Mentoring primary school student teachers in Turkey: Seeing it from the perspectives of student teachers and mentors

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As the mentoring program has currently constituted a central component in the partnership established between primary schools and teacher education institutions, this research aimed to investigate the practice of mentoring from the perspectives of student teachers and class mentors. The data were collected by means of open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews from the participation of 55 primary school student teachers. Supplementary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews from five class mentors. The results demonstrate important issues such as the unshared understanding of student teachers' teaching experiences between class mentors and the teacher education institution, and that the mentoring program is inadequate in terms of time management. It is suggested that the class mentors should be helped to open up an important opportunity for how to evaluate their practices in order to evaluate those which the student teachers experience.

Mentoring, primary school student teachers, qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

Studies on school and teacher education institution partnership advocate the significance of initial teacher preparation in terms of linking it with schools and with those who practise in schools (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Imig and Switzer, 1996; Toprakçı, 2003; Yiğit and Alev, 2005). Behind the idea of the partnership program is the need to alleviate the problem of disconnection between theory and practice during the process of student teachers' teaching, giving an opportunity for them to work with experienced teachers in a real school context (Asan, 2002; Senemoğlu, 2003). Despite an ever-growing literature with a central emphasis on school-based initial teacher education over the years (for example, Edwards and Collison, 1996; Furlong *et al.*, 1996; Furlong *et al.,* 2000), there appears to be little research which is concerned specifically with mentoring in primary schools. Moyles *et al.*, (1999) observe that formal mentoring, particularly in primary schools, is relatively new practice; and it has been recently formalised partly in response to a requirement of the school-based initial teacher education, and also partly because initial teacher education is viewed as the start of the professional development career, not the end of professional experience.

In Turkey, mentoring has been at the forefront of recent efforts in the partnership established between schools and teacher education institutions in order to prepare student teachers for the teaching profession more effectively (Higher Education Council and World Bank, 1998). The term 'mentoring' has many definitions (Cooper and Batteson, 1998; Gold, 1996; Stephonson, 1997), one of which is defined as "the interactions between a novice (the student teacher) and an expert (the teacher) which contribute to the novice's learning" (Collison, 1998, p. 174). In the

learning of a novice, a mentor is expected to discuss lesson preparation before a lesson with the student teachers, observe their lessons, discuss the lessons after observation, help them with teaching strategies, and to help them with classroom management (Monk and Dillon, 1995). Watkins (1992) also identifies the aspects of a mentor's roles which include pastoral support to a new teacher, supervision, and sequential introduction to professional issues in education. These tasks show that the role of a mentor is complex, involving many dimensions, because the mentor is a "counselor, observer, giver of feedback, instructor and assessor" (Cooper and Batteson, 1998, p.167).

Until 1998, student teachers in Turkey learned to observe and teach in classrooms. These observations and teaching were not always organised in systematic ways in all of the teacher education institutions across the country. This was so, even though there was a course called 'teaching experience'. Student teachers had not received the greatest benefit from the teaching practice due to fact that there were no laws and regulations related to it (Higher Education Council and World Bank, 1998). Each teacher education institution had its own mentoring schedules, such as two subsequent weeks in the last term of the fourth year, and one day per week starting from the first term of the third year and ending at the second term of the fourth year (Ekiz, 2003a).

As part of the wholesale changes that took place in primary education in the late 1990s in Turkey, initial teacher education was re-structured, systematised and regulated by the Higher Education Council more rigorously than had previously been the case. Although teacher education institutions still had control over the detailed content of the courses (for example, elected subjects), they were subject to the higher education regulations. In 1998, the Higher Education Council set the details of the nature, structure of initial teacher education, and school-based initial teacher education. The idea was to set up a national standard (Higher Education Council and World Bank, 1998).

Teacher education institutions established links with schools under the guidance of partnership program. Through this, the schools took a systematic responsibility for preparing student teachers for the teaching practice on the one hand, and the teacher education institutions took a hidden role to introduce schools to the new ways of working in practice by means of the student teachers on the other hand.

During the last five years, mentoring in school-based teacher education has undergone a dramatic change through the introduction of new roles and responsibilities. The new diversity and complexity of the mentors and the experiences of student teachers had increased. The roles and responsibilities of mentors were described by the Higher Education Council (1998, p.10) under 11 headings, some of which are:

- Mentors help student teachers in the development of their profession; the mentors assure that the student teachers observe their lessons, teaching methods and techniques in the classrooms,
- Mentors observe the works of student teachers in schools and evaluate these,
- Mentors do not leave student teachers in classrooms for a long time; if they have to leave the classrooms, they should be in a place where they can be reached easily.

Student teachers, in the course called "School Experience II", were required to prepare school-based assignments under the supervision of mentors. These assignments were structured as:

- Guidance and explanations
- Practice of asking questions
- Lesson management and classroom control
- Assessment and evaluation of pupils' works

- The utilisation of lesson books
- Group works
- The preparation of working-sheets and their use
- Recording and evaluation
- The preparation of test, giving mark, and analysis
- The utilisation of simulation in teaching
- Planning lesson and organising activities.
  (Higher Education Council and World Bank, 1998, p. 35)

The details of these assignments, to be prepared after each school experience, were also provided by clear explanations and directions by the Higher Education Council and World Bank (1998, pp. 75-107).

