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PROFESSIONAL INSERTION OF BEGINNING TEACHERS' TROUGH E-MENTORING STRATEGIES

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Abstract

The beginning in any profession involves an effort to adapt both the new employees and the organizations in which they will work, and which conduct, in many situations, training programs for new employees, internships, apprenticeships, mentoring and guidance, etc. New employees are thus in a period of transition in which they must gain experience that will make them productive in the organizations in which they have been hired. In this context, our article aims to analyze the mentoring activity at the beginning of the career of newly hired teachers, customizing the dimension of E-mentoring, a form of professional mentoring that develops in the context of evolving technologies and social conditions in which teachers operates. The paper presents qualitative research, conducted among teachers in Romania, who follow specific professional development courses to become mentors, either for students who are preparing to become teachers, or for beginning teachers, newly hired in the education system.

Keywords: E-mentoring, mentoring, teaching profession

1. Introduction

1.1. Teacher mentoring in Romania

The need for a skilled professional insertion of the beginning teachers lies in the fact that they have the obligation to adapt quickly to the new professional requirements and to ensure quality educational services to their students. The attraction of young people for the teaching profession in Romania is quite low, many students wanting to specialize as future teachers in parallel with specialization in another field because they see employment in education as a secondary opportunity if they do not find something else. Which pays better and offers more development opportunities.

In Romania, there are few statistical data available on students who choose, in parallel with the basic specialization, to follow the courses of the psycho-pedagogical training program for certification in the teaching profession. There is also little data on beginning teachers. In the Romanian education system, we can associate the beginning of the didactic career with the taking of the tenure exams, but many of those who take such exams are not necessarily beginners. The data regarding teachers who leave the education system in the first years from the beginning of their career are not available for the Romanian education system either. In this context, we consider that these data are particularly important for the development of coherent programs of initial and continuous training of teachers, of good insertion and of mentoring throughout the professional life.

A report by the European Commission (Kitchen et al., 2017) shows that the support system provided to beginner teachers in Romania is dysfunctional, even if there are formal regulations on teacher mentoring. The report also shows that the practical training of future teachers in the initial training programs in Romania is insufficient. In addition, some of the forms of professional development that are based on collaborative learning are insufficiently valued (e.g., observing the activities of colleagues, debates and feedback on teaching practices, mentoring and E-mentoring, etc.).

Teacher mentoring has often been associated with the beginning of a career, but research shows that it should be provided for the entire professional life of a teacher. One of the European Commission's objectives for securing the European Education Area by 2025 is that "teachers and trainers need continuous opportunities for professional development" and to be involved throughout their careers in career development programs.

The OECD and the European Commission's Structural Reform Assistance Service, following an analysis of education policies in Romania in 2017, make a series of recommendations on professional development and career management for teachers, including:

i. Professional development programs to be conducted according to the needs of teachers.

ii. Professional development to be achieved at the level of the schools in which they conduct their activity but also to support the collaboration between schools, the exchange of experience, the collaboration between teachers.

iii. Identifying and developing alternative teaching methods, promoting authentic teaching strategies, etc.

A 2018 Eurydice report shows that in many European countries there is a shortage of teaching staff, associated with certain geographical areas or disciplines, environment of residence, competing

professions that young beginners can access and more attractive working conditions within the aging teachers, etc.

As shown in the *Report on the state of pre-university education in Romania, 2021*, in Romania, the situation is good in preschool and primary education, but starting with the middle school cycle, there is a shortage of staff in subjects such as mathematics, chemistry, physics, computer science, foreign languages. In addition, the teaching profession remains strongly feminized, especially for the preschool and primary school. The European Commission, in 2017, points to the need to increase the attractiveness of the teaching profession, seen as a dynamic profession, which includes lifelong development, developing the capacity of teachers to adapt to change and cope with challenges, collaboration with colleagues, use of new technologies and innovations in teaching and progress. The cited document also shows that phenomena such as: the increase in expectations related to education (students' results, their level of education and that of graduates), high pressures generated by the great diversity of students, rapid technological innovations and their impact on school and students, affect deeply exercising the teaching profession. In this context, it is necessary to adopt, among other measures, various strategies and forms of initial and continuous professional development, support at the beginning of the career, the development of networks of mutual support between teachers. The quoted report shows that forms of collaboration with colleagues, teamwork and peer learning should be stimulated and become widespread practice throughout Europe.

