

Case Study MINT- Mentoring in Teacher Education

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1. Setting within the organisation of the mentoring system.

1.1. Description of a Dutch school.

The mentoring system that I shall describe is functioning in a school for primary education in a middle large sized town in the Netherlands.

The school has almost 650 pupils in the age of 4 tot 12 years old. It is expected that next year the school will grow quickly towards the number of 700 pupils.

In the school 42 teachers are doing their jobs for 2 or 5 days a week and they are teaching in 25 groups of pupils. They are mostly women, the school leader is male.

A group consists roughly of 25 children and they are spread over the groups by age.

The low level groups consists of children of 4 to 6 year olds, the middle level of children of 7 to 9 year old and in the top level are the children from 10 to 12.

Each level is an organizational unit and has a unit leader for managing practical educational subjects. Together with the school leader the three unit leaders make a management team where most of the educational policy of the school is planned and evaluated, also the policy for the mentoring in the school.

The mentoring is done by 4 mentors who fulfil the task of Internal Educational Consultation [IEC] in the school.

One of the IEC's is the Coordinating Educational Consultant. She is also the Top Level Unit Leader in the school and this case description is based on an interview she allowed me to have with her. She is the only one of the IEC 's who has no teaching duties, the other IEC's combine their tasks with teaching in a year group or remedial teaching with individual children or small groups, one person works two days just on IEC tasks.

1.2. The position and tasks of the Internal Educational Consultants [IEC] in the Netherlands.

The position of the IEC in Dutch schools depends mostly on the ideas of the school management of the specific school. This concerns what exactly in terms of activities is asked from the IEC, what time does the IEC gets for her or his actions in school, what extra financial reward is given and what is the managing influence granted to the IEC.

In general the IEC's have three different tasks in the schools in the Netherlands:

1. They manage the structure of care and support for children with special needs.
2. They give advisory support to the management of the school about the development of the educational quality in the school.
3. They manage the mentoring and coaching of teachers in the school: students from the Teacher Training Institute, newly qualified teachers and teachers having problems or needing support.

The professional profile of the IEC has developed from working more specific on the first task as a colleague with the focus on the pupils, towards a colleague that can be the mentor and coach in the team. The name of the person who did the job in schools for the last 15 years developed also: from "Pupil Care Coordinator" towards 'Internal Educational Consultant'.

Each IEC in this specific school has been given 'teaching free' time to do her job and gets no specific financial reward. They have been offered a course on what still is regarded as the basis of the work, which is task 1 and 2. [Structure of pupil support and Development of educational quality].

The Educational Service Institute MHR has delivered this basic course to them.

On the mentoring and coaching task, three of the four IEC's in the years 2003 and 2004 were in a training with me as an educational consultant and trainer/coach of the Educational Service Institute MHR. The training was called 'The Internal Educational Consultant as a Coach'. The fourth IEC was ill during the time of the training but will probably participate next year, when the programme will be running again.

The training is about the third and most complicated task of the IEC: to give mentoring and coaching to your own colleagues. Not every school manager or IEC in primary education thinks that mentoring and coaching is automatically a part of the initial job of IEC. Fear for 'what will happen if I confront my colleague with my feedback' is often behind the neglect of this task.

2. Roles and Tasks of the IEC as a Mentor/Coach.

This specific school has developed a task description for the IEC in which mentoring and coaching of colleagues is included.

Apart from their other tasks as an IEC the four IEC teachers in this school quite often visit their colleagues in the classroom. This is where the real mentoring begins.

When the teacher is a new qualified colleague she or he gets a mentor 'mate'. This is a teacher that works with the same age of children and can give answers to the most basic questions a newcomer could have. This 'mate' is supposed to advise and support the new teacher, not to coach on development.

The school leader visits the new teacher at least three times in the first year. Main purpose is to see the teacher at work: assessment for a permanent job will happen after a year. Nevertheless moments of the coaching practice can take place in the feedback dialogues after classroom observation.

The IEC of the Unit is the real mentor/coach for this teacher. She also visits the new teacher in the classroom, has a feedback dialogue afterwards and writes a report three times or more if necessary in the first year. The reports are to emphasize the development of the teacher and turn the teacher into a reflective practitioner. On my question if this good practice was written down somewhere in a policy plan for the induction period she answered that this was not exactly the case, but certainly something to realise soon.

All the other teachers of the team get a classroom visit about five times a year from their 'own' unit IEC. In some cases this is also a colleague they are working together with during the week f.e. in the Lower Unit of the school this is the case. This is a special situation that is reality for most of the IEC's in the Netherlands. We will come back on this.

The subjects and focus for these classroom visits are set in the management team that consists of the three Unit Leaders of the levels in the school with the school leader. The Coordinating IEC is also Top Level Unit Leader, she represents also the IEC task in the Management Team. The focus of the classroom observation is normally chosen from a new development the school is busy with. A recent example of a focus was the enhancement of autonomous and cooperative learning in the class room.

