

EDU WORLD 2022**Edu World International Conference Education Facing Contemporary World Issues****RELEVANT FEEDBACK IN MENTORING: NEW PERSPECTIVES
WITHIN THE PROF PROJECT**

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Abstract

The world we live in today has led the effort of education specialists to a series of unprecedented challenges and difficulties. Despite the critical period, experts from "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu, in partnership with other three universities, build the largest project at national level, PROF - Professionalization of the teaching career, that is currently implemented by the Ministry of Education, with the main target to create a systemic intervention through mentoring future teachers to the necessary quality standards. This paper highlights the key element on which the success of the PROF project and of the mentoring system will depend, which is relevant feedback at the base of teachers' training. Using focus groups and free writing, we explored teachers' views on this important topic, to identify their arguments of the need to provide relevant feedback during mentoring. Findings proved that authentic feedback is possible only when relationships really function, with a serious impact on each teacher's attitude and emotions. Mentors and future teachers need to find more ways to support each other and to provide qualitative feedback in trustful and relevant ways

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1. Introduction

Today's society has led the effort of education specialists to a series of unprecedented challenges and difficulties. The pandemic crisis and all the upheavals in the education system have been and are being felt, to the fullest, by students, by parents, by teachers, by the mentors of the teachers now. Health has become an absolute priority, but people's chance to carry on education has depended and depends, on a deep level, on the ability to communicate and build lasting bridges of connection with others. But the increasingly intensely superimposed crises, the conflict that has broken out in neighboring countries, the social, economic instability, the uncertainty of tomorrow, all bring additional hardships, difficult to imagine and tolerate, with a strong impact on our daily existence.

In Romania, the education system has gone through its own crises of reconstruction and restructuring in recent years, and the reforms have brought dozens of changes, sustainable, which have often led to upheavals and lack of stability, in terms of the status of the teacher, both socially and morally. Communication between teachers, at the level of a school chancellery, had and still has many gaps and deficiencies, working conditions, parental pressures, changing behaviors and many problems of children, being more difficult from year to year. Feedback for teachers' work in the classroom remained a more formal aspect than a valuable upskilling tool.

The teacher training departments, in the two years of the pandemic, have been in the biggest bottlenecks encountered in the system: the training of future teachers with the help of mentors, in pedagogical practice, have been canceled for almost two years. Mentors, with all their expertise and experience, have never had practicing students in their classes throughout the pandemic. Without mentors, pedagogical practice suffered the most. Prospective student professors searched for resources online and focused on their own visions of the teaching profession.

Despite the critical period, education specialists from the "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu, in partnership with other three universities, strongly concerned with finding the necessary pedagogical force, built one of the largest projects at national level, in partnership with the Ministry of Education, to bring back the mentorship for the teaching career, the most important objective of achieved, to relaunch the initial and continuous training of teachers, to the necessary quality standards. The project POCU PROF – Professionalization of the teaching career means an integrated intervention at the level of the national education system, creating solid and sustainable bridges between experts from university and experts from pre-university education (<https://www.edu.ro/PROF>).

The implementation period of the PROF project is 3 years, April 1, 2021 – December 31, 2023, and aims to train an impressive number of teachers – 28,211 people. This project is the foundation of an intervention at European level, in which the Ministry of Education in Romania is a partner and, together with the other project, START in the teaching career, the project with a teaching master's degree, a reliable context is thought of for what teacher training means in Romania.

This paper highlights the key element on which the success in implementation of the PROF project and of the entire mentoring system will depend. Teachers in Romania fundamentally need to rethink their professional relationships, through personalized, authentic, inspirational feedback, given that the teaching profession has been and is more difficult to achieve than ever. The training programs within this project bring as a first element of novelty the focus on the whole person, through the feedback that mentor

trainers can transpose into the educational relationships that are intended to be innovated, through the collegiate approach of unconditional support and the retrieval of emotional comfort, indispensable ingredients of well-being and trust (Woolworth, 2019).

There will be exemplified models of good practice in providing and receiving feedback from a group of teachers participating in the training courses, who have distinguished themselves through exceptional communication and networking skills in the virtual training environment, facilitated by the project organizers.

2. Problem Statement

The theoretical part behind this study brings to the fore two perspectives of analysis and reflections. One relates to the mentoring process rethought at the systemic level through the PROF project, and another refers to the importance and personalized valorization of feedback in the relationship between the trainer and the participants in the training.

