

THE POWER OF THE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN MENTOR TEACHERS AND BEGINNING TEACHERS FOR EFFECTIVE INTEGRATION TO THE TEACHING PROFESSION (FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF BEGINNING TEACHERS)

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Abstract: This paper contains the results of a study on beginning teachers' views regarding the role of the professional communication between mentor teachers and beginning teachers for effective induction and integration to the teaching profession. The study was conducted in within "The Art of Mentoring the Transition from University to Educational Institutions" research project of Vratsa branch of St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo. The first steps in a career (the induction), is a period of support aimed at the seamless introduction of the new recruits into a profession. Typically, at the start of their career in the teaching profession (first 1-3 years), beginning teachers are full of optimism, enthusiasm, dedication, ready to make a difference. But the induction period which is time of positive energy also turns out to be the most difficult and critical period of a beginning teachers professional life. During this early stage of teaching, new teachers suffer the pressure of high public expectations, disappointment from unmet expectations and frustration that ultimately result into leaving the profession. High attrition rates among beginning teachers is a global problem which causes huge economic cost to educational institutions and indicates the need of adequate support for new teachers. Effective induction is the best means for reducing attrition rates among beginning teachers during the early stage of their careers. Furthermore, high quality induction provides beginning teachers with the kind of support that may not only help them survive and stay, but may also help them thrive in the profession. It requires strong supportive school climate and high-quality mentoring. Of all support providing approaches, mentorship is the most effective one. The effectiveness of mentoring is in the power of man-to-man connection. The relationship between a mentor and a mentee is a strong professional relation. The most significant aspect of any relationships – no matter if they are personal or professional - is communication. Professional communication encompasses different forms of communication (written, oral, visual, digital) within a workplace context. Communication between mentor teachers and beginning teachers is the essence of mentorship. It plays an important role for the effective integration of the early career teacher to the profession as well as in building quality teachers. The mentor teacher's role is to guide the new teacher by providing methodological support thus stimulating the beginning teacher's professional enhancement and career development. Beginning teachers, however, are not only passive receivers of support and guidance, but active contributors to their induction and co-responsible for their own professional growth. The communication with a more experienced veteran teacher can be a motivating and inspiring example for the beginning teacher.

Keywords: beginning teacher, mentor teacher, communication, support, induction, attrition, integration to the teaching profession.

1. INTRODUCTION

The first steps in a career (the induction), is a period of support aimed at the seamless introduction of new teachers into the teaching profession. Typically, at the start of their career in the teaching profession (first 1-3 years), beginning teachers are full of optimism, enthusiasm, dedication, ready to make a difference. But the induction period is at the same time the most difficult and critical period of a beginning teacher's career. During this early stage of teaching, new teachers suffer the pressure of high public expectations, disappointment from unmet expectations and frustration that ultimately result into leaving the profession. Effective induction is the best means for reducing attrition rates among beginning teachers during the early stage of their careers. Furthermore, high quality induction provides beginning teachers with the kind of support that may not only help them survive and stay, but may also help them thrive in the profession. It requires strong supportive school climate and high-quality mentoring.

Of all support providing approaches for effective integration into the teaching profession, mentorship has proved to be a most effective one. The effectiveness of mentoring is in the power of man-to-man connection. The relationship

between a mentor and an inductee is a strong professional relation. The most significant aspect of any relationships – no matter if they are personal or professional - is communication. Communication between mentor teachers and beginning teachers is the essence of mentoring and good communication is the cornerstone of successful mentorship. The effectiveness of a mentoring relationship is due to the connection between the partners which should be collaborative and mutually active. Mentors and mentees are partners who should collaborate with each other, act in harmony working toward common goals.

Professional communication encompasses different forms of communication within a workplace context. Good communication skills are recognised as one of the key attributes of an effective mentor. Effective mentor teachers are good communicators who are genuinely committed to supporting the development of others thus facilitating their integration into the teaching profession.

