

## PRECONDITONS FOR SUCCESSFUL MENTORING IN THE COURSE OF TRAINING TEACHERS AND INTRODUCING THEM TO THE PROFESSION

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**Abstract:** The beginning teacher's transition from the university to the educational institution is a complex and dynamic process. In the time of generational change, expectations concerning this activity are burdened with high public responsibility and various issues. The Bulgarian educational system nowadays needs not only motivated novice teachers, but also good mentors who will support the early career teachers' successful adaptation and socialization into the professional community. The paper considers mentorship as one of the forms of practical training where the mentor teacher has a leading part. Productive interaction and fruitful communication between the mentor and the mentee can be preconditioned by their attitudes and expectations for one another. This study seeks answers to questions such as what the mentor teachers' attitudes and expectations with regard to the mentees are, how information about these attitudes and expectations could influence the professional preparation of trainee teachers and how it could optimize and improve the process concerning the beginning teachers' transition from the university to the educational institutions. For this purpose, a survey employing the respondents' method has been carried out, involving 68 teachers.

The topic is examined from an organizational aspect and conclusions have been drawn in respect of improving and optimizing the organization of the mentorship from our position of university lecturers involved in organizing and conducting the practical training of trainee teachers.

**Keywords:** mentor teacher, expectations, attitudes, professional profile.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The teacher's profession – which is the foundation of all other professions – is an 'eternal' one. Society is unthinkable without teachers to pass on knowledge and to bridge experience between the generations. As directing subjects in the educational context, they are responsible for the tuition, the schooling and the development of children and adolescents. The teaching profession dynamically develops together with the development of the society, content- and functioning-wise. In general terms, it is the connection between the needs of the society and the expectations towards the teacher that defines the essence, the character and the quality of the teachers' training and qualification. The modernization of contemporary educational systems results naturally from the existence of effective systems for professional-pedagogical training of the future teachers. Mentorship is among the forms of practical training in which the teacher-mentor has a leading role. In actual teaching environment, he or she reveals to the intern-teachers the secrets and the challenges laying ahead becoming in this way a major factor for their successful training, upcoming adaptation and staying in the profession. Mutual attitudes and expectations are of key importance for the effective interaction and fruitful communication between the teacher-mentor and the intern-teacher.

What are the teacher-mentors' attitudes and expectations towards the intern-teachers; how the information about these affects the future teachers' professional-pedagogical training and how could it be used to optimize and refine the transition process between the higher education (university) and the educational institutions (kindergartens and schools); these are the questions that this study seeks to answer.

### 2. DIMENSIONS OF THE TEACHER-MENTOR'S PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

A core aspect of obtaining the professional qualification of a 'teacher' is the interaction and the cooperation between the training institution (the higher education institution) and the educational institution, which provides the student-future teacher with real educational environment where he or she can apply in practice the acquired theoretical knowledge [1]. Successful implementation is linked necessarily to the concrete responsibilities of the people

engaged in a certain activity and the ongoing rationalization of the activity. In this case, the responsibility is shared between the university professor, the teacher-mentor and the intern-teacher. The logic of this training process – which final aim is ‘practical successfulness’ – calls for a special emphasis on the role of the teacher-mentor. He or she maintains a high-level professional competence and, therefore, deserves a prestigious role in the training of the future teacher. Whereas regulated mentorship is a rather new conception in our educational system, providing professional support for the young teachers is already a good and approved practice. “It is widely accepted that a mentor should be somebody more experienced and older, whose model could be copied. The tradition of an experienced and wise person to support and encourage the personal development of another person is a legit one in many spheres of life in the contemporary world of ours. In a number of cases this leads to perpetuating the old, well-proven methods for achieving diversity and sustainable development” [4]. Studying the nature and the functions of contemporary mentoring, B. Schmidt develops the understanding of a ‘tutor’ (‘mentor’) as a leader or consultant, who thanks to his/her experience and acquirements helps the development of those under his/her tutorage [2]. Possessing professional experience is just one among other preconditions for successful tutorage. Being a certain type of interpersonal relationship, successful mentorship importantly requires also objectivity; trust; honesty; reliability and confidentiality. The high professional level of interaction between the newly employed teacher and his/her tutor determines the successfulness of the first steps in the profession [3].