First, a description of the systemic intervention is presented, to analyse the theoretical approach and the fundamentals that support the entire project, in the context that we are living. During the pandemic, the main activity, the training courses, were approved to be hold online. So, all the meetings and all the debated were carried out virtually, letting the chance to communicate effective being really challenged. Providing feedback online was and is the only chance to be close to all participants in this effort of changing the teacher training system in a deep, systemic way (<https://www.edu.ro/PROF>). There are many facilities that the online training can be explored and valued, which means that trainers and all participants need to be strongly motivated to discover and learn them, like Google Classroom, Google Meet, Google Calendar, extensions, Google Blogs, etc., to collaborate effectively in a virtual space (Andron & Kifor, 2021).

The Ministry of Education has launched the systemic project "Professionalization of teaching career - PROF" – as an essential component of the "Educated Romania" Project. Through this systemic intervention carried out, the Ministry of Education is rethinking the training system for teaching career, intervening, both at the level of initial training and at the level of continuous training, by creating learning communities and flexible access routes career development (<https://www.edu.ro/PROF>).

A learning community of teachers, with the mentors support, is strongly based on feedback, at the base of all communications. Both the practical part of the initial training and the continuous training of teachers, as professional development, are done in the format of the learning community, through the bases of pedagogical practice-school consortium that bring together, under the coordination of an application school, various types of educational institutions. Education has undergone major changes internationally under the sign of globalization, neoliberalism, digitalization, and neuroscience (Marga, 2019). We strongly need a reinforcement of the practical activities, especially now, after this critical time of the pandemic.

The role of the mentor teacher, within a learning community, built, for the beginning, in the structure of the pedagogical practice base, becomes significant. It identifies the need for training, supports, mediates, give feedback for all the needs identified, validates, and disseminates the training, based on the training standards associated with the teacher's training profile. The new approach of the

PROF project is the fact that continuing education takes place in school, on the system of pedagogical practice, not outside it, not by removing teachers from courses and/or by placing them in learning contexts external to the educational process (<https://www.edu.ro/PROF>). Starting with this new systemic national intervention, a learning context involves the teacher-student relationship, on a model peer-learning, in a blended-learning system. The digital component of the teaching process is also essential in ensuring the mentoring of the teaching career, to give and receive feedback for a continuous improving of the abilities to teach.

The main goal of the PROF Project is to ensure professional mentoring throughout the didactic career, by creating a coherent and reliable national system of professional training and development of teaching competence, in the context of the global process of digitization of all education systems. At European level, this project is in line with the European Commission's goal of achieving the European Educational Area by 2025, which emphasizes that "teachers and trainers need continuous opportunities for professional development" (<https://www.edu.ro/PROF>). Also, according to the Council conclusions on "European teachers and trainers for the future", good quality teaching and learning can be achieved in the context in which teachers are involved throughout their teaching career in a process of a trustful professional development.

Feedback is essential during the mentoring process, and it is considered central during PROF Project. Training new teachers is the main component of the administrative task in schools today (Carr et al., 2017). During the mentoring training, all experts in mentoring should learn how to provide feedback in a supportive and assertive way.

In the opinion of Professor Ion Ovidiu Pânișoară (2009), feedback represents some of the most important motivators in the teacher-student, or mentor-student relationship, being a particularly important component in education and mentoring. It is essential to give positive feedback and to ensure that the mentor has been understood correctly and coherently. The mentor plays the role of a role model, which can accentuate the mentored person's sense of competence, self-efficacy, and personal and professional development. The need for feedback and the constant support of the practicing student will be the basis of the entire effort. Mentoring reimposes the idea of student-centeredness and is at the same time a development strategy on a personal and professional level. The mentoring specialists trained within the PROF project have learned that success depends on building strong, deep, and lasting relationships between mentors and trainees. Active listening in mentoring is essential and helps enormously in a good knowledge of those directly involved in the training process (Botton, 2020).

A role model mentor is the American teacher Ron Clark (2004), who believes that enthusiasm is the first quality needed to stimulate and attract to the learning effort. Trainees and children are impressionable, and when they look to the teacher or to the mentor, they need to feel inspired and motivated to learn, to want to accumulate knowledge and skills, and to want to become the best version of themselves. The educational environment is a developmental accumulation, and mentored trainees can be helped to overcome the fear of failure. The mentor owes it to himself to know the deep aspects behind inappropriate behavior, and his role is to provide the right, constant and sustained feedback to improve the student progress (Pânișoară, 2017).

