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Päivi Kupila
University of Tampere, Finland, paivi.kupila@uta.fi

Tuulikki Ukkonen-Mikkola
University of Tampere, Finland, tuulikki.ukkonen-mikkola@uta.fi

Kyllikki Rantala
University of Tampere, Finland, kyllikki.rantala@uta.fi

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Interpretations of Mentoring during Early Childhood Education Mentor Training

Päivi Kupila
Tuulikki Ukkonen-Mikkola
Kyllikki Rantala
University of Tampere, Finland

Abstract: This study examines how interpretations of mentoring by trainee mentors (TMs) changed over the course of a mentor training programme, and how this contributed to the TMs' professional development. The context of the study was a mentor training programme for preschool teachers who mentor early childhood teacher students during their practicums. This article presents a thematic content analysis of qualitative narrative data gathered from the TMs' narrative writings on the mentor training programme (N=36) and the TMs' contributions at one focus group interview (N=5). The findings suggest that the TMs' interpretations produced two main themes. First, changes in the interpretations were recognized concerning the task of mentoring, learning, and the relationship of the mentor and the student. Secondly, the TMs gained in confidence and expertise. The TMs thus developed their professional identity as mentors. Mentor training prepared the TMs for the mentoring process.

Introduction

Mentors play a significant role in early childhood education and care teacher education, and teachers need to be prepared for this task (Balduzzi & Lazzarri, 2015; Leshem, 2012). The education of mentors is carried out in many countries. Beutel and Spooner-Lane (2009) point out that mentoring relationships are most effective when mentors are trained for their roles. Nevertheless, there is considerable variation in competence and qualification requirements (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, & Neuman, 2010). In many countries, there is a wide variety of courses on offer for mentors. For example, in Norway, the completion of an additional qualification is required before taking a mentoring position (Oberhuemer, 2015). Although mentor training is considered important, mentors may also work without prior mentor training. In the mentoring relationship, a preschool teacher, who is more experienced and has more competence, instructs and gives support to the teacher student, who has less experience and who will soon start his/her career in early education (see Murray, 2001). The mentor training programme is obligatory for preschool teachers mentoring preservice students of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) at the University of Tampere (Finland); without the training, they are not permitted to mentor students.

This paper focuses on trainee mentors (TMs) and their interpretations of mentoring during a mentors' training programme that involved preschool teachers supervising teaching teacher students. The training programme was realized at the University of Tampere in the southern part of Finland for preschool teachers who serve as mentors to preservice students of

ECEC who are undergoing their practicums. This paper will focus on the development concerning these TMs' interpretations of mentoring and the role of the mentor. Furthermore, it describes the change in the mentors' interpretations of mentoring during the training programme. Most participants in the training did not have experience of student mentoring. The article presents a thematic content analysis of qualitative narrative data gathered from the narrative writings of participants of the mentor training programme (N=36) and their contributions at one focus group interview (N=5).

Mentor Training in the Context of Preschool Teacher Education

In Finland, the training for preschool teachers (including kindergarten teachers) is a 180-credit bachelor's-level degree programme. The research-based training contains studies of educational science, approaches to childhood, pedagogy, sociology, psychology, and the arts. Preschool teacher training involves lectures, seminars, small group exercises, and practicums in a preschool. Each practicum has different goals. The first practicum focuses on observing the learning environment, the children, and the professional identity and ethics of the preschool teacher. The second practicum deals with the pedagogy and curriculum work of ECEC. The third practicum focuses on the holistic responsibility in the preschool teachers' work, including cooperation with the preschool's multiprofessional team and the children's parents. During this third period, students also investigate the development process in the preschool. Each of these practicums is guided by a university lecturer (the tutor) and a preschool teacher (the mentor).

Practicums are essential learning arenas for students to develop professionally. The importance of a student's first years of practice in respect to their later professional development is well documented. It is during this crucial early period that the students grow into their future roles as teachers and the construction process of professional identity begins. Furthermore, Pendergast, Garvis, and Keogh (2011) state that students have the opportunity to face the reality of the role during these practicums. It is thus very important that the practicums in preschools are guided by trained and motivated mentors (Balduzzi & Lazzarri, 2015; Leshem, 2012; Ukkonen-Mikkola & Turtiainen, 2016).

