The Connection between Mentoring, Continuous Learning and Sustainability

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The potential of continuous learning, sustainable development and mentoring in adult learning and working life has long been identified. However, the connection between mentoring, continuous learning and sustainability has been limited in research. This study addresses this research gap and answers the question: What are mentors' perceptions of the connection between mentoring and continuous learning and sustainability? The data consists of interviews with mentors (N=10). The data was analyzed using a thematic analysis based on a data-driven approach. The results show that mentors' perceptions of mentoring and continuous learning are related to the temporal, content and contextual dimensions of learning. In mentoring, past, present and future phenomena related to the working life are addressed and learned. The aspects of context awareness, relationality, and transferability were also evident in mentors´ reflections. The connection between mentoring and continuous learning is deeply linked to sustainability issues, offering support to new generations as they navigate the transition into the evolving workforce. This support is structured to promote ecological, economic, and social sustainability. The sustainability of working life is also strengthened by mentors' opportunities for continuous learning. However, more research is needed to develop mentoring programmes in order to unlock the broad potential of mentoring.

Keywords: mentoring, continuous learning, sustainable development, working life, sustainability

Introduction

A rapidly changing world and global megatrends such as digitalization, climate change, an aging population and various crises are creating constant demands for adults to learn new things (Dufva, 2020; Kinnari, 2020; 2020; Finnish Government, 2020). These phenomena are global trends to which both higher education and the workplace must respond (OECD, 2006). Education and the workplace are important learning environments for adults, as the learning demands created by societal and global changes require continuous learning in everyday working life for everyone at work (Lemmetty & Collin, 2020). In Finland, for example, the Ministry of Education and Culture and the parliamentary reform of continuous learning focus on continuous learning, especially for the adult population during their working life, where continuous learning means the continuous development and improvement of skills throughout the life cycle (Finnish Government, 2020; Ministry of Education

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and Culture, 2019; 2022). Continuous learning is a process aimed at promoting individual and organizational learning (Tannenbaum, 1997). Billett (2020) points out that learning at work should not be seen as something that happens by itself but is influenced by many factors. Consequently, learning at the workplace is a complex process, but it can be encouraged and supported (Dochy et al., 2022). Research suggests that the majority, around 80-90%, of adult learning takes place at work (Yeo, 2008; Marsick & Watkins, 1990). As only a small proportion of adult learning takes place in formal education and training, it is important to consider how learning at the workplace can be supported. Both in formal education and in everyday contexts such as workplaces and society, it is important to consider how the ongoing learning at work of adults in transition from education and training to workplace can be supported and made visible (e.g., D'Abate & Eddy, 2008).

In this article, continuous learning is limited to the interface between mentoring in formal education and training, and the transition to working life and continuous learning in the workplace. These stages in adult life often intertwine and manifest themselves as continuums in the life course. Workplace learning refers to learning that takes place at work and during or for work, which focuses on the work situations, work practices and work processes in which learning takes place (Billett, 2020; Collin, 2006) and can be supported in various ways. Mentoring is one way to support the transition between education and work and early career learning from a continuous learning perspective (e.g., Damsa et al., 2017; Harteis et al., 2020). In this context, mentoring can be defined as a development partnership that bridges the gap between career pathways (Blake-Beard, 2009).

Mentoring is an important way to strengthen adults' continuous learning in a way that is sustainable in working life. Continuous learning in adults' lives and at the workplace is a necessity to maintain adequate individual skills and competences (Lemmetty & Collin, 2020), but also to achieve the SDGs in the community (Blaj-Ward, 2023). Globally, the SDGs aim to address global problems such as poverty, inequality and climate change (United Nations, 2015). Unesco (2019) has highlighted the concept of education for sustainable development, which states that education should provide all individuals with the necessary knowledge, skills, values and attitudes and the opportunity for transformative continuous learning and active citizenship.