In accordance with Decree-Law No. 12 of 1 September 2016 on the status and the professional development of teachers, directors and other pedagogical specialists (Bulgarian State Gazette No. 75 of 27 September 2016), the teacher-mentor is a pedagogical specialist appointed to the position of ‘senior teacher’ or ‘chief teacher’. This requirement serves as a guarantee that only pedagogical specialists with solid experience and proved professional competence would work for the future teachers’ practical training. The basic principle for the teacher-mentor’s participation in the mentorship process is volunteering.

Every teacher-mentor is solely responsible for the organization of the practical training of the intern-teacher under his/her tutorage, as well as for the process of his/her actual introducing and adapting to the teaching environment in the educational institution. The scope of the mentor’s activities includes preliminary preparation with regard to the presentation of the institution and the documentation; presentation of own pedagogical experience; provision of methodical and organizational support for the intern-teacher; introduction to the practical work with the parents; control and evaluation of the intern-teacher’s performance.

The anticipated effectiveness of the interaction between the participants in the transition ‘higher education – educational institution’ is determined to a considerable extent by each partner’s motivation and willingness to get fully and openly involved. According to the psychologists, motivation and willingness to participate in a certain activity depends strongly on attitudes and expectations. These also influence the professional communication between the participants. The impact that attitudes have on each activity is direct and substantive as attitudes represent building blocks for the motivation and the personal perspective to this activity.

Are teacher-mentors predisposed to work with their young colleagues and to act as leaders in the process of their successful transition to the teaching profession? Do they believe in the young teachers? Are they willing to share their knowledge and experience? Do they feel confident in doing so? What disturbs them? Do they have a vision for the process and its result? There are all questions that we seek to answer for they are not just in the basis of successfully implementing the role of a ‘mentor’, but also because they have their fair share of influence on human faiths and the future of education overall.

### 3. RESEAERCH METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted within the general framework of an inter-university project of the *Vratsa Branch of St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo (Bulgaria)*. It took place between May and July 2018 and the data was gathered by means of an on-line questionnaire. *Object* of this research are the intern-teachers’ mentors and the newly employed in educational institutions teachers’ mentors. The *subject* are their attitudes and expectations seen as preconditions for successful mentorship of intern-teachers and newly employed teachers. The *goal* of the research is to study the teacher-mentors’ attitudes and expectations towards the transition process ‘higher education – educational institution’ in the context of the current public expectations and legislative regulations. The goal is operationalized through the following *research tasks*: 1) Study of the teacher-mentors’ opinions about their expectations and attitudes for accomplishing successful interaction with the intern-teachers and the newly employed

teachers in the process of mentorship. 2) Aggregation, analysis and conclusions concerning the process of successful mentorship and the opportunities for its optimization.

The *main research method* is a survey done through a questionnaire. The *target group* of the study are the teacher-mentors of intern-teachers and newly employed teachers in the educational institutions. The questionnaire – with respect to the defined tasks – is focused on the teacher-mentors’ attitudes and expectations that influence their motivation and willingness to work; their own professional behavior; and their relation to the other participants in the overall organization of mentorship and the achieved results. We are also interested in the respondents’ opinion on the major aspects of mentorship, professional preparedness and trust relationships in the process of adaptation to the profession with regard to their significance for the effectiveness of the transition ‘higher education – educational institutions. The questions target essential aspects of implementing mentorship and interacting with young teachers. Content-wise, they are also related to a self-assessment of the readiness for work, which is on its own term corresponds to the teacher-mentors’ capacity to deal with their role.

For the needs of this study, the commonly used for on-line surveys *Likert scale* has been employed. The respondents’ answers/statements have been 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/no’ answer, this type of answers 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 teachers’ attitude and expectations.

The number of teacher-mentors who participated in the survey is 68 According to the more significant **demographic characteristics**: 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

The first group of questions concerns the teacher-mentors’ expectations about the theoretical and administrative competence of the young teachers. According to the opinions of the respondents, the greater share of the interns and the newly employed teachers possess the theoretical background needed for implementing the duties of a teacher – 46% of the answers are in the positive scale. The strictness requires adding here that it is always related to particular individuals and this seems to be the reason why small portion of the respondents have answered that it is hard to generalize.