The context of the study was a mentor training programme organized in 2014. The TMs were trained to work as mentors for preschool teacher students undertaking their practicums in preschools. The training programme was called "Mentors, Meanings, and Possibilities", and 36 preschool teachers participated in the training. The aims of the training were to increase the TMs' understanding of the practical, supportive, and interactive relationships in the field of ECEC, and in addition the pedagogical qualifications of ECEC professionals and the reflective and evaluative practices in ECEC.

The aim of the training programme was also to study the curriculum of ECEC preschool teacher training. During the training, the TMs concentrated on the components of interaction, interaction skills, the nature of guiding questions, assessment, and feedback. Five lecturers who were working at the university organized the training, which included four contact seminars over four months. The participants were required to complete reflective tasks and practice interaction skills, and to likewise give feedback between the contact seminars.

Mentoring as Support in the Professional Development Process

According to the classical definition, mentoring can be seen as a "professional guidance relationship in which an experienced, intellectually and socially valued mentor acts as adviser for a less experienced employee and helps this 'mentee' develop his/her work" (Heikkinen, Jokinen, & Tynjälä, 2012, p. 13). In the early education setting, mentoring can be viewed as an essential part of the professional development process (Karila & Kupila, 2010). It is considered a valuable means of facilitating learning through reflection on personal experience, developing confidence and skills, and dealing with problems in professional relationships (Aubrey, 2011). Heikkinen, Jokinen, and Tynjälä (2012) have analysed the conceptual change that has taken place towards mentoring being associated with collaboration and collegiality. Likewise, Gabriel and Kaufield (2008) and Paris (2010) emphasize mentoring as a shared and reciprocal activity. In mentoring, two or more people form a relationship of mutual trust. The idea of mutuality highlights that each participant usually has something of value to contribute and gain from the other (Angelique, Kyle, & Taylor, 2002, p. 199). Le Cornu (2005) argues that peer mentoring utilizes the latest conceptualization of mentoring, where all teachers give and receive support. This also refers to the general prevailing view that there is a current shift away from hierarchical one-way approaches towards more reciprocal relationships in which everyone is positioned as a co-learner or co-constructor of knowledge (Le Cornu, 2005, p. 358).

However, as a term, mentoring has multiple meanings. Mentoring is also used to achieve different goals (Heikkinen, Jokinen, & Tynjälä, 2012, p. 13). In the context of teacher development, Rippon and Martin (2003, pp. 211–226) emphasize the need for mentoring to help the development of professional identity in teaching. Mentoring is also seen as a means of professional development that has benefits for both the cognitive and socio-emotional aspects of early educator learning (Peterson, Valk, Baker, Brugger, & Hightower, 2010). As a result, mentees come to identify themselves as competent professional insiders, often relinquishing anxieties and beliefs about their own inadequacy along the way (Johnson, 2007, p. 22).

Ambrosetti and Dekkers (2010) highlight mentoring as a special process that involves both mentors and mentees. The mentor role has multiple features: it is dynamic, it involves both relationship and process aspects, and it is contextually based. The mentor can be supportive, a role model, a facilitator, a collaborator, and an assessor. The mentee can be, for example, an observer, a reflector, or an active participant. Both the mentor and the mentee must be aware of their respective roles and how they should interact.

In this article, we perceive mentoring to be an interaction process that aims to support the identity construction and professional development of teacher students in ECEC. In the context of learning at work, the student has a responsibility for his/her learning and development. Furthermore, the student is treated as an active and reflective learner who is involved in active interaction with the learning environment. The foundation of the student's learning and mentoring is their personal learning plans and learning objectives. It is furthermore important to support the student's personal aims. The mentor also works as a role model and as an example of a professional (Johnson, 2007). In Russell and Russell's (2011) study, mentors also viewed themselves as guides and individuals offering resources. These roles have an impact on student learning. A good relationship with the mentor supports the student's professional identity construction (Johnson, 2007, p. 22).