1.2. Teacher mentoring – a necessary service for teachers

Mentoring is a support service for teachers, defined as a "complex professional activity carried out by a mentor teacher which involves, in detail, the specific action of pedagogical mediation, guidance, facilitating learning and professional development, counseling, support, guidance, offering beneficial professional experiences, integration in (micro) community, etc" (Bocoş, 2018, p. 102).

Used since antiquity, the concept of "mentor" shows that he is an experienced person who transfers what he knows to a disciple through a mentoring relationship. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the mentor was the one who provided support to young people for learning various occupational practices (army, medicine), in the 19th century its use was extended to more fields, including education.

Mentoring is a supportive relationship for learning and education, between a mentor, represented by a person willing to share his experience and knowledge and another person, usually with less experience, willing to receive help and develop professionally. The mentor is a skilled professional, specialist, with expertise in the field, who supports a person or a group in the learning and development process (Stan, 2020).

Often associated with early career, mentoring is perceived as a form of support, especially for this category of people. The European Commission, in the handbook for decision-makers who contribute to the admission and introduction of the teaching profession, shows the importance of providing support for novice teachers, in three directions: personal, social, and professional (European Commission, /EACEA/EURIDYCE, C., 2018).

An analysis of the teaching mentoring provided to new teachers shows that the admission and mentoring of new teachers are widely regulated in most European countries, being mandatory in 26

countries, with both differentiations and common forms, such as: providing mentoring services, professional development, peer learning and the support of the school principal. It is compulsory in 29 European education systems and recommended in another five. Although the need for support is felt throughout the teaching career, mentoring is less regulated for teachers other than beginners. The analysis shows that only in Estonia (where it is also mandatory for admission to the profession) and Finland, schools are recommended to provide mentoring services to all teachers who need support. In other countries such as France and Hungary, mentoring is mandatory for beginning teachers and may be recommended by inspectors, where they find that teachers have poor professional results. There is no law in Greece governing the status of teacher mentoring. In Portugal, the legislation regulates the activity of beginning teachers employed on fixed-term, probationary periods. They must be supervised by a "senior teacher", chosen by the school management who: verifies if the beginner has adapted to the requirements of the job, makes an individual insertion plan aimed at developing the teaching and research skills of the beginning teacher. At the end of the probationary period, both the beginning teacher and the supervisor compile individual reports which are analyzed by an external evaluator, also a teacher. In Spain, the legislation provides for participation in training activities, in educational centers that can organize seminars, working groups, congresses, with a tutor in charge of online activities to provide help and guidance to teachers who participate in activities.

In Romania, chapter 247 of the National Education Law no. 1/2011 mentions the quality of mentor. Chapter 236 states that the pedagogical practice activity of the students / pupils, future teachers, is carried out under the guidance of teachers with the status of mentor. Ministerial Order no. 5485 of 29/09/2011 regulates the activity of the mentor teacher.

Mentors are teachers with experience in teaching a specialty, who have specific training for mentoring and who can work in this capacity in the following situations (Ezechil et al., 2013):

i.   Mentors of pedagogical practice who deal with the guidance of students / pupils who are initially trained for the teaching profession.
ii. Internship mentors for beginning teachers (until finalization in education).
iii. Professional development mentors conduct and support activities for teachers in professional development activities.

In Romania, there are professional standards for all categories of mentors, a national body of mentor teachers has been created, there are accredited continuing education providers that provide training programs in the field of mentoring, there have been training projects for mentor teachers (e.g. "*FROM BEGINNING TO SUCCESS* - national mentoring program for professional insertion of teachers"- POSDRU/57/1.3/S/36525, *"Professionalization of teaching career - PROF"*, SMIS project code: POCU / 146587). However, in current educational practice, the activity of mentor teachers (especially beginners and professional development), is only as an informal practice, the activity is not standardized, school inspectorates are not required to assume the sustainability of projects through official institutional actions (Ioja, 2019).