Communication is the flow of information between people. It could be verbal or non-verbal with several subtypes: open-closed, positive – negative, effective – ineffective. Open communication implies the expression of ideas from all parties involved allowing people to be more engaged and understand that what they do matters in the successful outcome. Modelling open communication in leadership is the starting point for open communication in a whole organization. Openness and clear communication in a mentoring relationship can help to build mutual understanding and trust and demonstrate respect for each other. In positive communication all parties involved feel that they are heard, they feel free to raise concerns and speak freely without fear of negative consequences. Communication is effective when all parties feel they have reached a desired outcome. Effective communication drives partners in mentorship in the same direction towards common goal. Mentoring relationship based on open, positive and effective communication takes time and effort from partners but this is what makes a trusting partnership. Forming a trusting relationship with beginning teacher is of paramount importance. When trust has been established, problems and difficulties can be faced and dealt with ease and effectiveness. Factors that promote trust in a relationship arise out of a sense of mutual respect and recognition of each other's strengths and differences.

According to the Bulgarian State Educational Standard (SES) for the Status and Development of Teachers, Head Teachers and other Pedagogical Specialists, mentor teachers are the ones who support new teachers in the process of their adaptation to the teaching profession and assist them methodically and / or administratively in performing their duties. It is required that a mentor teacher should possess experience and the rank "Senior teacher" or "Chief teacher". The competency profile of an experienced teacher requires communicative skills both as a key competence and as a means for building professional communication with colleagues, which allows "constructive professional relationships" and helps them "provide methodological and organizational support to new teachers" (Naredba 15, 2019). The communicative skills of the mentor teacher are an important characteristic not only in the performance of his/her direct duties, but also in the interaction with beginning teachers.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The current survey is organized using an online completion form.

The object of the research is beginning teachers in kindergartens and schools with professional experience up to 3 years.

The subject of the research is: the characteristic features of the communication between beginning teachers and mentor teachers as precondition for the successful integration of new recruits into the teaching profession.

The aim of the research is to outline the psychological and pedagogical characteristics of professional communication in educational institutions through the eyes of the beginning teachers as a prerequisite for successful professional integration.

The achievement of the aim is specified through the following **research tasks**:

1. Survey beginning teachers' opinions regarding their communication with mentor teachers as a prerequisite for effective interaction.
2. Survey the leading aspects of beginning teachers' professional readiness for professional communication as a condition for successful integration in the profession.
3. Summary, analysis and conclusions related to the communication process between mentors and beginning teachers

Survey is the main research method. The questionnaire, in accordance with the set tasks, is focused on the professional communication between beginning teachers and their mentors in the process of their integration in the teaching profession.

For the purposes of the research, the Likert scale was chosen, which is often used in online surveys. The answers / statements of the respondents are classified into 5 point: strongly disagree, disagree; undecided; agree; strongly agree. Unlike the questions that require a short and unambiguous answer yes / no, this type of answers allows for collecting more accurate information from the respondents, namely - different degrees of agreement or

disagreement. Questionnaire includes two open-ended questions allowing respondents to specify their opinions and to share ones on topics not covered by the questionnaire, which may point to important practical aspects in terms of professional communication between mentor teachers and their early career colleagues.