Mentoring is a key, but so far under-researched, factor in promoting continuous learning and sustainable development goals. However, in recent years there has been more research into the aims and importance of mentoring in achieving the SDGs. These studies (e.g., Blaj-Ward, 2023) are united by a desire to make mentoring processes in higher education more transparent and to develop their learning cultures to meet the multiple challenges of sustainable development. Empirical research on mentoring from the perspective of mentors and mentees, especially in the context of continuous learning, is still rather scarce so far. To address this research gap, this study empirically examines the bridging of adult formal education and continuous learning in the workplace from a mentoring perspective. It takes as its starting point the idea of learning as a life-long and deep process that intertwines with the different life courses and contexts of adults. The intersection, meeting and overlapping of family, work, study and leisure in adult life reflects a temporal continuum: past,

present and future, and the idea of the life course as a whole. In the adult life-course, learning can manifest itself as a continuum resource that strengthens individual resilience and development, as well as shared and organizational goals (Biesta, 2022). The research material consists of interviews with mentors with diverse work experience and the research question is*: What are mentors' perceptions of the connection between mentoring and continuous learning and sustainability?* The overall structure of the article is as follows: first, a Literature Review is presented, introducing previous research on mentoring, continuous learning and sustainable development, followed by a description of the methodology of this study. Next, the Results are presented, followed by the Discussion and Conclusion sections.

Literature Review:
Mentoring as a Bridge to Continuous Learning and Sustainable Development

Mentoring is no longer defined by the archetypal instructional and guiding attitude (Blake-Beard, 2009) but by a reciprocal and dialogical opportunity for mutual learning. Higgins and Kram (2001, p. 281) have proposed a theory and arguments where mentoring is viewed as a multifaceted phenomenon - a developmental network. This approach is based on the theory and methods of social networks, and it examines mentoring as a diverse relationship (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005). Mentoring is seen as a processual form of experiential learning that is built through a mentoring relationship (Bell & Bell, 2016; Reid et al., 2020). Mentoring is also seen as a tool that creates a guiding relationship (Sharma & Writer, 2015). According to Kram (1985, p. 161), the mentorship relationship progresses through specific stages (initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition) and a reciprocal dynamic relationship can foster the development of individuals as it evolves. While the young mentee gains tools to face the challenges of the early career phase, the more experienced mentor may reassess their perspectives. Mentor therefore supports the development of the mentee professionally through guidance, facilitation and support (Adler & Stringer, 2018) but at the same time opens the mentee to reflect on their own perceptions, experiments and professional career.

In this study, mentoring is defined as a developmental partnership that acts as a pathway between stages of career pathways (Blake-Beard, 2009). It supports the development of professional identity and helps to adapt to the constantly changing conditions of working life. Mentoring offers individuals ways to build bridges between different cultures, areas of expertise and professional practices. It can therefore be described as bridging mentoring, which is reciprocal and mutually beneficial; a good mentoring relationship is not a one-way street, but one in which both mentor and mentee learn and develop. Volk (2012) also defines it precisely through a reciprocal relationship. McDougall and Connolly (2020) argue that reciprocity provides an opportunity to reframe the issues that arise. They argue that reframing conversations in a mentoring context can contribute to a shift in thinking towards more progressive possibilities.

The support and guidance provided by mentoring help individuals to adapt and succeed in a changing and diversifying working life. Mentoring is thus an essential

part of modern professional development and lifelong learning, and it supports individuals' ability to navigate the constantly changing and diverse working life (Blake-Beard, 2009). In their study, Rubbi Nunan et al. (2023) identified four themes defining the mentoring relationship, which are positive relationship, growth and enabling, psychological safety, and purposefulness. According to them, the nature of the mentoring relationship in the context of working life is informal, mutualistic, and context-bound. Therefore, informal conversations related to the integration of leisure and working life also strengthened the mentoring relationship (Durbin et al., 2019). Previous research shows for example that personal, dialogic and targeted mentoring and coaching strengthen teachers' well-being and shows that high-quality and effective relationships have a positive impact on teachers' emotions, engagement, interpersonal connections and sense of achievement (Stuckey et al., 2019; Squires, 2019; Attard-Tonna, 2019).

Maunula et al. (2023; 2024) have also found that mentoring can support the learning of both the mentor and the mentee. At its best, mentoring can be a dialogical and educative process in which the mentor and mentee create new knowledge and understanding together as equal partners (Maunula et al., 2023). Educative mentoring can be seen in the mentoring relationship as developmental, integrative, and advanced. According to Maunula (et. al., 2024) developmental mentoring provided the mentee with answers and concrete guidance in the early stages of their career. Integrative mentoring was understood as an equal dialogue relationship. Advanced mentoring intrinsically emphasized equality between the mentor and mentee, centering on mutual learning and shared professional growth.

