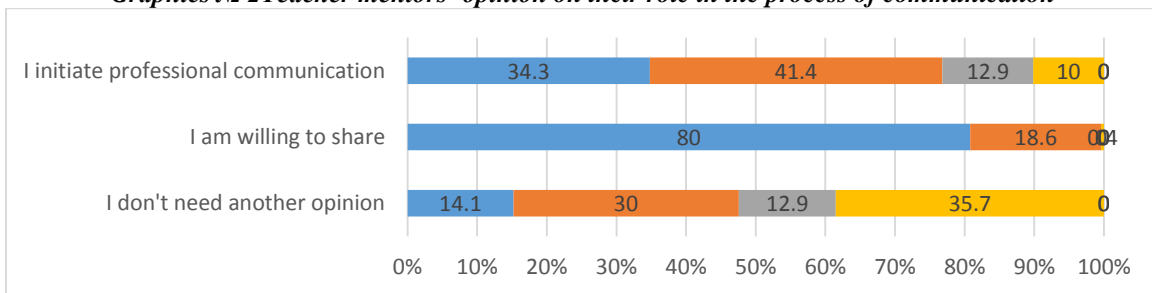


From what has been said so far, it is clear that teacher-mentors have developed certain sense of professional self-reflection together with gaining pedagogical experience. They carefully analyse their own position in the process of mentorship and responsibly assess their communication with the young colleagues. Alongside with the definitiveness in putting the professional dialog in the core of the communication (*see Graphics № 1*), they also definitely see themselves in the role of imitators when communicating with the young professionals: 34.3% completely agree and 41.4% rather agree with this statement. The practice shows that teacher mentors feel responsible for creating suitable conditions and provoking discussion on professional issues with the less experienced colleagues. This they regard as introductory steps in getting towards knowing the profession and the educational institution. 12.9% of the teacher mentors have chosen the 'no definite opinion' option here, 10% rather disagree and even 1.4% of them completely disagree with the statement that the initiative has to be theirs. Our participation in the internship programme of students shows us that there are cases in which the mentors are willing to let the youngsters have the initiative. The analysis of this behaviour indicates either higher level of initiative and autonomy on the side of the intern, or democratic style of interaction on the side of the mentor. In each of the described cases, however, the teacher-mentors are positive on stating that they are willing to share everything they know and can with the intern teachers/the newly employed teachers (*see Graphics № 2*). 1.4% of the respondents rather disagree with this statement and perhaps these are exactly the mentors that are also willing to easily let the new colleagues have the leading role in the interaction.

Although most of the mentors share similar opinions on their own behaviour in their mentoring role, their responses on the question whether they need external perspective on this behaviour vary. The wide range of the responses on this matter deserves detailed discussion. Almost 40% of the respondents rather disagree with the statement that when they are convinced in what they are doing, they do not need others' opinion on that. They know that one more opinion is always of help. To this group we may add another 7.1% who completely disagree, and also those 12.9% who argue that circumstances differ and their opinion depends on these differences. 44.3% of the mentor teachers consider their extensive professional experience enough of a reason not to look for external assessments when there are convinced in the rightness of their own one. Probably they are the multiple effective professional decisions that they have taken over the years that gives them ground to rely on what is 'verified in practice', but the world around us changes. Our children change as well. It is necessary to revise and reconsider well-established mechanisms for action. Perhaps a step back is needed to look for an answer to the question of how this corresponds to the eagerness of these same teachers to initiate dialog and to give due importance to professional sharing. And also we can ask whether the widely diffused responses to this question are not just an expression of the teachers' struggle to defend their own professional achievements from years of experience? This question remains open for discussion and could possibly even be addressed by another research. For the aims of the current research is relevant to just point at the fact that mentor teachers definitely need special training for mentorship. The pedagogical specialists, that are currently serving as mentors, seem to rely solely on their own intuition and their sincere desire to help the young colleagues. This is not enough. The diffused and even contradictory responses give us ground to assume that it is not

sufficient for the mentor teachers to rely just on their experience but they should be provided with preliminary training that is mandatory and well maintained. In this way, the process of mentorship will be refined and organized.

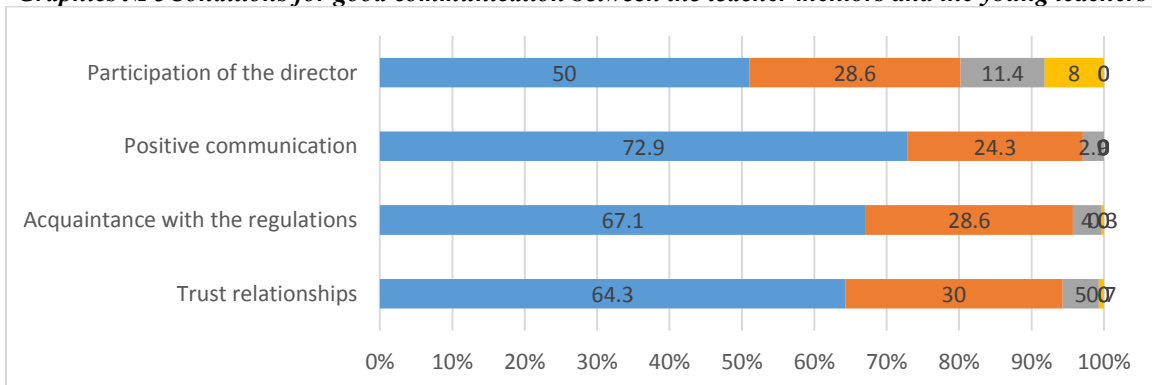
**Graphics № 2** *Teacher mentors' opinion on their role in the process of communication*