2. Problem Statement

The evolution of technologies, the complex social situations generated by the pandemic with COVID 19, have determined the development of new forms of mentoring, through information technologies that allow the development of various forms such as: forums, video conferencing, e-learning programs, the use of instant communication networks, setting up and acting at the level of interest groups on various topics, etc.

E-mentoring is a technology-mediated communication relationship (via e-mail, chat, video conferencing, telephony and instant communication networks, online collaboration platforms, web social media 2.0, etc.), between mentors and mentees, in which the mentor has a higher degree of expertise than the mentored teacher / group of teachers. E-mentoring (also called virtual or online mentoring) allows mentoring to take place quickly, is accessible, has the advantage that it can take place at any time and in any place between a mentor and a disciple or between a team of mentors and disciples. But, although it has many advantages related to flexibility, speed and accessibility, the absence of interpersonal relationships, face to face, it limits its effectiveness.

E-mentoring can take various forms such as:

i. Formal E-mentoring, organized, structured, in stages, planned. This form can be developed as a form of assistance for students preparing for the teaching profession or for teachers (beginners or not). It can be developed in the form of collaborative learning platforms in which those interested have access to resources but also can follow certain assisted training programs that are recognized and certified.

ii. Informal E-mentoring that develops in teacher communities as networks of mutual support, relationships are generated by immediate needs and preferences (e.g., Facebook and WhatsApp groups).

Depending on the structural dimensions of the mentoring relationship, its duration, the nature of the activity, the location, we can identify the following types of E-mentoring (adaptation Saito and Blyth, 1992, cited in: Crașovan, 2016):

i. Traditional mentoring in which the mentor can provide support (including online) to less experienced teachers.

ii. Peer mentoring, which can function as an informal (sometimes friendly) network, mediated by technology, which gives members the opportunity to follow each other's work, to quickly exchange opinions and experiences.

iii. Team mentoring and group mentoring in which the mentor may have the opportunity to collaborate with several mentors, with different areas of competence, may have access to resources targeting several areas of interest (e.g., didactic design, extracurricular activities, activity with children with special educational needs, etc.).

iv. Reversed mentoring which involves the possibility of reversing the roles in the mentoring relationship by capitalizing on the ideas or experiences of the mentored person. We believe that this form can be used, especially in the exchange of experience regarding the use of new

technologies in teaching, young people being, in many cases, more skilled in the use of technology and better acquainted with it.

The paper aims to clarify practical and theoretical aspects related to the activity of E-mentoring for teachers, to bring to the fore aspects specific to this field.

3. Research Questions

Our research aimed to identify the opinions of some teachers in pre-university education, of various specialties, regarding the provision of E-mentoring services for teaching career, what are the special issues that the E-mentoring relationship can raise, the advantages and disadvantages of a such relationships, suggestions for the development, in optimal conditions, of E-mentoring services for teachers.

4. Purpose of the Study

The main hypothesis of the research tried to show that there is a direct dependence between the need for mentoring for the exercise of the teaching profession and the diversity of the forms through which mentoring services can be provided, including those of E-mentoring.

5. Research Methods

To achieve the research objectives, we conducted a qualitative, empirical sociological research, which allows direct observation of the studied reality by applying specific methods and techniques of collecting information for processing and obtaining information about the studied phenomenon. For the research we used the focus group method, which was attended by independent groups of 87 teachers, with various specializations, from several counties in Romania, who attended training courses to exercise the quality of mentor, within the project POCU/146587, "*Professionalization of the teaching career - PROF*", in the period October 2011 - April 2022.

The participating were organized in 4 focus groups, which were attended by a variable number of teachers (between 15 and 24 people). The actions took place online, the participation being mediated through the continuous training activity in which they took part. The discussions were mediated by the authors of the article, in which the topic of E-mentoring was approached, based on a semi-structured group interview grid. The discussion framework was open, encouraging, comfortable for the participants (they were in their environment, in front of some computers), being encouraged to share their opinions, ideas, perceptions, group members influencing each other, exchanging opinions, sharing experience.