Mentoring can support adults' continuous learning. The goals and meanings of continuous learning are understood in different ways, and many goals are set for continuous learning (Biesta, 2022; Laalo et al., 2019). Continuous learning has been criticized for its vision of global competitiveness and labor market focus, and for ignoring issues such as human development, the environment or civilization (Kinnari et al., 2022). According to Biesta (2022), learning is increasingly associated with the goals of performance management, comparative advancement, competition and market-oriented social morality, with those who can steer educational processes towards predetermined learning outcomes and ideal identities being considered the best and the best teachers. Consequently, it would be increasingly important for educational institutions and organizations to pay attention to the objectives of mentoring and to the training of mentors from an educational and sustainability perspective. Sustainably set goals and objectives can help all parties involved in mentoring to grow together towards sustainable thinking and full subjectivity (see Biesta, 2022).

The phenomenon of mentoring and continuous learning is also fundamentally linked to the sustainability aspect. Sustainable development is defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brutland's commission, 1987, p. 43). A systemic understanding of ecological, economic and social sustainability is needed to address the diversity and complexity of the problems. Environmental sustainability focuses on reducing biodiversity and environmental pressures. Economic sustainability refers to balanced economic growth. Social sustainability includes

issues such as human rights, equality, equity and inclusion. In recent years, the goals and relevance of mentoring have increasingly been studied from the perspective of the Sustainable Development Goals (Blaj-Ward, 2023). Previous studies have highlighted the link between formal education, professional development and the non-educational environment. For example Bangeni, Fourie, and Pym (2023) have reflected on the role of mentoring in supporting the multiple transitions which dual professionals navigate and what this means for the provision of inclusive, quality education (Sustainable Development Goal SDG 4) with a focus on higher education. Blaj-Ward et al. (2023) have studied mentoring as part of lifelong learning and equitable access to quality education at all stages of an individual's life and career from a micro-credentials perspective. Mentoring is a valuable support system for academic researchers who want to design micro-credentials that contribute to the achievement of all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Overall, mentoring organizations is crucial to supporting the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. For example, Mentoring Europe is building a European mentoring landscape for a more inclusive European society (Mentoring Europe).

Methodology

This study examines mentors' (N=10) perceptions of the connection between mentoring and continuous learning and sustainability. The data for the study consists of face-to-face or live online interviews with 10 mentors. All interviews were carefully transcribed for further analysis. The data was collected as part of a larger dataset that looked at mentoring from the perspective of mentors. During the interviews, mentors were asked open-ended questions about, for example, their perceptions of mentoring, the learning that takes place during the mentoring process and ethical issues for the future.

The mentors had participated in mentoring training at least once and had varying degrees of mentoring experience. Mentoring experience ranged from 15 years to first-time mentors. The educational background of the mentors was a minimum master's degree. Their work experience also varied from five to almost 40 years long. They also had a wide range of work experience. Many of them have worked as a front-line employee or in a specialist role. From this perspective, the mentors studied have a strong experiential and perceptual base on the subject of the study. For this study, the mentoring relationship of the mentors surveyed had lasted one year. The mentees involved in the mentoring relationship were business students at university and in transition from studies to working life.

The research question is: *What are mentors' perceptions of the connection between mentoring and continuous learning and sustainability?*

The data analysis commenced with a holistic approach to obtain a comprehensive overview. The analysis then focused on the mentors' perceptions of the connection between mentoring and continuous learning and sustainability, along the lines of the research question. Thus, the content analysis of the data is data-driven (see Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The analysis focused on mentors' perceptions of the connection between mentoring and continuous learning and sustainability, and these perceptions

were coded from each interview data. Continuous learning and sustainability were the main themes of the analysis. In line with these themes, sub-themes were formed from the data, through which the substantive breadth of the data was structured. The sub-themes and dimensions for continuous learning were: temporal dimension, the content dimension and contextual dimension. The next stage of analysis looked at how mentoring as continuous learning reflects the sustainability sub-themes of ecological, economic and social dimensions. The findings of this research are constructed according to these main themes and sub-themes.