There are some earlier studies on mentor training, although this topic is under-researched in early education. Mentoring is studied more in the school context (e.g. Heikkinen, Jokinen, & Tynjälä, 2012). Balduzzi and Lazzarri (2015) have acknowledged that ECEC mentors need to be guided and supported to engage in constructive and reflective

dialogue with students. Ukkonen-Mikkola and Turtiainen (2016) have shown that students, mentors, and university lecturers appreciate mentor training. These groups consider mentor training to improve the quality of mentoring. In her study on classroom teachers, Ambrosetti (2014, p. 39) found that mentor training changes both the understanding and the practices of mentoring. Graves (2010) states that mentor training is important for teachers to enable them to understand their role.

Mentor development also means a change in the mentor's identity as a mentor. The professional development of the mentor is influenced by the mentor's personal history, understanding of learning, and personalized understanding of supervision. Dealing with challenges and developing an identity as a mentor are complex processes involving the negotiation of meanings among participants in the social context. Identity work is also imbued with tensions and struggles (Chappell, Scheeres, & Solomon, 2007, p. 167). Furthermore, identity work includes developing an understanding of the mentor's roles and responsibilities, conceptualizing knowledge and work skills, and changing one's understanding of one's identity within the mentoring relationship (see Chappell et al., 2007, p. 167). Identity formation requires a place where one can experience knowing as a form of social competence (Wenger, 2000, p. 241).

Research Questions

We focused on the early development of the TMs' interpretations of mentoring during the mentor training programme. We investigated the change in the trainee mentor's interpretation of mentoring and interpretation of working as a mentor. The research objectives are summarized in the following two questions:

1. What kind of interpretations of mentoring do the TMs have before, during, and after the mentor training programme?
2. What kind of interpretations do the TMs have of their work as a mentor before, during, and after the mentor training programme?

Methodology: A Narrative Approach

The data was collected from the TMs participating in the mentor training programme. The data consisted of the TMs' narrative writings (N=36) and their contributions in one focus group interview (N=5). Thus, the data were collected from 36 preschool teachers in the form of narrative writings, and five of the 36 also participated in the focus group to expand on their reflections. First, all the participants of the mentor training wrote the narrative writings. The narrative writings were written during the last day of the mentor training programme. The researchers organized the writing session and gave the participants the necessary instructions. The narrative writings included questions to be examined in order to support reflection on the mentoring progress. The questions focused on the TM's role as a mentor before the training, during the training, and in the future, and asked the TM to reflect on the time before the mentor training. The questions were set as "Remember the time when you started the mentor training. Describe your mentor's role and mentoring during that time", "What do you think of your role as a mentor now, after the training?", and "What kind of mentor do you want to be in a year's time?"

Secondly, the focus group interview was conducted at the end of the training. Two of the researchers led the focus group interview and the discussions were transcribed verbatim. The participants of the focus group had also written the narrative writings. The participants

had different working and supervision backgrounds. In the interview, they were asked to reflect on their personal interpretations of mentoring. They were asked to describe their thoughts on mentoring; working as a mentor; the difficulties, challenges, and development needs they faced; and how they would describe the changes that happened in relation to these aspects.

The analysis narrates the TMs' interpretations of mentoring. The analysis focused on the narratives' details, which is crucial to the narrative approach and provides descriptive insights into the participants' personal interpretations (see Goodson & Gill, 2011). The narrative approach is seen to identify interpretations through which sense is made of the construction of the trainee mentor's interpretations, work, and identity as a mentor.

In this study, we regard the focus group interview and narrative writings as narrative acts. These narrative acts provide narrative accounts of the TMs' early career and process of identity work (see Riessman, 2008). Narrative here can be seen as a "way of constructing and communicating meaning" and expressing experience and aims (Goodson & Gill, 2011, p. 93). In accordance with the narrative approach, in the data analysis the interview and writings of each TM were analysed side by side to construct a holistic view of the interpretations. Like Polkinghorne (1995, p. 5), we use the phrase "narrative configuration" to refer to "the process by which happenings are drawn together and integrated into a temporally organized whole". Furthermore, we use the analysis of narratives, by which Polkinghorne (ibid.) means collecting the stories as data resulting in descriptions of themes that hold across the stories.