6. Findings

The participating teachers appreciated the possibility of using E-mentoring. They mentioned that in this way, not only students and beginning teachers but also more experienced teachers can have access to resources. Among the benefits offered by online resources, the following have been maintained:

    i.   documentation on certain topics of interest.

ii.   exchange of experience in managing the educational situations they face.

iii.   source of inspiration for: the use of curricular products, the elaboration of didactic strategies for teaching some topics, the elaboration of the curriculum at the school's decision, the elaboration of the evaluation tools, etc.

iv.   According to the participants, an E-mentoring service should offer to beneficiaries:

v.   access to online teaching resources (online applications - e.g., online test editor, puzzles, educational gifs, etc., various models of activities and teaching materials).

vi.   news and invitations to events.

vii.   registered teaching activities.

viii.   facilities for support groups.

ix.   courses and courses recommendations.

x.   tutorial / counseling for the use of IT means.

xi.   access to educational platforms.

xii.   online applications (online test editor, puzzles, educational gifs, etc.).

An interesting point of view indicated by the participants was that they appreciated that E-mentoring can be less formalized, that many teachers are self-taught, improve themselves and look for resources according to their own needs.

The roles of mentor in the E-mentoring activity are diversified; he can identify a series of available resources that he can be recommend to other mentored teachers. In our opinion, however, several ethical issues arise: if these resources are open, can they be widely used? How can plagiarism be avoided, and copyright respected? Are they always scientifically, correct? Other roles of the E-mentor, indicated by the participants were: mentor support in planning and designing teaching activities, in giving suggestions on teaching strategies and in providing resource, he is a motivator, information provider on specific training activities that aim to develop teachers' digital skills.

Participants appreciate that in the relationship of E-mentoring, artificial intelligence is important, as a mean of providing mentoring services, but that behind it must be people, that the mentoring relationship must be primarily an interpersonal relationship, and that facilities offered through technology can become more valuable as it is used and mediated by people.

In addition, the participants appreciated that the efficiency of the didactic mentoring relationship increases if "the interaction between the e-mentor (a person from a platform) and the face to face one is combined". E-mentoring can also be considered as a tool to build a mentoring base. They can be grouped according to specialty, expertise, training, etc. Teachers who need guidance can consult this register of mentors and ask for their support, in this way the E-mentoring activity becomes accessible to those interested, the exchange of expertise may be possible in large geographical areas, depending on the needs and the interests of those who access such services. Some critical points related to the promotion of such a service among teachers are related with standardization and rewarding of mentors. We find it difficult to identify and quantify the potential needs of mentoring service teachers and to include these services in standard and paid activities.

The E-mentor should fulfill, in the opinion of the participants in the focus groups, the same qualities as any mentor: "to know the one he is guiding, to be a good listener, able to ask useful questions,

which bring perspectives to us", "to learn together with the one he mentors, to encourage and to offer confidence", "innovative", "example for others, to offer support based on his own experience", "cooperating, collaborating, interactive".

Most participants agreed that from E-mentoring services should benefit all teachers, regardless of professional experience. One participant stated that "E-mentoring should be a pan-European online counseling service for the novice teacher through access to electronic guidance and self-assessment tools". Another view is that "E-mentoring should be a platform that promotes the same standards of guidance for all beginning teachers in their teaching career."

The *advantages* offered by E-mentoring are those identified in other research: accessibility, elimination of geographical boundaries, large number of potential users, objectivity of relationships and services offered.

The *disadvantages* mentioned by the participants related to the didactic E-mentoring are: the communication relationship is not real, being strongly influenced by technology (e.g., only nonverbal language is partially involved in synchronous communication, asynchronous communication does not ensure continuity and immediate feedback). The recommendations given are standard, non-personalized, the platform menu can be complex, unfriendly, difficult to access, requires a long search time, especially if the platform is permanently enriched with new resources. Other disadvantages indicate that in communication, synchronous or asynchronous, participants reactions may be delayed, with mentors' responses sometimes coming late. The use of E-mentoring resources is based on individual needs, on self-assessment and sometimes this perspective is individual, subjective.