At all stages of the research, the research team has been self-critical in its awareness of critical points related to the different stages of the research (Patton, 2002). The research topic is broad and includes big concepts. The topic as a whole is timely, and it is both a strength and a challenge to combine mentoring, continuous learning and sustainability in the same study. This was a challenge at various stages of the research process, and the conceptual starting points in particular required particular rigor. The credibility and reliability of qualitative research can be strengthened by triangulation and self-critical observations made by a multidisciplinary team of researchers at different stages of the research process. Reliability is strengthened by discussions within the research team (e.g. Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The researchers discussed the results before the analysis, after the first analysis phase, after the preliminary results took shape, and further during the theoretical and more detailed results reporting phase. Reflective discussion between the researchers guided the interpretation of the analysis results and the way the results were presented, and through the process and discussions a common understanding of the analysis, the results and their systematic presentation emerged. In qualitative research, it is important to be able to to return to the different stages of the research and to critically examine how the results were structured.

Results

Mentors' perceptions of the connection between mentoring and continuous learning included three dimensions: temporal, content and context dimensions, which are presented in the first part of the results. The second part of the results shows how mentoring as continuous learning reflects the ecological, economic and social dimensions of sustainability. These dimensions will be explored in more detail below.

Mentoring and Continuous Learning

Temporal Dimension

Mentoring was seen by mentors as learning in a wider sense, and integrating different temporal dimensions. In the past, mentors themselves had felt that they had not received sufficient support early in their careers. Many career decisions had been made with little knowledge, alone and in uncertainty. Many training and career options and opportunities had also been unknown to the current mentors at the time.

This experience motivated them to act, and they wanted to contribute to changing the status quo and helping the new generations entering the workforce and their future. They were grateful that the experience they had accumulated over the years was valued and could be put to good use.

> *"Having been a mentor in my own organization in the past, I felt that it was an opportunity to give something to the mentee. I myself have had to learn the hard way, so I would be happy to help. We've had two-way confidential conversations. They are good for me too, they give me a perspective." Mentor 4*

> *"In mentoring, the discussion becomes equal and gets a response. It makes you realize that you are useful. You get a sense of joy and gratitude for the mentoring." Mentor 9*

In the mentoring process, mentors reported that they used their own accumulated experience as a mirror for discussions with their mentee. Mentors emphasized that in a forward-looking mentoring approach, simply transferring knowledge does not contribute to learning. The mentee should, according to the mentors, acquire the ability to adapt to current and future change situations, to be flexible and to think critically. This is what the mentor can do to guide learning in the mentoring process.

> *"In the beginning, we got off to a good start, telling each other about each other's backgrounds and establishing a relationship of trust. It has progressed so that the mentee has chosen the topics. Mentoring is more thought-provoking, and it's my job to bring out points of view. It has allowed us to discuss hard and soft issues." Mentor 4*

> *"Mentoring is about broadening perspectives on thinking and situations." Mentor 10*

According to the mentors, learning in mentoring took place in many different time perspectives. Mentors reflected on their own past experiences in working life, constantly analyzed current changes in working life and discussed with their mentee the issues of the future. Mentors described mentoring as a process and a year-long journey together as a significant learning process, where both participants learned from each other and together in all time dimensions and about a wide range of content.

Content Dimension

Mentors described mentoring as a free-form mutual sharing of experiences, reflection and learning with the mentee. This enabled continuous learning on a variety of content for both the mentee and the mentor. The mentors appreciated the opportunity to learn for themselves during mentoring, for example they were interested in different digital skills and new content in university education. However, the content covered was mainly driven by the mentee's initiatives and needs. According to the mentors' perceptions, the mentor's accumulated experience of the content was one of the starting points for mentoring and learning, but mentoring was not just about transferring knowledge, but at best about a joint articulation of new phenomena in the changing working life.

> *"It was extremely interesting to have those discussions and useful to think about the concrete issues myself. I learned myself, I'm not used to... young people have to make interview videos and film on the phone. That's what I felt I had learned myself. Luckily, I have an expert in my circle of friends, so I asked him for sparring, for both of us."* Mentor 1

According to the mentors, the diverse content of mentoring was a natural part of the process. Initially, the content covered in mentoring was related to practical knowledge and skills that the mentee would need in the near future, such as how to write a CV and how to succeed in job interviews.

