

# Mentors in German Teacher Education

Dietlind Fischer

## 1. Who is the mentor?

“Mentor” is an experienced school teacher who is assigned by the school principal (headteacher) to guide a newly qualified, young teacher during his/her first two years in school. The mentor serves as a model teacher as well as a counsellor, focusing on lesson planning and conduct of classroom teaching practice.

The relationship between the mentor and mentee aims at a temporary learning partnership. Sharing professional experience, reflecting and communicating what happens in the classroom, encouraging, counselling, coaching are different modes of mutual empowerment.

Every schoolteacher is obliged to care for beginning teachers during the “Second Phase”. It belongs to his/her duties. Some (about 30%) enjoy this task and like to be a mentor. A mentor does not get any award or reduction of work for this task, nor any formal education. He/she mentors just for honour and personal appreciation.

## 2. Setting within the teacher education system

Mentoring takes place in the so called „Second Phase“(preparation service) of teacher education. After graduation at the university (“First Phase”) teachers are employed at the regional state seminars (Studienseminar) and earn a small salary. They have to spend 24 months at the seminar and at schools to gain and accomplish practical teaching experience. In the end they take a “second exam” after which one is employable as a fully qualified teacher.

The organisation of the "Second Phase" of teacher education differs in the Bundesländer, due to the cultural autonomy. As most of the teachers are state servants, the second phase is organised in charge of the state, not the university. The institutional separation of pre-service, introduction and in-service teacher education in Germany in general leads to separate structures which lack mutual relationship and continuous learning processes.

Recently there are several initiatives at the teacher education centres of universities (i.e. Kassel, Bielefeld, Dortmund) to better coordinate the teacher education on different levels of theory and practice.

Within the “Second Phase” of teacher education there are several persons who are formally involved in guiding, counselling, and assessing the young teacher during the induction phase.

The formal appointment to the **Studienseminar** puts him/her into the position of a learner taught by experienced teachers. Twice a week the young teacher (“Referendar”, “Lehramts-Anwärter” LAA) is attending the main-seminar within a group of 24 to 40 peers, working on basic theories of teaching and learning in schools (7 hours) and on teaching matters in his/her special subject. The head of the seminar is a full-time employee, responsible for teacher education in general, administration and staff, earning a salary comparable to that of a university teacher. Usually the head teaches the “Main-Seminar”.

The teacher of the subject seminar – entitled **Fachleiter** – works on a part-time basis in practical teacher education while he/she is an ordinary school teacher. The amount of part-time depends on the number of LAA’s in his group. His task is to teach in the seminar, to visit the LAA’s in schools, and to observe, counsel, evaluate and examine the young teacher.

The appointment to a **school** for a period of two years brings the young teacher in contact with colleagues who offer different kinds of support to him/her.

One teacher is formally appointed to coordinate the second (practical) phase of teacher education for all young teachers in the school (entitled **Ausbildungskoordinator AKO**–coordinating teacher)<sup>1</sup>. He/She is responsible for the induction, meeting with colleagues, organisation, and he can act as a problemsolver or mediator between young teachers, headteacher, seminar, students, parents etc. The pay-off for the AKO is two weekly lessons workload.

The AKO is selected by the school principal or by an internal application procedure. The AKO can be responsible for 10 to 15 young teachers in a school.<sup>2</sup> He/she is invited by the Studienseminar to take part in staff meetings.

According to his/her certain subject the young teacher works together with an **experienced classroom teacher (Mentor)**: observing his lessons, serving as a model, helping to lesson preparations and sitting in the back during classroom teaching. If the mentorship works well the young teacher feels someone he/she can trust to keep a hand in his/her back.

The young teacher (in Northrhine-Westfalia) has also to teach a certain amount of „self-responsible lessons“ which are not supervised. First he observes the mentor’s lessons, and then he teaches while guided by the mentor. After half a year he teaches “self-responsible” 12 regular lessons a week.

The **final examination** consists of a written homework, two classroom lessons and a colloquium, given to a board of 4 examiners: one from the school administration, one seminar-teacher (unknown to the teacher), one seminar- teacher (suggested by the teacher), one school person. The assessment of the head teacher is added to the results.

The double responsibility to the school and to the seminar produces high pressure to the young teachers. Some of them quit the job during this phase; some of them are traumatized for their whole career.

An advantage can be seen in the separation of roles: the support role of the mentor and the evaluation and assessment role of the Fachleiter will not cause ambiguity in the personal relationship.