50% of the experiences teachers regard the role of the educational institution's director as key for the good organization of the phase of introduction of young teachers to the profession; and 28.6% rather agree with that claim. 11.4% of the respondents have no definite opinion about the question of whether the director facilitates the effective communication between the mentor teacher and the intern-teacher/newly employed teacher, whereas 10% of the responses fall into the negative scale (see Graphics № 3). From the position of a manager, the director has the obligation "to manage the educational process in the institution with in accordance with the national policy in the sphere of education and to plan, organize, coordinate, control and be responsible for the administrative and the financial activities in the institution" [1]. Thus, he/she created the necessary organization for implementation of all activities. The effective manager has as his first and most important concern the care for the people in the organization. The adaptation of the new teachers to the profession is also to be perceived as part of the future development of the institution. An existing overarching organizational culture presupposes good adaptation and good communication between the employees.

All said so far just confirms the director's role for affirming positive communication in the team, incl. with its new members. Even though this role in the context of mentorship has not been studied in sufficient detail, we are justified in assuming here that this role is basic in character. The quality of professional communication stays in direct relation to the director's managing skills to work with the employees, and the professional communication, on its own turns, is directly related to the smooth adaptation of the young teachers. Here also lies the reason why mentor teachers claim that the director facilitates the effective communication. It possible the fact of not-good-enough communication with the young teachers to mirror the non-good-enough communication within the organization on the whole and even to be a sign for non-good-enough organizational culture. According to the legislative framework in the field of education, the creation of the necessary conditions for practical training and independent inclusion of the young teachers in the educational process includes generation of information about the teachers and the children in the institution and also the issuing of normative documents for organization of the activity [1]. The director is responsible for the activities' regulation and regulation. If there are clear and commonly accepted work rules, then there is also good interaction between the employees. The opinion of the respondents in this survey confirms these observations. 95.1% of them completely agree or rather agree with the statement that knowing and understanding the educational institution's inner regulations helps the effective professional communication.

**Graphics № 3** *Conditions for good communication between the teacher mentors and the young teachers*



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The established rules for work in the organization and the good management are supposed to count among the necessary requirements for good communication between the young teachers and their mentors. Other requirements for good professional communication are positive interaction and trust relationships. The respondents definitely agree with this: 97.2% of them see the positive interaction between the mentor teacher and the intern-teacher/newly employed teacher as encouraging and of support for the successful adaptation in the professional community. Positive interaction requires the existence of trust relationships. 64.3% of the mentors think that these are of key importance for their successful communication with the new teachers, and another 30% rather agree on the matter. Just 5.7% of the respondents disagree. Perhaps these are the people who regard trust as a consequence of proven qualities and this explains their reserves when it comes to giving trust in advance. However, we need to have in mind here that the young teacher will feel supported and included only when he/she is treated with trust and the interaction with him/her is positive and professional. There is the possibility that the doubts expressed originate from interpersonal relationships between certain two participants in the process. Our own experience in the practical training of students shows that it is possible for a natural mutual non-acceptance to occur which makes the good working together impossible. In this case, any additional measures for overcoming the situation would be violent and ineffective. The best solution would be appointing another mentor.

The organizational aspect of the communication in the process of mentorship reflects the objectively outlined frame of interaction. It is also present in the already cited above Decree-Law on the status and the professional development of teachers, directors and other pedagogical specialists, as well as in the educational documentation of the training institutions – the universities. The legislative regulations require management, consultations and provision of support from the side of the mentor to make possible the independent participation of the young teacher. All this presupposed good communication, but does not call in an imperative way for a two-sided engagement and activity. The same activity that – according to the survey – holds a key place in the communication in the process of mentorship is also of importance for reaching the goals. The mentor teachers are motivated professionals who are willing to perform their mentoring role in the best possible way and to share their professional experience. They naturally expect the same commitment from the intern-teachers and the newly employed teachers in performing his/her respective role of a learner in the context of professional training and adaptation to the requirements of the professional environment. The teacher mentors generally see communication as good. They strive to build trust relationships and expect the help of the authority body when needed and also they require the existence of clear rules that contribute to the positive interaction and productive dialog for approving the practical skills and inspiration for staying in the profession.

*The most important prerequisites for achieving effective communication* in the process of mentorship, the mentors arrange in the following way: 1) professional trust; 2) mutual respect; 3) positivism; 4) motivation; 5) positive environment; 6) dialog and understanding; 7) knowledge; 8) teamwork; 9) preliminary preparation; 10) responsibility.

*The respondents' own conclusions* are:

- ✓ about the prerequisites: “There should be mutual acceptance. No time or efforts should be saved from working. The participants should feel no discomfort in any of the conversations that they are having.”
- ✓ About the communication: “Good communication always have two sides. It is successful when we look in the same direction.”

## 5. CONCLUSION

Professional communication is a special form of social communication. It is dynamic, diverse and ever developing in nature. The people who engage in it, should be prepared for their participation. The art of mentorship needs mentor teachers who possess the necessary professional qualification, but also communicative skills. In this way the mentor will feel more confident in providing a smooth transition between the university and the educational institution, and the mentee will adapt to the requirements of the professional environment and will choose to stay in the profession.

## LITERATURE

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