> *"I can see that my mentee is motivated and committed, especially in concrete actions. And moments of shared joy are important, for example, that a young woman had overcome her fears and contacted a potential employer and then got the job. These are all things that can be celebrated together."* Mentor 6

> *"We talked about concrete issues at the end of their studies, what kind of jobs they are looking for, where their current work experience fits in. Mentee made applications and CVs and I commented on them. Job search tactics too, trying to find the keywords that make you stand out from the crowd. What you need to have on LinkedIn. Really specific, what they need and what we also went through."* Mentor 1

As the mentoring process progressed, the issues became deeper and more complex. According to the mentors, the discussions were at best able to arrive at content that would help the mentee prepare for future challenges in the working life. Mentors' perceptions were that the changing working life will be more challenging than the current one, requiring everyone, from employees to managers, to be able to learn and innovate.

> *"The content was driven by the needs of the mentee. Professional self-awareness and, at a broader level, self-awareness is fairly fragile in a young person in their twenties, so we were considering, for example, what I am like, what I am not like, what I want, what I don't want. Quite often the young person has not thought about these things, and they were enormously fruitful discussions."* Mentor 8

Contextual Dimension

According to the mentors' perceptions, the content of the mentoring sessions could be meaningfully reflected in different contexts. However, they stressed the importance of understanding the relational aspect. Decades-old knowledge and skills cannot be transferred as such, but their core content, ethics and working cultures can be learned by application and reflection. For example, motivation, the courage to apply for a job and careful preparation for a job interview were issues that could be reinforced through mentoring.

> *"There were two particularly meaningful moments in mentoring: the mentee got the internship, when the mentoring relationship started, it was a nice turning point at that point. The second was when, after the internship, he applied for a permanent position.*

We sparred over what strengths to highlight and what to emphasize in particular. Then he got the job, his first real permanent job. It was not my own success, but it was a joy to be there with him. When you see that enthusiasm and joy, you somehow feel that you have been there along the way, watching from the sidelines." Mentor 3

The mentors also found it useful to reflect together on the characteristics and general processes of work communities. According to the mentors, work-related skills were both individual and community-related, and their responsibilities were discussed with the mentee. Work communities as diverse contexts for learning and as enablers of continuous learning was a theme with many relevant themes. One was related to well-being at work, the skill of job delimitation and the whole issue of good management. This theme was more relevant today than in their early years, according to the mentors, and was relevant in all contexts. The mentors themselves also learned more about the topic during mentoring.

"It's good to teach the younger ones not to repeat my own mistakes, for example in terms of coping and such. Mentee was very good at thinking about these. For example, how to keep a balance between work and studies." Mentor 1

"I hope that mentoring has made me more sensitive to understanding people's thoughts and perspectives even better at work. I would listen more to the group and colleagues: I hope I have gained a new perspective and that my perspective has broadened." Mentor 7

The context of mentoring was broad and the transferability and applicability of the content was identified as both a strength and a weakness of mentoring. The mentor's responsibility towards the mentee was, according to the mentor, to be respectful and allow the mentee to grow at the mentees´ own pace. The mentee's learning was anchored in mentees´ starting points and context, which the mentors respected and gave space to the process.

"I knew that in university there wasn't much about transition and what the working life was like. I thought I would be able to give general advice regardless of the sector. To open up what skills are needed. Mentee wanted to ask a lot of questions about specific things in our field. But I personally feel that I can give more on a general level about expertise and work, what it means to be in the workplace and what is project work and so on." Mentor 7

According to the mentors' perceptions, continuous learning in the mentoring process was varied in time perspective, comprehensive in content and recognizing different contexts. Many of the mentors emphasized that both mentee and mentor learning occurred continuously at different stages of the mentoring process, which reinforced their understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of mentoring. Thus, the continuous learning embodied in mentoring responded in many ways to changes in the working life.

Mentoring, Continuous Learning and Sustainability

Ecological Dimension

Mentors' perceptions of mentoring and continuous learning formed links with different dimensions of sustainability. Mentors did not directly talk about sustainability as a concept, but in terms of content, sustainability was expressed in relation to many concrete phenomena. Mentoring and ecological sustainability were linked at many levels in the mentors' perceptions, both individually and through the perspectives of the work community.