But lack of research is a remarkable heading in the area of the “Second Phase”.<sup>3</sup> The disadvantages caused by so many people involved are based on weak informations. Major critics come from structural and economical reasoning. The institutional separation of the phases lengthens the amount of time to be spent in teacher education (5 – 6 years), without securing the competencies to be completed. What a student teacher has learnt at the university is not treated as a prerequisite to the next phase, but is devastated. Many young teachers feel not to be prepared for teaching during the university studies, and many of them remember the favourite advice of school practitioners to them: “Forget all about what you have learnt at the university. Practical schooling is different.”

### 3. Roles and tasks of a mentor

<sup>1</sup> Northrhine-Westfalia: Ordnung des Vorbereitungsdienstes und der Zweiten Staatsprüfung für Lehrämter an Schulen (Ordnung des Vorbereitungsdienstes und der Zweiten Staatsprüfung OVP) vom 1. Februar 2004, Verwaltungsvorschrift

<sup>2</sup> In a previous Administration Order the AKO was one of the members of the examining group. When the external examiners noticed that the loyalty of the AKO went with the young person promoting a good exam, the Administration Order was changed. The AKO is no longer member of the examining group. Now the headteacher is the person who evaluates the performance of the young teacher.

<sup>3</sup> A recent research study has been conducted by a Norwegian person: Kaare Skagen: Zwischen Beratung und Anweisung. Das Meister-Muster oder Lernen am guten Beispiel. In: Die Deutsche Schule 95(2003)3, S.354-363.

There is almost no research on mentoring in teacher education in Germany. According to the philosophy that each teacher has to be a mentor, you can find a rich variety of individual and personal interpretations of the task.

The mentor-teacher feels a personal responsibility to help the young teacher to teach. Mostly he/she work together in lesson preparation, giving support to the selection of teaching material, methods of classroom management etc. The lesson planning takes place in the afternoon or evening in the private home of the mentor, during phone calls, e-mail correspondence and sometimes on Sundays. The lesson talk after is a very prominent task of the mentor.

The criteria of head-teachers to select and recommend mentorship in his school are fairly unknown. Sometimes social and personal traits play a role, sometimes the reputation as a "good" successful teacher. Very often those teachers who have been selected by the pupils to be their 'confidential teacher' or those who have taken a postgraduate training in consultancy are the favourite persons to become mentors to the young teachers. This matter of fact could be an indicator to the contribution of mentors to the communicative climate in staff and school. But there is no formal training organised for them to fulfil the task.

Mentoring is regarded as a "natural" teacher competence.

## **4. Supporting structures: Mentoring mentors in in-service teacher education**

### **4.1 Mentors and staff development**

Only a few in-service institutes offer special coursework for mentoring (i.g. Rhineland-Pfalz).

When I asked some representatives of in-service-institutions whether they offer courses for mentors or why not, I got the answer: "It is not necessary, you can overdo the formal training of competencies. Good mentors happen by chance and personality or not."

But there is a difference in valuing when staff development in a self-directed (autonomous) school comes into views. Some in-service programmes on school-leadership or staff development explicitly pay attention to mentoring. The gender-mainstream policy promotes programmes for women in schools to become interested and feel supported in leading positions. Mentoring is viewed as an important strategy of personal recruitment and support.

### **4.2 Professional learning tandems**

An interesting in-service programme is the conception of "*Tandem-partnership*", created by Esther Enns-Connolly, University of Calgary, Canada, and further developed in the Swiss in-service institute in Bern together with Hans Rudolf Lanker.<sup>4</sup> Tandem means the professional co-operation of two teachers by means of mutual classroom observation aiming at improving classroom teaching practice.

---

<sup>4</sup> Esther E.Enns: Tandem als Raum für narrative Lernprozesse in der Lehrerfortbildung. In: Forum Lehrerfortbildung. Sonderheft Biografische Methoden in der Lehrerfortbildung. Deutscher Verein zur Förderung der Lehrerfortbildung. Grebenstein 1999, S. 117-127

Esther Enns/ Cornelia Gick/ Hans Rudolf Lanker/ Jean Racine: Lehrer- und Lehrerinnenfortbildung im Tandem. In: Forum Lehrerfortbildung o.J.(1996), H.29-30. S. 165-169.

Esther Enns-Connolly: Fortbildung als Prozess der Selbstentwicklung: Eine Projektbeschreibung. In: Schweizer Schule 78(1991)12, S. 3-10.