In the paper „*Visible Learning*”, John Hattie brings undeniable scientific arguments on which the process of deep, authentic learning is based, and relevant feedback is necessary to ensure effective, transparent communication that allows students to progress. It is important that any message from the mentor is shared, appropriated and very well understood by students and trainees, especially because we learn a lot from mistakes, and a secure environment, where mistake is welcome, feedback ensures visible learning (Hattie, 2014). Mentors will succeed if they are dedicated and passionate about creating such safe training environments for the teaching profession. They will be role models if they end up demonstrating to practicing students that any child can learn, and that they can discover the successful child in any child (Clark, 2010). The way you encourage learners, through authentic feedback, will create the right team learning environment, in which the goals pursued will be achieved together. Effective rules set by American professor Ron Clark (2010) can help any apathetic student, to become, in challenging circumstances, a successful student.

Ties define the quality of relationships in the complex mentoring process. The most difficult challenges in education, essential in mentoring for teachers, aimed at educating emotion, educating self-esteem, developing solidarity, tolerance, safety, schematic reasoning, the ability to manage thoughts in situations of tension, the skill of processing losses and frustrations, that is, the formation of people who think, depend on the quality of feedback in the mentor relationship – future teachers (Cury, 2018). Thomas Gordon has proposed an effective program to improve the relationship with students, in which the role of communication and relevant feedback underlie the most solid scientific arguments, extremely useful in mentoring. Effective active listening is at the heart of this current PROF training program, because only mentors with essential communication skills can create authentic connections (Gordon & Burch, 2011).

Emotional involvement and creativity in the relationship of communication and provision of feedback will make all the difference, assures Sir Ken Robinson (2015), in his work. At the basic level, the focus of education must be on the conditions in which students will want to learn, from teachers who know how to stimulate them. It is an exercise of utmost importance in the mentoring program, to provide the trainees with models of authentic and relevant feedback in the demonstration activities with the students, as a first deep responsibility.

The pandemic period has brought major disturbances at the individual level, but also at the social level, which are still in the process of discovery and understanding, both theoretically and in educational practice. The review of recent studies has also identified a knowledge missing about virtual or face-to-face learning, from different perspectives. Feedback is considered a cultural need, as the pandemic forced us to find new solutions to communicate and learn (Cioca & Bratu, 2021). The need for feedback from trainees and mentors, to discover their current problems, and to be able to connect in an authentic way, is of the utmost topicality.

3. Research Questions

All the efforts of the teams of expert trainers from PROF Project are interested to create the best training environment, in order to facilitate close connections with the participants, that are all teachers with high expertise and experience in mentoring and education, considering that all the activities take

place through the online platforms. Each expert trainer tried its best to communicate on the topic of the first two programs –about mentoring the didactic career and mentoring the pedagogical practical activities with all the participants, inside our University "Lucian Blaga" of Sibiu.

At the base of this small-scale study, there is a reflective question, conducted inside the team of expert trainers, from the "Lucian Blaga" university team:

- i. How feedback in mentoring becomes relevant for the trainees, based on what specific ingredients?

4. Purpose of the Study

This study purpose was to explore teachers' views on this important topic, to identify their argues of the need to provide relevant feedback during mentoring and to select the most relevant and authentic feedbacks recorded, as examples of good practice in teacher education through mentoring. The reflective question was addressed to the last two groups of participants, inside PROF II program, so the number of respondents was large – 27 teachers from group 6 and 29 teachers from group 7. They participated to the program of training about mentoring during April and May 2022, and they were voluntarily invited to contribute to this qualitative study.

5. Research Methods

We used two qualitative methods, first focus groups and second free writing with participants from the two groups involved in the online training activities. The number of respondents was represented by the researcher, a university teacher, and eight teachers voluntarily involved, with more than 10 years' experience in mentoring, selected according to their creativity and openness to this topic, three of the teachers were man and five were women. They were experts in the field of mentoring future teachers.

This study allowed us to use an ethnographic perspective, so that the basic question was discussed with all the teachers involved, to share their voice and self-experience in giving and receiving relevant feedback in mentoring and education. In this way, we can collect real true stories and examples that can inspire and support future mentors, that are able to create teachers learning communities, where learning takes place in a collaborative way.

6. Findings

Responses show that relevant feedback is possible only when relationships really function, with a strong meaning to each teacher's views, attitudes and emotions, because first of all, mentors and participants inside PROF project are colleagues with large experiences, from different schools. This attitude is felt from the first second of the training program, even in a virtual platform that facilitates the meeting. Teachers that were involved in the study decided voluntarily that they are interested to reflect on the theme approached. Teachers' perspectives related to feedback and its challenges to allowed cooperation presented a deep and personalized meaning of how feedback counts for their professional growth. Findings also revealed that each answer was subjective, but based on a high expertise in the field of mentoring, so their voice is valuable.