> *"I feel that since there is free education in Finland, I feel that I have received a high-quality education, so of course I want to help my alma mater, my home university, and its graduates to enter society and working life. Of course I want to contribute my own knowledge and input." Mentor 7*

According to the mentors' perceptions, the new generation entering the workforce brings a new mindset to working life. Mentors appreciated and learned from mentee thinking, for example, the importance of sustainability leadership practices and decisions, and their importance had become more prominent in mentors' perceptions. According to the mentors, the future culture of the workplace would evolve significantly with the sustainability skills of the new generations.

> *"Mentoring is hugely rewarding. I've talked about it to colleagues, family and friends. I mean just enormously giving and I find that gives me a professional context, even the way I look at my colleagues and my ability as a close manager and leader. Of course mentoring supports that too. I'm not an HR manager myself, but more analytical and issue-oriented. It helps me to empathize and remember people's inner worlds." Mentor 8*

The mentors further reflected that the new generations seem to be able to use different digital solutions in a sustainable way in their working lives, based on what they observed in the mentoring. This would also be an opportunity for older generations to learn new practices. Learning from and with others at work was strongly reflected in the mentors' thinking, which also relates to sustainability and ecology. The mentors' perceptions reflected the need for a constant capacity to learn in working life and the authenticity of learning situations, as in mentoring. This is also linked to the ecological nature of learning: learning situations open up on an equal footing, without costs or environmentally damaging arrangements.

Economic Dimension

The links between mentoring, continuous learning and economic sustainability emerged in several mentors' reflections. For example, mentors felt that mentoring provided deep, meaningful and engaged learning for all participants, resulting in benefits for them personally, but also for the workplace and society at large. The use of time resources for learning was also respectful of the needs of both in the mentoring relationship. Mentoring was not costly for either party, but provided a

multi-dimensional, ongoing learning experience and future-oriented professional strengthening.

> *"Expectations that I would learn from the mentee. For example, how they think: the experts of the future, about the world and about work. There was such an expectation, but frankly it surprised me how much you learn by yourself and get different perspectives."* Mentor 7

Mentoring and continuous learning were perceived by mentors as a sustainable response to the constant changes in working life. Mentors considered mentoring to be an economically rational solution and reflected more broadly on the importance of continuous learning as part of the future of working life. Continuous learning was, in their view, a natural part of working and developing in the workplace. Mentors raised the idea that mentoring could benefit the whole work community and even society in an economically sustainable way. Being a mentor had also strengthened their perception of their own skills.

> *"Mentoring also opens your eyes to how much you already know and understand about different things. You become a bit blind to your own knowledge. In mentoring, you learn a little bit by accident that, wait a minute, I actually know something about this subject. Perhaps you can appreciate your own skills differently than before."* Mentor 3

Learning through mentoring was, according to mentors, an individual's intangible enrichment, especially early in their career, but also as their career developed. They further suggested that mentoring or other flexible approaches to learning that are strongly linked to working life would have many benefits, including financial ones. Mentors emphasized the mentee perspective in their speeches, but also raised reflections on the later stages and broader perspectives of mentoring and careers. Mentors saw the changing working life from different perspectives: from the societal level, from the level of work communities and from the level of individuals. They saw the changing working life as combining many reforms, demands and opportunities to act strategically and proactively in a sustainable way.

Social Dimension

The mentors' perceptions reflected the social sustainability considerations discussed in the mentoring conversations. According to the mentors, the new younger generations in particular needed support in general to cope and to balance their lives. Some mentors had shared their own ethical dilemmas with mentees and described how they had dealt with similar situations themselves. Practical ethical case stories had also been shared as a basis for learning and discussion in a confidential mentoring relationship. Some of the mentors had, together with their mentees, reflected on and anticipated future ethical issues in their working lives. The awareness that there could be different stages and twists and turns along the career path in the future was also valuable, according to the mentors.

"There was talk that my career hasn't gone like in the movies, in a linear way. I've been doing a second degree in between. Realistic examples are needed, that things don't always go as you plan and expect, and that's fine too." Mentor 1

Overall, mentoring and continuous learning were perceived by mentors as strongly reflecting social sustainability. Through mentoring, the mentee's social capital and networks were strengthened. For example, the mentors shared their own contacts for the mentee to use in the job search. The mentee's and mentor's understanding of the social dimensions of working life, such as awareness of the diversity of work communities, empathy and interaction skills, were also strengthened. Mentors stressed that everyone, including mentees, will work as part of a social community. Working in a community would require individuals to be accountable and ethical, for example by discussing the culture of the work community within the community. However, mentors' perceptions revealed that mentoring is not intended to pave the way for mentees.