Thus, the analysis of narratives moves from stories to common elements (ibid.), and thematic data analysis was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Roulston, 2001). Themes were used to capture important aspects in the data, firstly, in relation to the TMs' interpretations of mentoring, secondly, their contribution to the TMs' professional development as mentors, and thirdly, their characterizing features (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). Permission to use the narratives for research purposes was obtained from the participants. A guarantee of confidentiality was given to the informants, stating that no actual names would be used and no ECEC centres would be identified in the reporting.

Results

The following section describes the change in the TMs' interpretations of mentoring during the training programme. Changes in the interpretations were recognized concerning the task of mentoring, learning, and the relationship of the mentor and the student.

	Before the mentor training programme	**During the mentor training programme**	**After the mentor training programme**
Task of mentoring	• limited • unclear • challenging • significant • technical	• cleared up	• diversified • complex • demanding
Mentoring relationship	• mentor's role emphasized • direct supervision • mentor is solely responsible for the supervision	• student's individuality was identified • mentor as a fellow traveller • other members of the community are also responsible for mentoring	• student has an active role in the interaction • mentoring as a task of the community

Interpretation of learning	• transfer of information from mentor to student	• model learning • mentee's needs and aims taken into consideration • shared reflection	• reciprocal learning • social learning

Table 1. Change concerning the interpretation of mentoring.

Interpretations of Mentoring

Mentoring as a Limited Task

Before the training, the TMs had seen mentoring as a significant but restricted and unfocused task. Likewise, they considered mentoring to be challenging: it was new and unfamiliar. They also considered mentoring to be a technical operation, involving such tasks as filling in forms. The following quotes indicate the TMs' constrained understanding of mentoring:

I didn't think anything in particular about mentoring (TM 2).

The role of the mentor was mainly giving feedback in a discussion (TM 10).

Before the mentor training, the TMs had emphasized their role and action as instructors. They generally considered mentoring to be direct supervision; the student had to follow the mentor's instructions. Some of the participants were aware of the student's needs. Before the training, the TMs had considered mentoring to be a relationship only between the mentor and the student. As the following quotation confirms, they had also interpreted learning as a one-sided transfer of knowledge from the mentor to the student:

It is a knowledge transfer from one's own important work. It is the appreciation of my work. (TM 12)

Developing the Interpretation of Mentoring

During the training, the interpretation of the task of mentoring was clarified. The interpretation of the mentoring relationship broadened from the examination of the TMs' own activity to a shared, "fellow traveller" relationship between the student and the mentor. The TMs began to consider the significance of interaction between the mentor and student. The TMs also acknowledged the need to give the student free space to work and considered mentoring from the student's point of view. Furthermore, the TMs realized that the students have their own aims and their own solutions to problems. As the following quotation shows, the TMs began to see mentoring as an activity that spreads outwards:

In future, I also want to encourage other members of the work community to give the student feedback (TM 10).

During the training, the TMs began to regard the student and mentor's discussions as a valuable learning arena. They considered questioning a significant method of mentoring. Furthermore, the TMs understood the student's suggestions as being more relevant than before.

I have to open my eyes to the students' ideas (TM 12).

The participants of the training emphasized the student's point of view and needs, and found it important to be able to meet them. Some TMs emphasized the student's learning as learning from the mentors' model. However, the mentor can also learn from the student. In a mentoring relationship, the student can be a "mirror" for the mentor, just as the mentor can be a "mirror" for the student.

Interpretation of Mentoring Diversified

After the mentor training, the newly qualified mentors also began to see mentoring as a broader and more demanding task: they acknowledged that the student has an active role in the mentoring relationship. The mentors emphasized student mentoring as a task for the whole preschool community, and as such it should be involved in the mentoring process. The mentors also reported that they now understood the significance of reflection. They acknowledged the importance of interactive and reciprocal learning between the mentor and student, and many emphasized shared learning.

> *I now understand that mentoring is not the same as teaching: rather, it involves reciprocal learning and guidance (TM 26).*

Interpretations of Working as a Mentor

Next, we reveal the changes of interpretation related to working as a mentor. The interpretation of professionalism as a mentor was seen in the TMs adopting and developing their understanding of the complex role they had to play. Furthermore, the TMs developed their professional identity as mentors.