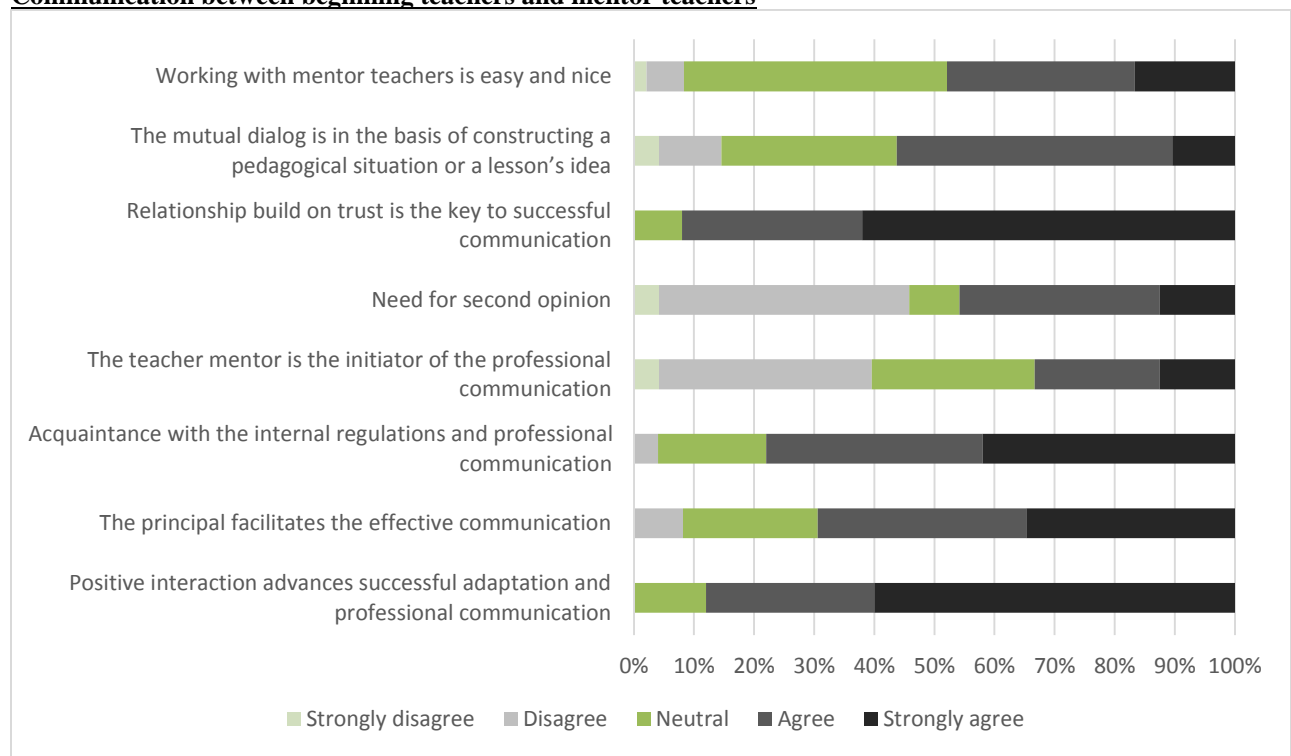
Participants in the survey are 50 beginning teachers with 1 to 3-year professional experience who work in kindergartens and schools. The most significant demographic characteristics of the respondents are as follows:

- women predominate - 94%, men are only 6%;
- with regard to the workplace, 52% are school teachers and the remaining 48% are kindergarten teachers;
- the educational institutions which are the respondents' working places are located in different settlements: 22% in a big city, 26% in a small town and 3% - in a village; 41% in big cities, 48% in small towns and 11% in villages;
- in terms of the educational and qualification degree, 52 % of the respondent beginning teachers hold Bachelor degree, 44% hold Master degree; 4 % are Professional Bachelors;
- most of the respondents - 67% - have graduated with a major in "Pre-school and primary school education" and the rest of the majors are presented as follows: Primary school education, Pre-school education, Primary school education and foreign language, Bulgarian language and history, Psychology;
- the pedagogical experience of the respondents is up to 3 years - 54% are in their first year at the time of completing the survey, 20% have 2 years of experience and 26% have 3 years of work experience;
- 52% of the respondents work on a permanent employment contract, 47% - on a temporary employment contract and 2% of them work as replacements. A contract of indefinite duration such as the permanent employment contract, gives the employee security and is a good basis for professional development. The answers of the respondents testify that beginning teachers receive their permanent employment contract after their second working year as a teacher. Probably this fact explains why large percentage of them makes their way to another profession.

It is noteworthy that 74% of the respondents started working one or two years after graduation. Predominantly, they are holders of a Master degree. It can be considered that this is understood by them as an opportunity for increased competitiveness and an opportunity for retention in the profession.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Communication between beginning teachers and mentor teachers



The questionnaire, in accordance with the tasks, focuses on the respondents' opinions on the leading aspects of mentorship and professional communication "mentor teacher - beginning teacher"

The analysis of the results obtained in the survey provides serious grounds for reflection on the communication of experienced mentor teachers with new teachers. Only 16% of the participants in the survey strongly agree with the

definitely positive statement "Working with mentors is easy and nice." The other assessments fluctuate, albeit in the positive scale of possible answers – 30 % agree. Quite a big part (42%) of the respondents, however, does not have definite opinion on the question. A possible explanation of these figures might be the lack of quality mentoring based on high-quality communication and interpersonal relationships. The problem with many educational institutions in Bulgaria is that their mentors are not part of a mentoring program. The mentor is a veteran teacher (senior or chief teacher) assigned by the principal, with a full-time load and with little or no special training. Mentor teachers should have the knowledge, skills and understanding necessary to establish good communication which will allow them to carry out their responsibilities effectively.