"I didn't just think about giving the right answers, because everyone builds their own path. It's your own experience, and if someone can avoid such pitfalls, then they have done their job. For me, this is another opportunity to volunteer." Mentor 3

"I think about it from a broader perspective, I have this humanistic concept of the human being and that there should be development in the mind, be it in the personality or in the professional part, that through reflection the person develops, refines, grows as a human being, this is my idea and challenge." Mentor 4

During their mentoring relationships, the mentors had found that difficult decisions in changing working lives require a multifaceted reflection on social sustainability and ethics. What they found essential in working life was the ability to recognise the complexity of change situations and the solution-oriented and active search for new approaches. In the mentoring relationship, the mentors had recognised that their old solutions did not necessarily work as such in complex and changing work situations. There is a need to recognise changing contexts and to structure the whole. Recognising such a situation was a demonstration of the mentor's own ethical agency.

"Many people probably don't learn that expertise until they've got their first specialist job. In that sense, there were bad questions and of course I knew what I could and couldn't answer. I had the expectation that I would have given you a list of things to apply for when you graduate, but I didn't have one. I was only able to advise on where to look and how different organizations under the ministry, for example, were structured. I tried to open up the field a bit. I knew myself that this was not something I could offer. So I found that I had to clarify my own ideas a lot and try to give the best advice I could." Mentor 7

Mentoring and the continuous learning it enables was inherently socially sustainable. Regardless of background and context, generations entering the working life had the opportunity to learn with the support of a more experienced mentor and to build understanding together. The mentors who had worked in the workplace also

brought new lessons and valuable insights into the perceptions and expectations of the new generations.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore mentors' perceptions of the connection between mentoring, continuous learning and sustainability. The results of the study show that mentors' perceptions of mentoring reflect the broad potential of mentoring for continuous learning. Mentors identified mentoring and continuous learning as embodied in time, content and context. Mentoring combines different temporal dimensions as a natural continuum. The mentoring process enabled learning from past events, present circumstances and needs, as well as anticipating and preparing for the future. The content of mentoring was broad and sometimes unforeseen. The idea behind the mentoring process, according to the mentors' perceptions, was to reflect on and learn from their accumulated experience in working life together with their mentee (also Dobrow & Higgins, 2005; Bell & Bell, 2016; Reid et al., 2020). At the same time, mentoring was based on the needs of the mentee and the joint formulation of a solution to the mentee's current skills needs, which has traditionally been seen as a basic premise of mentoring (e.g., McDougall & Connolly, 2020).

In the mentoring process, the mentor and mentee operate in different contexts, which mentors consider essential to take into account and remember. Mentoring is not about transferring knowledge, as the world is changing and working life is evolving at an accelerating pace. However, relationships are formed between work contexts and there is transferability between core phenomena. Reflection on the process of change is another important aspect of mentoring. Mentoring provides an opportunity for both mentee and mentor to learn (also Billett, 2020; Collin, 2006), both from each other and together (also Maunula et al., 2023; Sharma & Writer, 2015). In the mentors' perceptions, mentoring involved all dimensions of time, reinforcing the changing perspective of work and the importance of understanding its relationality. Continuous learning is essential in changing work contexts, as emphasized by Collin (2006) and Lemmetty and Collin (2020). Understanding different contexts during the mentoring process, or enabling this understanding to start building, is essential for mentoring and continuous learning.

The second aspect of the study looked at mentoring and continuous learning from a sustainability perspective. According to this study, mentoring and continuous learning respond to current perspectives and needs for sustainability in the workplace. Tailored support in the form of mentoring helps new generations to attach themselves to the working life in a sustainable way, providing important knowledge, skills and attitudes. Mentoring and continuous learning are linked to all three dimensions of sustainability as defined by the United Nations (2015). The Sustainability Ecological goal dimensions relate to the precision of mentoring in terms of content focus and flexibility in terms of time. The economic objectives are also well achieved, in particular the cost-effectiveness of voluntary activities. In particular, the social dimension is met in terms of learning in the mentoring relationship, as equal access to early career support for the accumulation of human capital is important, in line

with the findings of Blaj-Ward (2023). Mentor learning also reinforces the upgrading of skills needed in the workplace in a sustainable way. While the mentee hopes for concrete help in the early stages of their career, as the process progresses, continuous learning and sustainability play a bigger role. Mentoring, continuous learning and sustainability form an integrated whole, combining the rapid changes in the world of work and the different forms and contexts of learning that they allow (also Bangeni et al., 2023).