	Before the mentor training programme	**During the mentor training programme**	**After the mentor training programme**
Working as a mentor	• uncertainty • ambivalence with skills	• reflection and self-examination • identity work	• mentor's role clarified • self-confidence • identity as a mentor • interactive and supervising skills

Table 2. Change concerning the interpretation of working as a mentor.

Uncertainty in the Beginning

Two-thirds of the TMs wanted support from the training to develop their expertise. These TMs had experienced uncertainty concerning their abilities as supervisors and had doubted their ability to work as mentors.

> *I doubted my validity for the task because my own studies finished more than ten years ago. The means [of mentoring] were perhaps from the memories of my own time of study and I didn't want the students to experience the same as I had experienced. (TM 18)*

At the beginning, some of the TMs did not consider the mentor's role to be important. Many of the TMs did not have previous experience of mentoring and many of them had only their own memories of being supervised as a student. Most of the TMs also had out-of-date knowledge about contemporary preschool teacher training and they did not know its current goals and demands. The experience of uncertainty can be seen as a breach in one's ability, which is manifested as uncertainty in acting as a mentor. Those who experienced this uncertainty did not trust themselves, and the responsibilities included in the role were difficult for them to understand. Many of the TMs were not aware of the functional demands of mentoring, or what was expected of the mentor. Other aspects unclear to the TMs included

what the goal orientation of the mentoring relationship was, what they should expect from the student's performance, and what kinds of issues they could face.

One-third of the TMs considered themselves to already possess sufficient skills at the beginning of the training. The TMs considered the training as an opportunity to develop their professional abilities. These TMs were certain of their competence, as the following quote shows:

I think that I am well prepared to act as a mentor (TM 23).

In general, many of the TMs saw themselves as role models for the students. The TMs' confidence stemmed from trust in their abilities, work experience, appreciation of early childhood education, and earlier experiences of mentor training. These perceptions can be identified in the following comments from TMs:

I had instructed many students and I had a lot of experience and strength in acting as an instructor (TM 23).

The role of the mentor seems natural and agreeable to me (TM 27).

Some of the TMs who had already acted as mentors reflected critically on the character and quality of their own mentoring experiences.

Reflection and Self-examination Begin

During the training, the TMs began to reflect and examined themselves, and they assessed their readiness to act as mentors. This reflection concerned the TM's abilities, development, and self while working as a mentor. The TMs also justified and examined their professional, pedagogical work and methods in early education. They also examined their professional, cognitive, and personal development. As the training proceeded, many of the participants highlighted their interest in mentoring, their enthusiasm to instruct, and their opportunities to learn. As the following quote shows, they also examined their own adequacy as mentors:

[I possessed an] ignorance, in a way, of what is enough, and what is sufficient in mentoring (Focus group, TM 1).

The process of training clarified the mentor's role, and the readiness to receive the student and give guidance was strengthened.

The Mentor's Role

At the end of the training, the role of the mentor was clarified. All newly qualified mentors mentioned that training increased their confidence to act as mentors. They reflected on the qualities of a good mentor and good mentoring. They highlighted the demands of the mentor's role and the complexity of mentoring. It was noted, for example, that to the student the mentor is the professional model of the ECEC worker, and the mentor conveys an appreciation of the ECEC work to the student. Likewise, mentors considered their role significant when the student is constructing his/her professional identity, when providing support for the student's professional development process, and when the student has doubts about his/her career choice.

Mentors considered the mentoring task demanding when the student lacked motivation or if the student doubted his/her abilities to perform as a preschool teacher. One mentor mentioned that in this kind of situation, it is very important to be honest and to tell the student about the mentor's own career choices. Another mentor reflected that discussion with the student is essential and that the mentor has to give the student feedback, especially regarding the student's successes.

The mentor's professional development was characterized by an increase in self-knowledge and the wish to continue the personal development process. One of the mentors studied her need to please and reported that her self-knowledge had increased. One of the mentors expressed the need to develop thus:

Acting as a mentor is a great opportunity for me to grow as a teacher, and above all, to grow as a human being (TM 30).