Participants were asked to reflect on ways in which the mentor can contribute to the development of digital skills, in the context of the widespread use of learning management systems and e-learning tools. Participants provided opinions such as:

i.   "The mentor can be a role model, he/she must clearly demonstrate digital skills in the interactions he / she has with the beginning teacher. He /she can provide examples of his class activities or initiate virtual meetings with him on various platforms or applications, or even launch "challenges" using digital technologies. It is important that the mentor teacher regularly use digital technologies in other professional activities with colleagues, both in methodological-scientific activities, pedagogical circles, and in the exchange of everyday ideas (examples of good practices, platforms, new applications, etc.)".

ii. "The mentor can offer to the beginner suggestions on the creative use of digital resources (created by him or taken from various resource libraries), in choosing these resources, to use them in class or can help him concretely to make a material of this type, according to their own needs".

iii. "The beginner can participate in the lessons developed by the mentor, lessons in which ICT is integrated, can initiate the beginner in the use of educational platforms and various Google applications in making presentations, worksheets, assessment tests, etc.".

iv. "The mentor can familiarize the beginner teacher with platforms and various collaborative and classroom applications".

v.   "As a mentor, I encourage beginning teachers to participate in courses on the use of ICT in teaching and assessment, even if many are self-taught. Personally, I use a lot of information and communication technology (ICT) in the classroom, open educational resources (RED) and others. The mentored teacher must have, through inter-class attendance, good practice models in this regard. I encourage beginning teachers to plan their lessons by reserving in their economics stages in which to use ICT. I recommend joining eTwinning, as it is known to be the largest network of teachers in Europe that gives teachers the opportunity to work with colleagues".

vi.   "We can provide personal examples of synchronous, asynchronous teaching, using digital tools. There are many digital resources that capture us when we start to get acquainted and apply them in the teaching process. We imagine how it captures the attention of our students. We need to arouse the curiosity and motivation of the mentored teacher for an integrated approach to digital tools".

vii.   "We can ask the mentored teacher to think of a strategy for integrating digital tools in the teaching process, to which we can offer positive, constructive feedback, diplomatically improving the deficiencies we have noticed. We can think together of a strategy for inserting digital tools in the process of teaching, learning, assessment, the gain being biunivocal".

viii. "We can provide suggestions on how to use digital technology to communicate with parents, create your own collaborative sites or platforms".

ix.   "We encourage teachers to use educational platforms, digital textbooks, educational software, initiating methodological and developmental actions with topics relevant to the use of digital technologies in various disciplines and adapting the educational approach to the challenges posed by its online development".

x.   "We offer examples of good practice in choosing existing digital materials, adapted to the specifics of the class and age of students as well as concrete indications in the use of platforms at the level of various learning units".

xi.   Some of the participants appreciated that "beginner teachers have adapted very well to online teaching, teachers being familiar with digital applications and tools" (issues reported during the online inspections conducted for the selection of candidates for positions in competition).

7.   Conclusions

In the current conditions, in which the evolution of various social and technological problems is much accentuated, the development of the E-mentoring activity for teachers becomes a necessity.

The research confirms a number of theoretical and practical aspects that have been highlighted in similar research. E-mentoring triggers an online learning activity, individually or in groups, which may involve participants differently, as they may use information and learning resources in their own style (at different times, by accessing the resources they are interested in, they can choose activities individually or in groups, may request individual support from the mentor, etc.) (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2008). Research on the training of teachers to provide E-coaching and E-mentoring activities (Kovalchuck & Vorotnykova, 2017) shows that these forms of mentoring are appreciated as ways of continuous professional

development. Experienced teachers are interested in mastering the technology and offering their expertise through the facilities offered by it. However, the article draws attention to major risks related to the training of e-coaches and e-mentors and their competence in the field of new information and communication technologies.