The mentors' perceptions covered a broad range of topics on how mentoring, continuous learning and sustainability are connected. According to mentors' perceptions, mentoring is a multi-dimensional process and cannot be fully anticipated and managed (Rubbi Nunan et al., 2023). Mentoring, continuous learning and sustainability are current phenomena in working life and more discussion and practice is needed on issues such as the principles of sustainable development and their application. In the future, mentoring processes should be studied in more detail, especially from a learning perspective. Mentoring would also seem to have potential as a tool in the development of inequalities in society. As the cost of training becomes increasingly concentrated on both the employer and the employee, the use of informal learning methods, and mentoring in particular, is likely to become more widespread. In addition, further reflection is needed on how mentors can be trained and prepared for this important role, which has multiple societal implications. The article suggests that mentoring can be implemented as a non-formal education and a form of continuous learning based on researched knowledge about mentoring. The article suggests that mentoring can be implemented as a non-formal education and continuous learning activity based on researched knowledge about mentoring. Mentoring can be implemented from a variety of angles. If the aim is to form a developmental network (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005) and a processual form of experiential learning that is built through a mentoring relationship (Bell & Bell, 2016; Reid et al., 2020), planning and familiarity with mentoring is essential. The phases of the mentoring relationship, namely initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition, as identified by Kram (1985), represent the optimal objectives that the mentor aims to achieve.

This study suggests that mentoring may play an even more important role in the future as the themes of continuous learning and sustainability become more concrete in working life. However, the content of mentoring programmes needs to be further developed on the basis of research evidence. Awareness of the process nature of mentoring among those involved in the mentoring process, understanding the informal nature of learning and recognising the interactive centrality of mentoring is at the heart of development and building sustainable mentoring.

Conclusions

This study examined mentors' (N=10) perceptions of the connection between mentoring, continuous learning and sustainability. The study was based on the premise that the potential of continuous learning, sustainable development and mentoring in adult learning and working life has long been identified. Previously, the connection

between mentoring, continuous learning and sustainability has been limited in research. This study provided new and timely information, answering the research question: What are mentors' perceptions of the connection between mentoring and continuous learning and sustainability? The data for the study consisted of qualitative interviews with mentors. The data was analyzed using a thematic analysis based on a data-driven approach. Two main themes emerged from the data: mentoring and continuous learning and mentoring, continuous learning and sustainability. In addition to these, three sub-themes were structured into each of the two main themes. The results show that mentors articulated the potential of mentoring in a broad way. The results show that mentors' perceptions of mentoring and continuous learning are related to the temporal, content and contextual dimensions of learning. In mentoring, past, present and future phenomena related to the working life are addressed and learned. The aspects of context awareness, relationality, and transferability were also evident in mentors´ reflections. The connection between mentoring and continuous learning was deeply linked to sustainability issues, offering support to new generations as they navigate the transition into the evolving workforce. This support was structured to promote ecological, economic, and social sustainability. The sustainability of working life was also strengthened by mentors' opportunities for continuous learning. According to the results of this study, quality mentoring can meet the needs of continuous learning in the workplace in a sustainable way. The research also identifies potential limitations, such as the number of mentors studied and the impact of their background on the results obtained. However, in this qualitative study, the starting point and objective was to obtain in-depth data and understanding of the phenomenon under research, where information power (Malterud et al., 2016) is essential not the sample size. The quality and depth of the data was further confirmed in the interview dialogue, where the mentors' personal perceptions were widely expressed. The diverse backgrounds of the mentors studied further added to the richness of the data, bringing out a wide range of perceptions about the connection between mentoring, continuous learning and sustainability, in line with the aim of the study. However, more research is needed to develop mentoring programmes in order to unlock the broad potential of mentoring. We suggest that further research is needed to develop mentoring programmes. It is also beneficial for those involved in mentoring to be familiar with the principles of mentoring. Awareness of the process nature of mentoring, an understanding of the informal nature of learning and a recognition of the interactive centrality of mentoring is at the heart of development and building sustainable mentoring.

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