The IEC team developed a observation instrument for classroom observation that each time can be adjusted to the focus of the period of classroom visits to come.

When the IEC's have completed a whole round of classroom visits, the coordinator writes a overall report with recommendations for educational school development for the Management Team.

Frequent meetings of the IEC's and their Coordinator take care of exchanging information concerning the results of the classroom visits. Problems of weak educational performance of a specific teacher are dealt with and further IEC actions are planned, like extra classroom observation for this particular teacher. If this not give the results that are necessary in the eyes of the IEC, she brings this in as a case during the IEC meetings.

After this the case will be introduced by the Coordinating IEC in the next meeting of the Management Team. A decision is made there what to do about the problem. One of the choices is that a 'trail of coaching' is going to be planned. The IEC, the teacher and the

school leader come to agreement on an action plan with achievement goals and activities for the coming period of time. Often the IEC Coordinator herself takes the lead now in the coaching of the teacher. After this there is also the possibility to turn to the Educational Service Institute for help. The Coordinating IEC tells me this seldom has occurred. On my question if this way of handling problems by IEC workers was an accepted written down policy plan accepted and agreed on by all the teachers in school, the Coordinating IEC denied that but emphasized that this way of working was totally accepted

Student teachers in this school have their own mentor. This is the teacher of the group where they practise their lessons. Almost every teacher apart from the new ones in their first year have a student teacher in their group.

The Coordinating IEC tells me that she believes it is a duty for each school to do what you can to help future colleagues develop and give them the opportunity to educational practice. One teacher coordinates the contact with the Teacher Training Institute but it is not her or his task to mentor the mentors, nor is he or she chosen for this competency. The Coordinating IEC has contact with this person only if problems arise. Due to economic reasons the Teacher Training Institute does not pay visits to the schools anymore to mentor or coach the students. The mentor teachers of the students are autonomous in their mentoring the students. Most of them are experienced in this subject of being a mentor for students, others learn so in practice. This has always been the accepted case for years in the Netherlands and is not a special thing for this school.

But while telling this to me the Coordinating IEC realised herself that it could be regarded as contra dictionary that the care and support for the IEC coaching system in the school was so different from the care for the student mentoring system.

3. Roles and Tasks of the Mentee

If the mentee is a student, she writes lesson plans and reflection logs after each lesson and feedback dialogue with the mentor teacher. She delivers this at the Teacher Training Institute for feedback.

If the mentee is a teacher she is expected to take serious the suggestions for improvement that are in the report of the IEC regarding the classroom observation and feedback dialogue. Teachers must show a reflective attitude and a certain readiness to change behaviour in the classroom.

Important is what the IEC Coordinator told me about the ideas the Management Team had about the direction and the process of change towards f.e. autonomous learning and the teachers in the school:

“Certainly we want changes to happen, but we want to involve all workers in the school in this development. We want them to experience ownership towards their own professional development and we want the same for the educational development of the organization. That is why we have to take time in the mentoring process and we have to take time in the strategic process of school development”.

4. Supporting structures in the professional context.

Already I gave some information about supporting structures. The IEC's have had a training course on coaching that was delivered by myself as trainer/coach.

The course consisted of 6 meetings of 3 hours and there was an certificate in the end. The management of the schools always decide if they offer this opportunity to teachers and will pay for it.

The Educational Service Institutes are not the only organisations that run courses on Coaching for IEC's. Teacher Training Institutes and other advisory organisations also run courses on all kinds of subjects for teachers and schools can choose.

The course I run for Internal Educational Consultants I developed with a colleague consultant of the Educational Service Institute MHR.

IEC's begin with making their own development plan for the 6 meetings. What do they want to learn in cognitive, social and emotional sense? Also they reflect on this after each meeting. In the last meeting they evaluate what they have learned and want to develop further.

After this I start to expand their self knowledge with the help of the system of Core Qualities of Daniel Ofman. To be a coach you have to know which are your strong points and your developmental points. A person who is energetic and convincing must perhaps learn to pay attention to the other and be patient. A person who has a lot of empathy must perhaps learn to confront the other and to work with goals.

In the training course are other themes: theory and practice about conversation skills, all kinds of professional conversation that coaching consists of [giving feedback, giving advise], the technique of classroom observation, the setting up of a mentoring system in the school, the question of how to use power and persuasion, letting go and making space, make the other person reflect on her or his behaviour and how to come to suggestions for change and to support and empower the insecure colleague.

But a course ends after a while and that is why it is so important to have a structure of support in the school itself like this school has created. In the IEC meetings every two weeks there is room for exchange and problem solving and the IEC Coordinator can be the coach for the coach in trouble.

Last remarks:

Self criticism of the IEC pointed at the lack of formal agreement and policy documents that confirms the quality of the mentoring system. Also she saw the gap between the good support and control systems of mentoring by the IEC's and the lack of support and control for the teachers that are mentoring students during the interview.

But she said: **"We are a school in development and it would be boring if there was nothing to develop at all!"**