After the uncertainty at the beginning of the training, the mentors expressed their feelings of being up to the task of mentoring. During the training, the mentors had to develop their guidance and social skills. This appeared as courage and as skill in making specifying and target-oriented questions, directing the discussion, and supporting the student's thinking and problem-solving. As the following excerpts show, the mentors highlighted the meaning of the right target-oriented questions:

If somebody [i.e. the student] goes a little off course, you have to be able to ask the right question (Focus group, TM 1).

I wonder how I am able to arrange enough time for an undisturbed discussion and how I can get the student to talk about her own thoughts and feelings more.

I hope that I can ask the right questions at the right moment and remember to offer encouragement at the right time. (TM 30)

The mentors mentioned that the training had given them the tools to give and receive constructive feedback. They reported that they had developed an awareness of what kind of guidance different sorts of situations require. However, the mentors stated that it is not easy to recognize the limits of when to get involved in a student's practice and actions:

Where the limit is, when to let the student clarify and find his/her own professional way, and when to intervene … this has to be negotiated personally with the student (Focus group, TM 3).

The skills learned – to direct the discussion, give and receive feedback, and utilize different kinds of guidance and interaction models – are also transferable to other interactive situations in teamwork. The mentors also wanted to share these skills with the day care community.

At the end of the training, the mentors considered the mentor development process to be continuous – "The road is long" (TM 3) – and it is important to plan the route with the mentee. The mentors highlighted their development challenges and mentioned that it is important to strengthen the theoretical base of mentoring. They also acknowledged the importance of developing listening skills and the ability to direct the student's reflection and argumentation. The mentors expressed courage and increased self-confidence. This also manifested itself as an acceptance of the tensions between professional interactive relationships. According to some of the mentors, they had developed the courage and the confidence to bring up difficult matters with colleagues.

Mentor training strengthened the mentors' perception of mentoring as a meaningful task. One of the participants stated that she understood that the more skilled the mentor and student are as professionals, when they both develop professionally, the better the needs of the children will be fulfilled and the children will be better seen and heard. The training provided them with an enthusiasm for mentoring and they were eager to start. With the greater understanding, the enthusiasm and desire to mentor increased and strengthened:

I feel that I have new methods, and with their help I can ensure that we both – the student and I – continue our journey (also after our time together) richer than we were before (TM 8).

I now feel that I would like to start work as a mentor (TM 27).

I await the future students with confidence and I am full of enthusiasm (TM 26).

Discussion

The aim of the study was to investigate how the interpretations of trainee mentors (TMs) changed over the course of a mentor training programme in relation to mentoring, and how this contributed to the mentors' professional development as mentors. The results show that the understanding of the complexity of mentoring was confirmed. The interpretation of the task of mentoring diversified. First, the participants acknowledged the challenging nature of mentoring; secondly, the essential mutuality of interaction in the mentoring relationship was acknowledged; and thirdly, the nature of the learning process was seen as interactive, with both the student and the mentor having an opportunity to learn. This confirms Ambrosetti's (2014, p.140) finding that mentors appreciate knowledge about the nature of mentoring. During the training, the consciousness and importance of interactive, reflective, and shared learning between the mentor and mentee increased (see also Ingleby, 2014, p. 24). Effective mentoring between the mentor and the student is characterized by coequal and reciprocal relationships. Again, Ambrosetti (2014) highlights that the mentor and mentee can travel together on a common journey during the practicum. Before the training, the TMs interpreted mentoring solely as a one-way process, with knowledge transfer from the mentor to the student. Gradually, mentoring was seen as a general task of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) multiprofessional team and community.