The preparation and design of a pedagogical situation or lesson is the focus of professional communication between new teachers and their mentors. Only 10% of the respondent beginning teachers categorically state that the conceptual construction of a pedagogical situation / lesson is on a dialogical basis between the beginning teacher and the mentor, and another 44% rather agree with this statement. These figures show that a total of just over half of the respondents received pedagogical and methodological support in planning and designing the lesson / pedagogical situation. It is a fact of concern that 28% of respondents do not have a definite opinion on the matter, and another 10% rather disagree. This means that more than 1/3 of the new teachers have not received adequate and quality support from a mentor, i.e. there is a deficit in professional communication. A possible option to overcome these deficits is to create professional learning communities where beginning teachers work in a team with not just one but with several experienced colleagues. According to Wong "The best induction programs provide connection because they are structured within learning communities where new and veteran teachers interact and treat each other with respect and are valued for their respective contributions. Teachers remain in teaching when they belong to professional learning communities that have, at their heart, high-quality interpersonal relationships founded on trust and respect." (Wong, 2004).

The categorical assessment of the place of the trusting relations in the professional communication of mentors with their beginning colleagues is impressive – 60 % strongly agree and 30 % agree that a relationship built on trust is the key to successful professional communication. Undoubtedly, in the respondents' opinion communication in a mentoring relationship should be based on trust in order for beginning teachers to feel at ease with their mentors in such a way that they are not ashamed to ask for advice when faced with difficulties. Asking for help when faced with problems is not a sign of incompetence but rather a sign of growing up to professional maturity level.

Beginning teachers are convinced of the need for someone else's professional opinion regarding their first steps in the profession not only in cases of problems arisen. "When I am convinced that I do something right, I do not need someone else's opinion." About 48% of respondents disagree with the statement while another 44% approve such an idea. It is always a good idea to ask for feedback and another perspective. This is a good way to encourage open communication and demonstrate respect for the other partner since they can see things that you can't.

It is noteworthy the division of opinions regarding the initiative in professional communication. More than a third (38%) of the respondents believes that the initiative does not belong to the mentors only and probably see opportunities in which the initiative belongs to them. These are mainly the holders of a Master degree, who have logically acquired better professional self-confidence as a result of their upgraded education. About one third of the respondents (32%) agree that the professional communication is initiated by the mentors. However, 26% of the respondents do not have a firm opinion on the question. It can be considered that these are new teachers who already have their professional opinion about various issues, but still do not have the necessary self-confidence (or perhaps arguments) to take the initiative in the professional communication with experienced colleagues.

The internal regulations of educational institutions should create preconditions and conditions for good professional communication between employees. It is noteworthy that 78% of respondents agreed that knowing and following internal rules set the guidelines for new people in the team and point to the desired interactions. The share of respondents who do not have an opinion on the issue is not small (18%) and those who strongly disagree (4%) have probably already formed their own ideas about the internal order and interactions between employees which is why they do not have the need to be familiar with the respective documentation.

"The principal facilitates the effective communication of mentor teachers with their beginning colleagues". The majority of the respondents (68%) agree with this statement", 8% disagree and 22 % are neutral. "As an employer, the principal consults, monitors and takes responsibility for the results of the interaction of the new teachers with their mentors"(Mihova & Kostadinova, 2019). People, who do not see the need for established regulations as conditions for good communication, do not take into account the role of the kindergarten director and the school principal as educational managers to facilitate good communication. It can be considered that this is the reason why teachers consider the heads of educational institutions mainly as a controlling body. Beginning teachers say that they would not share with principals any problems regarding the communication with their mentors and state the reasons for this: they will not find understanding.

Respondents (60% strongly agree and 20% agree) highly value the need for positive communication as an expression of encouragement and support for successful integration in the professional community. The lack of good communication is an expression of rejection, its absence is a serious obstacle for the new teachers and statistics shows that this is a reason for leaving the teaching profession.

In order to further refine the described results, the respondents were given the opportunity in free answers to share their ideas about the communication of beginning teachers with their mentors. The topic is obviously exciting for the new teachers since they willingly shared their views.