Esther Enns: Einblicke in meine narrative Werkstatt. In: Forum Lehrerfortbildung. Sonderheft Biografische Methoden in der Lehrerfortbildung. Deutscher Verein zur Förderung der Lehrerfortbildung: Grebenstein 1999, S. 50-60

The tandem is constructed as a social space in which two basics of teaching processes are closely connected: the planning and changing of classroom practice on the one hand and the perception and reflection of classroom experience on the other hand. The tandem-partnership is carefully developed by a certain set of negotiation rules. The partners work on a contract basis, observing, questioning and evaluating each other's work.

The Tandem-Model consists of four stages which are accompanied by the in-service agency:

**(1) *Preparation and selection of a partner***

The selection of a partner is a very delicate procedure; similar interests and teaching situations but also personal sympathy and trust have to be negotiated until the tandem-partnership can be contracted.

**(2) *Contracting***

The partners decide themselves, what they are interested to look at and improve. They negotiate the amount of mutual classroom visits, the focus of classroom observation, they agree on the time for discussion immediately after the observation.

**(3) *Tandem in work***

The inservice agency gives a set of attitudes and an opportunity to train those in principle and very carefully. For instance REH are the principles of interaction between the partners: respect, empathy and honesty.

They promote a narrative approach to reflection on classroom teaching. The narrative approach is regarded as the most practical way of negotiating mutual understanding, especially if the implicit conceptions of teaching differ – as they usually do.

**(4) *Evaluation of learning outcomes within the tandem***, usually after half a year of tandem work, redefining of the contract if necessary.

**(5) *Evaluation of results within the group of tandems.***

The tandem-model is based on equal partners who have to find out what they can learn from each other by means of mutual classroom observation and feed-backing procedures. A narrative approach is preferred. Although working in a tandem can be contracted in a private way in any case, the integration in formal in-service coursework is a very important factor of efficacy.

### **4.3 Competency profile of a mentor**

In the Austrian teacher education system the newly qualified teachers are assigned to a one year "Praktikum" in schools, in charge of a university teacher. Within the schools they are appointed to a mentoring teacher called "Ausbildungslehrer". The Austrian administration has developed a set of competencies concerning the role and tasks of these practitioners (BMUKA 1998)<sup>5</sup>:

"Profile of competencies of a mentor:

- to understand oneself as a teacher educator
- to reflect on action-knowledge
- to communicate to teacher-students one's reflective access to teaching
- to develop one's own professional attitudes and values
- to develop competencies of classroom analysis and teaching practise
- to refer to academic goals and contents of teacher education policies
- to regard adult-related aspects of communication and council
- to contribute to an integration of theory and practice beyond demonstration of good classroom practice."

<sup>5</sup> K. Klement/ A. Lobendanz/ H.Teml (Hrsg.): Schulpraktische Studien. Beiträge zur Qualitätsentwicklung n der Lehrerbildung unter Berücksichtigung europäischer Perspektiven. Innsbruck/ Wien: Studienverlag 2002.

Some experiences with training the mentors as reported<sup>6</sup>. The university faculty offers four blocked seminars to the mentors (three to four days per half year) and additional voluntary courses during the holidays. The mentors are involved in subjects of three areas:

- (1) Reflection of their own teaching and counselling practice by means of “cooperative counselling”, “cooperative classroom observation”, “action research” and “presentation”.
- (2) Development of mentoring-concepts referring to: “teaching”, “counselling”, “assessing”, and “organising”.
- (3) Personal in-depth-studies like “Gestalt”, “non-directive communication”.

### **Perspectives of current development**

There are dynamic changes in German teacher education according to the “Bologna Process” since 1999. The European ministers of science and research have agreed upon the development of a European higher education space until 2010.

Almost every teacher education department in different universities is concerned with a change in the system, designing coursework with a BA and MA exam, consisting of “modules” and ECTS points. Some teacher education models include an integrative school practicum, which means that the Second Phase is going to be shortened.

The teacher education experts have developed a “core-curriculum” of educational scholarship as a kind of guideline.

The discussion about “standards” of teacher education has begun.

There is much ado about .....

---

<sup>6</sup> K. Klement/ H. Teml (Hrsg.): Schulpraxis reflektieren. Wege zum forschenden Lernen in der Lehrerbildung. Innsbruck/Wien: Studienverlag 1996.