The interpretation of the trainees in terms of what a mentor is changed during the training process. The interpretation of working as a mentor illustrated that the TMs had a willingness to assume responsibility for their professional development and strove to determine the nature of their professional roles as mentors. Ambrosetti (2014) found a wide range of roles and uses for mentors. Ambrosetti and Deckers (2010) add that it is important for mentors and mentees to understand their roles. Our results show that the mentors developed a clear understanding of their mentoring responsibilities. Furthermore, the increasing self-knowledge and the need to develop was part of this process (see also Kupila, Lääperi, Ahlqvist, & Koivisto, 2013). For the TMs, the training facilitated them in shaping their mentoring identities. The TMs formed and deepened their personal understanding of what defined them as mentors. The results indicate the occurrence of engagement in mentoring. Empowerment thus involved the TMs making their skills and professional abilities known to both themselves and others. Furthermore, through the training, the participants learned to cooperate and act in the work community with other adults. This finding supports the earlier study by Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, and Tomlinson (2009), in which it was found that mentor preparation produces effective mentoring strategies.

In the same vein as Ambrosetti (2014), Balduzzi and Lazarri (2015), Graves (2010), Ingleby (2014), and Leshem (2012), the results of this study also address the meaning of mentor training. Mentor training was worthwhile to the participants as future mentors. The mentor training provided to the TMs offered a means of support as they constructed their understanding of the complex nature of mentoring and increased their confidence as mentors. Our results will help TMs reflect on the early phases of their mentoring careers. Mentoring holds much promise as a means for improving the early phases of TMs' careers.

We consider mentoring to be a means of adding quality to ECEC. With qualitative mentoring, it is possible to develop both early childhood teacher education and early education in day care centres. The results of our study confirm the need for mentor training for preschool teachers who supervise students' learning during work periods in preschools. The findings of this study can be utilized when developing mentor training, and also in early childhood teacher education. According to our results, the TMs wanted to strengthen their theoretical base even further during the mentor training. This expectation challenges mentor

training to develop a theoretical approach to mentoring, for example, by setting up reading groups that meet during the training.

Moreover, mentor training is significant for early childhood education and care (ECEC). The TMs gain an understanding of the mentoring relationship and the mentor's duties. This awareness of the mentor's complex role creates opportunities for a good relationship between the mentor and student. In all, students need support in making the transition from teacher education theories to professional practice. When students have proper support, they are more likely to enhance the profession. A motivated, engaged, and skilled mentor has a significant role to play for students when structuring and mediating the pedagogy of ECEC in practice. The mentor's strength lies in practical and experimental knowledge. A competent and aware mentor has the opportunity to complete a comprehensive description of the pedagogical process and the work environment of ECEC to the student. This cooperation is an essential reflective link between education and training in formal learning and work-based learning. Thus, education and professional life work in tandem to create a learning environment for the student. Consequently, we recommend the development of mentor training in ECEC teacher training to support early childhood teacher students' professional development during their practicums. Every student should have a trained mentor.

For all the participants – the mentors, teacher students, university teachers, and researchers – it is possible to create new knowledge and engage in progressive problem-solving through reflective discussion. These reflective discussions are particularly meaningful when developing teacher training and the curriculum of ECEC teacher training at universities. In the context of the Early Childhood Education Partnership Network, the mentors strengthen collegial collaborative interaction with teachers and researchers. The social environment of the network is an essential factor in the development of effective cooperation. It is important to create and organize social and shared learning environments and to promote the various forms of participation in support of social reflection between education and the ECEC professional field. In ECEC teacher training, it would be useful to cooperate with mentors as one form of learning, and thus to support a new kind of learning community and interaction between training and the professional field.

There are some limitations to the validity of this study. A possible limitation is the influence of variables outside the programme that may have affected the mentors' professional development (see Crasborn et al., 2008). Another limitation resulted from the data being collected during the mentor training at the university. Social relationships between researchers and informants can affect the objectivity of a study (see Alderson & Morrow, 2004; Atkins & Wallace, 2012). To increase the validity, researchers used a focus group interview in addition to the narrative writings. It has been argued that validity is more likely if a variety of methods are used. However, one should be aware that many things remained untold and were thus not included in the narrative writings or the interviews. The approach used touched on sensitive issues when the TMs reflected on their own personal interpretations of supervision and working as mentors.

In future studies, it would be interesting to examine how the mentor could mediate the importance of pedagogical identity work and professionalism with the student. In addition, it would be interesting to study how the mentors' experiences and interpretations change throughout their careers.

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Note

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