Beginning teachers readily reflect on the important prerequisites for successful professional communication. The three most important prerequisites according to them are: trust, mutual respect and patience. Other words that predominate the answers are: faith, patience, inspiration, responsibility, dialogue, cooperation, professional competence, feedback, equality, support, constructive dialogue, conscious responsibility, motivation.

According to the respondents, effective communication is determined by: sharing and discussion, openness and transparency, common language, listening skills, tolerance of different opinions. Three respondents use "open communication" in their answers.

They also rank the qualities of the successful mentor teacher as follows: 1. Proactive - asks, gives advice, attends classes, discusses, gives ideas, gives information about the context and more; 2. Benevolent - tolerant of "mistakes" - sees them as learning opportunities and a necessary step in the professional growth of the new teacher, gives constructive feedback and not just criticizes the beginning teacher with the only purpose to show how much he himself (as a mentor) is better; 3. Purposeful - sets goals according to the needs of the beginning teacher and draws up a plan of smaller steps to reach the goal (For example: the beginning teacher needs techniques / information on how to deal with challenging children, the mentor offers him various sources of information, meets him with colleagues who face the same challenges, but are more experienced and already have developed working techniques for dealing with such situations, etc.)

The fact that 8% of the surveyed beginning teachers categorically answer "I don't have a mentor" deserves attention. Probably they are generally disappointed with the welcoming to the team of the educational institution. Their opinion may also be decisive as to their retention in the profession.

Activities related to observing and analyzing the work of experienced mentors teachers are defined as attractive for beginning teachers. Neophytes wish to: 1. attend and observe classes of their experienced colleagues; 2. To get familiar with different aspects of their work experience; 3. To analyze successful practices, problem situations and difficulties.

According to the respondents, the collaboration of experienced and neophyte teachers should be characterized by teamwork, clear division of responsibilities and willingness to cope with difficulties.

Beginning teachers see their place in the process of good communication as a condition for successful adaptation and integration. They put in the first place their own willingness for integration in the profession, followed by: the ability to observe and draw their own conclusions and responsible attitude to work duties.

In beginning teachers' views, difficulties to effective communication arise from: 1. the insufficient time for professional communication with the mentor; 2. insufficient distribution of responsibilities; 3. the absence of proper conditions for professional communication such as regulations, a place suitable for conversations; 3. insufficient positive attitude and prejudice towards new teachers. In connection with problems to communication two respondents speak of "authoritarianism" and reflect on the acceptance of the new teacher as a competitor.

More than 1/3 of the respondents (35%) chose to answer the open -ended question "What else would you add in terms of mentor - beginning teacher communication?" These are some of the answers:

"Calm and positive work environment as well as good relations between the employees in the respective institution team", lay the foundations of the communication with the new teachers.

"Sometimes from the standpoint of experience, mentors give ready-made recipes and are reluctant to accept opinions different than theirs."

"In order to secure the effectiveness of the beginning teacher's as well as his own work, the mentor should guide - not offer ready-made material, give ideas - not implement them.

"Mentors willingly work with us from the standpoint of experience, but they should sometimes read something new."

"The mentor teacher should have fewer hours and administrative duties than other teachers."

"Very well thought out configuration, but it is not implemented in every school. At the school where I work, no one has ever provided any support to me."

"The mentor teacher should trust the beginning teacher, because the former may learn something new from latter."

5. CONCLUSIONS

Mentorship has a key role in building a quality teacher. It is an integral part of the new teacher's integration to the profession, of his/her professional development and continuous improvement. Mentoring is an integral part of the supportive environment, and positive communication between the mentor and the beginning teacher is encouraging and plays a key role in the successful adaptation and integration into the profession. The trusting relationship between the mentor teacher and the new teacher is of paramount importance for successful communication between them. Mentors should have the knowledge, skills and understanding necessary to establish good communication which will allow them to carry out their responsibilities effectively. They need to build confidence, be patient, proactive, benevolent, and purposeful and set challenges that will broaden their beginning teacher's knowledge and skills. Good knowledge of the internal regulations of the educational institution supports effective professional communication. According to the new teachers, the three most important prerequisites for fruitful professional communication are: trust, mutual respect and patience.

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