*Table 1. Distribution of the teacher-mentors’ opinions about the theoretical training of the young teachers*

Completely disagree	Rather disagree	No definite opinion	Rather agree	Completely agree
8,7%	31,9%	8,7%	36,2%	11,6%

Notably, 41% of the respondents have answered that the level of theoretical competence of the young teachers is not high enough. This worrisome finding may be interpreted as a reflection of the generally shared opinion of the low quality of education overall or – on particular personal observation. This expectation of the mentor may provoke in him/her greater engagement towards upgrading the knowledge of the intern or the newly employed teachers. The latter assumption is grounded in the fact that negative opinions on this matter regard mainly the intern-teachers, and the internship is naturally related to upgrading and concretizing theoretical knowledge and practical skills (*Table 1*). A great share of the respondents is on the negative scale on the matter of young teachers’ working with the legislation in the sphere of education – 44,9% of the teacher-mentors disagree and 24,6% completely disagree (*Table 2*).

*Table 2. Distribution of the teacher-mentors' opinions about the young teachers' familiarity with the educational legislation; Distribution of the teacher-mentors' opinion on the young teachers' acquaintance with the educational and school documentation*

Completely disagree	Rather disagree	No definite opinion	Rather agree	Completely agree
24,6%	44,9%	10,1%	14,5%	5,8%
21,7%	36,2%	10,1%	14,5%	5,8%

Even though approx. 20% of the respondents have given positive answers, this question deserves careful analysis from the perspective of the practical aspect of the students' training and their opportunities to get familiar with the legislative regulations as a condition for fulfilling successfully the teacher's work in the long run.

The opinions about the young teachers' familiarity with the educational and school documentation and their skills to work with it are similar. The position that both the interns and the newly employed teachers are not familiar enough with the documentation and they lack practical skills to work with it prevails. Although the share of 36,2% negative opinions is not definitive, it is nevertheless enough of a reason to assume that a certain deficiency in the professional training of the students has been found (Table 2). The teacher-mentors' opinions reflect the claim that the intern-teachers and the newly employed teachers are familiar with their rights and obligations – approx. 55% of the answers are within the positive part of the scale (Table 3).

*Table 3. Distribution of the teacher-mentors' opinions about the young teachers' familiarity with their rights and obligations*

Completely disagree	Rather disagree	No definite opinion	Rather agree	Completely agree
7,2%	18,8%	13%	42%	17,4%

The students are instructed purposefully about their practical rights and obligations at the beginning of their internship. This is likely to be the reason why their mentors do not expect them to be familiar with their professional rights and obligations prior to this instruction. This assumption finds further proof in conversations with students who admit to believe that exactly on the stage of their professional-practical training the content aspects of their work obligation and their personal rights as pedagogical specialist should be clarified. The teacher's functional characteristics consists in many different activities, incl. some referring directly to active participation in the life of the educational institution. Young teachers are well enough prepared for this function of theirs as the opinions of the teacher-mentors show: more than 70% of the respondents claim that young teachers participate actively in all the activities of the kindergarten or the school and their activity is well-received (Table 4).

*Table 4. Distribution of the teacher-mentors' opinions about the activity and the reception of young teachers in the educational institutions*

Completely disagree	Rather disagree	No definite opinion	Rather agree	Completely agree
4,3%	5,8%	13%	42%	34,8%

Managing the children's group in the kindergarten or the class in school represents a serious challenge for the young professionals and it predetermines to a considerable extent their later success as teachers. Although again not definitive, the respondents' answers on the matter speak for diversity of opinions: 34,8% of the respondents are willing to agree that this is a challenge for the future teachers whereas 37,7% are willing to disagree with the same claim; this goes for the shared complete agreement and disagreement as well (Table 5). With view to the mentors' responsibilities of the respondents, this proportion is distributed between the mentors of intern-teachers and those of newly employed teachers. This fact once again proves the usefulness of providing practical training in the university – for the period of the internship the professional skill for managing the group/the class develops and reinforces itself.