Through internet services, e-coaching and E-mentoring applications and programs may provide ongoing professional development services for teachers, but this requires additional training for e-mentors. The roles of the mentor in the E-mentoring relationship are diversified in relation to the classic mentoring activity. The E-mentoring activity can be carried out both synchronously, the mentor and the mentee being directly connected through technology, and asynchronously, the two partners accessing resources at different times, depending on interests, time availability, access, etc. The E-mentoring relationship can be developed according to the needs of the users. The technology offers the advantage of being able to store, in the form of tutorials, podcasts, electronic material archives, databases, etc., resources of interest that can be accessed by beginning teachers, whenever they need them.

However, it is important that these resources are either scientifically correct, respect the copyrights of those who created them, or accessible, can be taken over and adapted, in the educational practice of those who access them, those interested must know that I can access these resources and how I can do it. Even if the relationship of E-mentoring leaves some freedom to users, we emphasize the importance of setting goals for professional development, the effectiveness of E-mentoring being dependent on the characteristics of the mentor such as: desire to improve, confidence, openness to new, availability of learning, ability to use technology, etc.

E-mentoring eliminates the problem of spatiality, as both mentors and mentees can be positioned in any geographical area, provided that they can understand each other in a common language (speak the same language, use known and compatible technologies). It is necessary for users to have a certain level of digital skills, to know, to apply electronic resources, to be willing to learn other ways to use.

An issue that can be raised is related to the accounting of the activity carried out by the mentor and the mentored, the online platforms giving the possibility to record the duration and the synchronous activity carried out by them.

The time allocated to mentoring activities can be made more efficient by placing electronic resources on the platform, which those interested can access, by preventing possible questions and publishing standard answers. This can make the use of feedback time more efficient.

The development of online resources can sometimes be the task of the mentor (e.g., filming and publishing meaningful recordings: lessons, podcasts, model teaching projects, assessment tests, etc.), which raises the issue of copyright and use of these resources. It is necessary for both the mentor and the person (s) to be familiar with how to use electronic resources.

Other research shows that didactic E-mentoring has a number of advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages are issues such as: elimination of geographical distances, great flexibility in programming, low administration costs (involves lower costs than the development of face-to-face relationships), may involve various people with varied expertise. The disadvantages of E-mentoring are related to aspects such as: asynchronous communication does not allow immediate feedback which can be

an obstacle in the mentoring relationship, the duration of establishing interpersonal relationships can be longer, there is a risk that this will never happens.

We consider that the E-mentoring activity is necessary for the development of teachers' competencies, the principles that can be taken into account in the organization of the E-mentoring activity can be (adapted after Henry & Meadows, 2008):

i.   Online activity is a learning environment in itself, requires the mentor to concentrate and motivate to access resources and learn individually, without always receiving immediate support from the mentor.

ii.   The mentor must be motivated to learn, to use the electronic resources at his disposal.

iii.   Technology is just a tool, important is the way it is used in teacher development.

iv.   Mentors may sometimes have better digital skills than mentors. Let's not forget that mentors can be teachers who have developed their digital skills in different periods, mentors have learned to use technology while mentors have had access to technology much earlier.

v.   Mentoring activity is defined by connectivity, by interaction. No matter how good the published resources are, the mentors appreciate: the interaction with the mentors, the feedback given and received, the speed of the answers received to the questions asked, the frequency of contact with the mentors, the objectives of the clear mentoring relationship, the exemplification of how electronic resources can be used. etc.

vi.   The perception of belonging to the mentoring community is essential and determines the reaction of those involved (mentors and mentors).

vii.   A good quality of E-mentoring services requires the collaboration of people with various fields of expertise (mentors, teachers, computer scientists, etc.) and the adaptation of applications, resources, depending on the feedback received from users.

viii.   Online platforms should allow users to stay in the community (e.g., some mentored people become mentors for others, allow them to share experiences, good practices, etc.).

Our research has a limited scope in terms of number of participants and geographical area, the opinions expressed by participants bearing the imprint of subjectivity. But the points of view expressed by the participants are validated by other similar research, they complement them, they can be starting points in future research and in the organization of E-mentoring programs for teachers.

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