The group of participants was small, but significant for the purpose of the study, as the personal reflections of experts in mentoring need to be recognized and discussed. Also, other main argument was to facilitate awareness and preparation for the next generations of educators, by trainings mentors that are experts in providing great feedback. Ethics approval was assured, and respondents' names were not revealed.

All participants were from Bucharest, teachers that were very excited to be part of the PROF project and of this investigation. The reflective question was discussed during the focus groups and after that, teachers used free writing to explain their personal thoughts and feelings about relevant feedback in mentoring. The theme was very interesting to develop, and the teachers invited were determined to let their voice be heard, to gain data that matters, as their experience in mentoring was important.

We strongly consider that their voice as practitioners is relevant to discover deep needs and emotions that are at the base of their professional efforts in front of their students that want to become educators. If the society is now full of uncertainties, the trainers of teachers need more than ever to be able to rely on each other's support, through relevant feedback about what works and what doesn't work in teaching and learning with today's generation of children, deeply confused from all the pandemic context and the conflicts around the world.

Respondents were deeply involved in all the focus groups meetings, focused on how we can create inside schools the learning communities of teachers that learn and grow together. Each group involved in the study had three focus group meetings with the researcher, involved as an expert trainer in the PROF project. At the end of each meeting, the ones that were interested and passionate about the topic, facilitated their ideas and arguments, as answers to the reflective question of the study, using free writing. Here are the best reflective answers collected:

Respondents' views:

- i. "I can feel that feedback is relevant when I find that the trainer is competent, prepared with qualitative presentations and information, that are presented on such an empathic way, that allow us to grow personally, at a spiritual, not just a professional level";
- ii. "Feedback is relevant if it comes from a valuable person, that helps us during all meetings to forget about the time and space barriers, offering a qualitative time to learn together";
- iii. "For me feedback depends on the communication skills of the trainer, it is relevant only from the trainer that is a true professional in the Art of speaking";
- iv. "I feel relevant the feedback from an extraordinary mentor. You need to be the model of what you teach, to convince the audience of your words and suggestions";
- v. "The relevance of any feedback comes from the mentors that are open minded, with healthy attitudes. If I feel that the speech is real, and most of all, sincere, I can really learn. I appreciated the sincerest trainers, that let their inside feelings and thoughts revealed, during the training";
- vi. "The feedback is relevant if the trainer brings that warm and human approach of each relationship, that we need so much";

- vii. "I admire the generous mentors as trainers, the ones that share all their good and bad experience in a trustful way, than their feedback is relevant for me. Feedback becomes relevant also if the mentor creates a secure learning environment";
- viii. "For me, any feedback is relevant if each one is based on a real exchange of personal and professional experiences, and also, of humanity".

The small study allowed us to find how experienced mentors express for considering the feedback relevant during mentoring. Findings revealed that they have common needs and views, especially because we live in a complicated and controversial society, in which the emotional pressures are huge for all of us, children, parents, teachers, leaders in education. The need for a human approach inside almost each answer collected reveals us that teaching and learning can be improved strongly if feedback is assured in a relevant way, at a personal level, not just at a professional one. If we compare their ideas about feedback, we realize that we need the same human and empathic way to connect to one another, if we recognize the power of feedback in our communication, at the base of our efforts to mentor future teachers. Relevance of feedback is needed in education, at all levels. Colleagues needs to find more ways to support each other and to provide qualitative feedback in trustful and relevant ways.

According to Center for Mentoring Excellence (n.d.) (Your Mentoring Year Tip #8: Giving Feedback | Center for Mentoring Excellence), feedback can help us behave in a better way, as teachers or mentors. There are many tips for giving feedback, that so many studies are relying on, but what is proved so far, is that feedback really works only if it is relevant for the mentees. The success in mentoring is based on a deep understanding and practice of relevant feedback.

7. Conclusions

The PROF project will continue to take place in school with an essential emphasis on rebuilding and strengthening the link between pre-university and university education, bringing them together in a training process, essential for the teaching career. The feedback that is relevant and useful inside the mentoring process will support the entire effort. Bringing together four universities and 11 faculty houses creates a solid bridge between initial and continuing education - an essential connection deeply needed in Romania (<https://www.edu.ro/PROF>).

Through PROF project we are rethinking and relocating, according to current requirements - mentoring throughout the teaching career. This project is another strong challenge that emphasis on creating communities of practice, combining pre-university education with university education. The mentors' feedback must remain the determining factor in a truly student-centered education system, according to the team of experts in training. PROF project comes and proposes both a significant impact in relation to the number of teachers trained, and an institutional-support system that would re-accredit the institution of mentoring in education in Romania.

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