*Table 5. Distribution of the teacher-mentors' opinions about the difficulties of managing the children's group/the class before the young teachers*

Completely disagree	Rather disagree	No definite opinion	Rather agree	Completely agree
7,2%	37,7,8%	13%	34,8%	7,2%

A recent trend in pedagogical theory and practice is the promotion of building positive educational environment in cooperation with children's families. In the respondents' view, future teachers clearly lack skills for engaging parents as partners: more than 60% of the answers indicate this (Table 6). The certainty of this opinion stands in contradiction with the expectations towards children's satisfaction from communicating with the young teachers: more than 70% of the answers are positive on this matter (Table 6). There is general agreement that children like young teachers. The smaller age gap between the young teachers and the parents is another precondition for mutual

understanding. The development of the relevant practical skills is probably also a product of practice and experience.

*Table 6. Distribution of the teacher-mentors' opinions about the skills for building partner relationships with the parents; Distribution of the teacher-mentors' opinions about the children's satisfaction from communicating with the young teachers*

Completely disagree	Rather disagree	No definite opinion	Rather agree	Completely agree
20,3%	47,8%	14,5%	11,6%	4,3%
1%	8,7%	15,9%	46,4%	26,1%

It is quite impressive that the respondents regard future teachers as lacking the skills needed to work with special children: 40,3% of them are willing to rather agree with this claim, and another 19,4% express their complete disagreement. Only 30% of the respondent disagree with the claim (*Table 7*).

*Table 7. Distribution of the teacher-mentors' opinions about the young teachers' competence to work with children with special educational needs*

Completely disagree	Rather disagree	No definite opinion	Rather agree	Completely agree
20,3%	39,1%	13%	18,8%	7,2%

The experienced teachers appear to project their own insecurity about handling this problem on their younger colleagues. It is clear that the educational practice faces many difficulties in connection with the stable tendency of increasing the number of children with special educational needs and children at risk in the recent years. Teachers do not have the necessary competence to foster pedagogical interaction with the children falling within this category, as well as to manage the group/the class where these children are being educated. The last group of questions in the survey concerns the teacher-mentors' own willingness to participate in the process. The readiness to work with the young colleagues defines the quality of the work done to a considerable extent. In the respondents' opinion, they are executing their mentor's duties with willingness and they are doing it well: 52,2% of them completely agree with this, 29% opt for the 'rather agree' answer (*Table 8*).

*Table 8. Distribution of the teacher-mentors' opinions about their willingness to work and coping with their duties.*

Completely disagree	Rather disagree	No definite opinion	Rather agree	Completely agree
1,4%	1,4%	11,6%	29%	52,2%

The mentors' willingness to work contrasts with their opinion about the role of the financial stimulation and the way the latter is linked to the attractiveness of the mentoring work. The opinions here vary a lot. The greatest share of the respondents agree rather or completely, which results in 24,6% of the answers falling in each of these two options (*Table 9*).

*Table 9. Distribution of the teacher-mentors' opinions about the additional financial stimulation and its influencing the attractiveness of the mentorship.*

Completely disagree	Rather disagree	No definite opinion	Rather agree	Completely agree
13%	14,6%	11,6%	24,6%	24,6%

This position is perfectly logical, because people are justified in requiring payment for their work; in this case, however, it is quite impressive that about 50% of the respondents claim to think differently. 13% of them completely disagree that financial benefits are what makes mentorship attractive. These may be the teachers who believe that it is their duty to share what they have learned from their long teaching experience. The teachers who work as mentors without being paid for that – even though there are just a few of them – should also be included in this group. In fact, the greatest part of the teacher-mentors who work without any additional financial stimulations are those who work as mentors of newly employed teachers in the educational institutions. The mentors' responsible behaviour towards mentoring young teachers also finds expression in their opinion about the extra work load that they get in result of performing this task. Just 13% of the respondents claim not to agree. These are probably the teachers who find satisfaction in a 'job well done' and who feel pleased with and inspired by the professional communication with the young people. This is exactly what attracts them in mentorship (*Table 10*).

*Table 10. Distribution of the teacher-mentors' opinions about the additional responsibilities and work load*

Completely disagree	Rather disagree	No definite opinion	Rather agree	Completely agree
1,4%	11,6%	2,9%	33,3%	50,7%



All said so far is to be considered serious ground to accept that the high level of professionalism also means highly responsible behavior towards to the future, namely - towards those who are going to take in their hands, so to speak, the teacher's profession in the future. This statement finds proof in the respondents' answers on the matter. 50,7% of them claim to need to share their experience, and 36,2% are willing to agree with this possibility (*Table 11*).

