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Case Study on Mentoring

Tutors, super mentors, mentors and, mentees in a school of education

1. Setting within the teacher education system/ within the organisation

The University of Groningen and the Noordelijke Hogeschool Leeuwarden in the North of the Netherlands are involved for several years now in a new way of preparing teachers for their career and to support them on the way. When students have completed three years of training and still have one year of training to go. They are offered special contracts for newly qualified teachers, so called teacher trainees (TT's).

Their appointments cover less hours than a full appointment so that enables them to study and work parallel. They are supported by trainers from the initial training institute as well as by mentors in their schools. The Mentor usually is a trained senior teacher, who serves as a mentor/coach for the new-comers. Their job initially was to mentor the TT's, but as time went by, it appeared that teachers also later in their career (young teachers in their induction phase, at risk teachers, burnt out teachers etc. felt like having similar support. The consequence now is, that in some schools the mentor role has become a full or almost full position with a wider HRM or HRD character. The salary that goes with it is a recognition of the wider responsibility. Mentors get hours for their mentoring work, no raises in salaries.

2. Roles and tasks of a mentor

Schools very much differ in the way they choose the mentors. Some appoint older sometimes burnt out teachers to offer them a kind of new perspective; other schools choose more seriously and select mentors for the right reasons and qualities. All mentors are trained by the ECNO a training centre of the Noordelijke hogeschool.

The University and the Hogeschool themselves also play a part in the training of mentors. Many of those that wish to be mentors already have a background in similar fields such as supervision, counselling, consultancy etc. Most schools appoint mentors on a basis of their motivation and their feeling with the field of work.

Schools expect that training mentors also enhances the quality of the mentoring of pupils.

The training of mentors consists of ten meetings in which communicative and interactive social skills and competences are trained. Simulations and action

learning are a prominent part of the programme. Beside that the emphasis is on making your own professional history explicit and reflect on what processes you went through in order to become the professional you are now.

In the meantime discussions have arisen about how to bring theory into the schools and into the mentoring process. Here the mentors feel insufficient, the input of the trainers from university or teacher training colleges are missed. Schools have identified this problem themselves.

Mentors support and mentor the mentee as far as teaching and subject matter are concerned, furthermore they provide personal support and evaluation and assessments and they support the TT's self assessment.

Beside the mentors, schools participating in the School of Education project, have a mentor appointed to be a coordinating mentor. These people have a more profound training background and they are trained more intense. These people are called trainers in the school, but within this case study they will be referred to as super mentor, because they supervise the mentors.

The supermentor covers more general areas such as class room management, discipline, intervision. And he serves as the mentors mentor.

Thus mentors are co-ordinated and coached by this super mentor, the one who is in charge of all the mentoring in the school. Super mentors have a course of two years training to be prepared for their position. The actual meeting time during that training course is three weeks in year one and four weeks in year two. The super mentor is the one who often holds the broader HRD position mentioned earlier. He sees to it that TT's get mentors, he facilitates their getting acquainted with mentees, and he seeks a good match between mentors and mentees.

The mentors themselves work with groups of TT's. The TT's in turn work in network groups, so they can share experiences and give their peers feedback. Their peer feedback gradually becomes the most important input in the process, while the inputs of the mentor gradually become more process oriented.

The super mentor co-ordinates all the mentoring that goes on and usually also the wider range of kinds of mutual support that take place within HRD or staff development activities. On average his appointment to do so approaches a half time appointment (20 hours a week)

Often the duties of the super mentor cover even a wider range of tasks than mentoring. He or she becomes responsible for any kind of staff related issue or problem that arises. Super mentors become all round trouble shooters

3. Roles and tasks of the mentee

Mentoring takes place once a week for half a day. The mentees meet in groups. One chairs the meeting, one writes the minutes and makes a list of things agreed upon or plans for future actions. In the beginning, the issue discussed most, is classroom discipline and how to cope with disorder or insubordination. The mentor facilitates the discussions, creates a safe atmosphere. There is room for discussing anything, for expressing emotions. Mentees are sharing their concerns, they engage into role play, incident method approaches etc. The group size is not bigger than 12. In case of personal or special problems or needs there is also one to one mentoring, but that is not structurally planned. It is based on ad hoc needs identification.

The trainer from the initial training institute hardly plays a part in this phase of the training curriculum any longer. The emphasis has completely shifted towards the super mentor and the mentor. Trainers, as they are called Tutors come in the school 3 times a year for evaluation purposes. The mentee has to show, explain and defend a portfolio kept during the trimester. The tutor deals with the super mentor and the mentees. The mentors are not directly in touch with the tutor. This is one of obstacles in getting the knowledge flow into the school.

While being a mentee, with a limited number of teaching hours, the mentee is supposed to teach 6-10 hours.

Supporting structures in the professional context

As mentioned the mentors are trained in ten days, the super mentors in seven weeks over two years. Also once they are mentors they have support structures. Mentors are supported by the super mentor, the super mentors by the tutor and by their school leader.

Super mentors or trainer in the school as they are named, work together in a network. So there is a supra school connection to reflect on the curricular coherence of the training/mentoring activities. They share thoughts on matters as learning for competence, critical professional settings and challenges, the relation between theory and practice, how to build a practice theory, and how to learn collectively and mutually beneficial.

Tutors evaluate the mentoring with the mentees and feed their conclusions back to the super mentor.

4. Methods of data collection

The provider of this case study (Koos Koopman) works as project leader of the new mentoring system in both institutions mentioned above. He has co-provided the training programme for the super mentors himself. He has monitored and evaluated this new approach of school based teacher training now for almost ten years. He spoke with the mentors, the mentees, the school leaders, and the tutors involved. He played a part in launching and underpinning the approach. He has become enthusiastic and so have all parties concerned. Evaluations show the enthusiasm and the progress made in turning acquired knowledge and skills into transferable, applicable competences

Based on his years of experience in this field of mentoring and induction, he sees some threats as well.

- He feels the learning environment of the mentees could be “manipulated” more effectively. Now the conditions are to too high an extent left to coincidence.
- He feels that the focus on survival of the mentees could and should be drawn more effectively to learning.
- He is afraid that once the super mentorate becomes a position aside the regular teaching a new threat comes to live that knowledge loses its link with classroom reality. The super mentor could well become a functionary with a separate room and a copper plate on the door saying: super mentor. That will be the moment where history will be going to repeat itself and another gap will have to be closed again.