*Table 11. Distribution of the teacher-mentors' opinions about their need to share their professional experience*

Completely disagree	Rather disagree	No definite opinion	Rather agree	Completely agree
1,4%	14,6%	8,7%	36,2%	50,7%

The students' professional-practical training is carried out with the active participation and the leading role of a professor from their higher educational institution (the university). The interaction between the professors and the mentors is crucial for linking theory to practice and for creating good conditions for a smooth transition. The respondents share this view – the prevailing 46,3% of them completely agree here.

*Table 12. Distribution of the teacher-mentors' opinions about the cooperation with the university professors*

Completely disagree	Rather disagree	No definite opinion	Rather agree	Completely agree
8,7%	5,8%	21,9%	13%	44,9%

Approx. 14% of the respondents claim not to expect any cooperation with the university professors, and 21,9% of them take neutral position. The explanation may be that they see themselves as particular and different aspect in the young teachers' training or rather that they regard theory and practical performance as not connected enough, but yet another plausible explanation may lay in these people's negative previous experience or even failures. The reasons for this situation needs further clarification, because the lack of teamwork between the university and the kindergarten/the school may cause serious difficulties for young teachers in the very beginning of their professional development. Another ground for looking for establishing productive communication is that during their practical training and the initial steps in the profession, young teachers acquire new knowledge that allows them to add to and widen their academic training. Over 80% of the respondents agree here (*Table 13*).

*Table 13. Distribution of the teacher-mentors' opinions about the additional theoretical training*

Completely disagree	Rather disagree	No definite opinion	Rather agree	Completely agree
1,4%	2,9%	8,7%	36,2%	47,8%

The shared opinion of the teacher-mentors finds concentrated expression in the main priorities with regard to their role as mentors that they themselves define in terms of: respect, support, encouragement, cooperation, patience and professionalism in sharing their experience and introducing young colleagues to the profession. The claims that respondents formulate to further describe their expectations and attitudes serve as a basis for defining the teacher-mentor's profile – personal and professional. It also serves to outline the need for special training before performing the role of a mentor in the educational context in order that the teacher-mentors' to be of maximum use to the young people who would like to enter and remain in the profession.

The teacher-mentors' expectations and attitudes, studied by means of this survey, regard both the intern-teachers and the mentors' own personal professional participation. When summarizing the results, we may distinguish between positives and difficulties. With regard to the intern-teachers the positives include good theoretical preparation; prerequisites for adding to their theoretical knowledge; acquaintance with the teacher's rights and responsibilities; high activity; also they are accepted well by the community and the children and the students are satisfied with them. As for the difficulties – those appear in the work with children with special educational needs and children at risk; skills for working with the parents; skills for managing the group/the class; insufficient level of acquaintance with the legislative regulations and inability to work with the educational and school documentation. Regarding the teacher-mentors' personal professional participation, the positives are expressed need for sharing gained professional experience; cooperation with university professors; motivation grounded internally and not on financial benefits; strong willingness for work and good results. And the difficulties – theory and practice are not always interwoven; payment is required for the work; on the stage of intern's practice the decision for mentorship is taken within the team.

This summary of the results turns the attention to particular conclusion about improving the transition between the school and the university: close cooperation between the representatives of the secondary school and the higher

education institutions is a must; continuous upgrading of the students' curriculums and programs in answer of the dynamics of the practice; organization of meetings and workshops for the participants to get to know each other; setting common rules for action and building expectations and attitudes to provoke positive motivation in the participants.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The mentors are the transmission between the university and the school, and mentorship requires extra work on the behalf of the teachers as well as a high level of personal and professional engagement. It is a serious responsibility to the future and expression of respectful attitude towards one's own professional achievements.

Mentorship could be experienced as form of development; as form of satisfaction and inspiration. The teachers devoted to this mission understand this. Their expectations and attitudes, however, should not be neglected for there are an important precondition for fruitful involvement in the process. Studying and analyzing these expectations and attitudes is a valuable source of information for improving the processes and the interaction in the course of the young teachers' training and first steps in the profession.

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