The underpinning philosophy and nature of mentoring were related to the models of initial teacher education. Some of these models were; the apprenticeship model and the mentor as skilled craftsperson, the competence-based model and the mentor as trainer, and the mentor as a reflective coach (Brooks and Sikes, 1997). The recent research in Turkey undertaken by Ekiz (2003b) on models in teacher education by the participants of 60 student teachers, demonstrated that the nature of initial teacher education was heavily based on the competence-based model, and thus the student teachers complained about the inadequacy of the model, providing theoretical and practical justifications. It might be well assumed that mentoring also relied upon the competence-based model and the mentors might be seen as trainers. What might well be said was that although the teacher education institutions placed a significant emphasis on the roles and responsibilities of teachers in supporting student teachers under the systematised partnership program, the fundamental model of teacher education had not been changed, for example, from competence to reflective-based models.

Constable and Norton (1994, p. 123) argued that "at a time of change towards school-based supervision and assessment of students, it is more than ever necessary to understand what happens to students in school". The lack of research in the area of mentoring practice might suggest the need for an investigation so as to contribute to the available literature on initial teacher education.

METHOD

The research was undertaken with the participation of 55 primary school student teachers who were in the fourth year of their initial teacher education at the Faculty of Education, Karadeniz Technical University, Trabzon, Turkey. Why did 55 student teachers participate in the study? As a lecturer and professional mentor, the researcher was responsible for all of their school experiences. The study was essentially prompted by their concerns and sometimes their complaints about their class mentors and mentoring practices. The data on the student teachers' views of mentoring were gathered by means of a questionnaire consisting of only two open-ended questions towards the end of their school experiences. These questions were: (a) what do you think of your class mentors? (b) What do you feel about mentoring practice? These two questions were generic in nature, simply because they aimed to provide as many views as possible. After that, a qualitative research approach was adopted to take, understand and interpret the participants' views in details (Bryman, 1988; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Maykut and Morehouse, 1994; Merriam, 1998; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Having read through the responses, qualitative interviews were conducted (see Appendix A). Through recorded interviews with five voluntary student teachers, the researcher hoped to gain a deeper insight into their written responses and to clarify some of their views. Supplementary data by means of interviews were collected from five class mentors, hoping to gain a clearer picture of

mentoring from two dimensions (see Appendix B). The strength of the study lay in the two perspectives of the data. The participant mentors within the research were selected from the schools which were characterised by their effective teachers.

The data were processed by constant comparative analysis to reach generic categories across the cases (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In the first place, the data were categorised by coding each view into as many categories as possible, basing on 'feels right' or 'looks right' judgements (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), leading to tentative categories. Then, each view was compared with other views to reach similar properties of the categories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). To a greater extent, cross-case analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994) was utilised to generate constant occurring categories.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The nature of the data resulted in a range of findings, but only those that had a direct connection to major issues and which were thought to be at the heart of mentoring are reported. These are:

- unshared understanding,
- support from mentors,
- support to mentors,
- challenges, and
- evaluation of the mentoring program.

Unshared understanding

The study showed that there was an atmosphere of having an unshared understanding between class mentors and the teacher education institution in the management of student teachers' school-based works or assignments within the partnership program. One of the outstanding roles of mentors in the student teachers' teaching practice was defined as observing student teachers, and thus providing productive feedback. Nevertheless, the feedbacks seemed to be supplied without having the student teachers observed in the classrooms:

> The mentor helps us with how to do the assignments. But s/he leaves the class to us and goes away. S/he says: "whatever you want to do, just do it". S/he leaves enough room for us to do whatever we want to do. Once the lessons are over, s/he asks: How did it go? What did you do? S/he does her/his best to help us. (Student teacher questionnaire response)

The absence of the mentors while the student teachers were teaching was also accepted by the student teachers for the psychological reason of anxiety:

> S/he does not come to the class whenever we are in the school. S/he leaves us alone in the class. This seems to be useful to both of us. When the mentor is there, we are anxious. (Student teacher interview response)

What was interesting was, however, when interviewed, the mentors provided exact descriptions of their roles and responsibilities:

- To be models to student teachers.
- To have a good interaction with them.
- To observe them in the class.
- To pass our experience to them.
- To provide an understanding with them of school activities and practices.

(Class mentor interview responses)

Though these literal descriptions corresponded with those prescribed by the Higher Education Council (YÖK), implementation of these seemed to be problematic. There was a 'gap' between the rhetoric and the reality in their understanding and management of student teachers' school-based activities, which appeared to lead to unshared goals and understanding. This unshared understanding was also created by the nature of some of the assignments that the student teachers were required to prepare while and after teaching:

> Our mentor tries to help us. Whatever we ask for something, s/he provides it and gives ideas. But some of the assignments we have to do cannot be done because, s/he says that these assignments are not suitable for the levels of the children and s/he wants us to do something else. The works we do are not what we have to do. (Student teacher questionnaire response)

This was particularly so, because all school-based assignments were organised and regulated by the Higher Education Council for all of the education departments (for example, science teacher education, social science teacher education, mathematic teacher education for secondary schools), and thus asking all student teachers to follow the same work was not realistic. Although the Higher Education Council allocated adequate scope for all of the departments to accommodate or modify what work could be done in reference to their subject areas, this was not the case. As noted above, for instance, one assignment was the preparation of a test, giving a mark, and the evaluation of the pupils' work. A problem occurred when the student teachers needed to give a test to first class pupils who did not already know how to read and write.

There was also a difference between the teacher education institution and the mentors in the understanding of how to teach primary school pupils. The difference mainly lay in the organisation of group work for the pupils and teaching strategies which were assumed to be based on a shared understanding and a shared aim in the experience of the student teachers:

> In the activity of group work, our mentor says that it is not effective to divide the class into different groups. S/he says that one group is only suitable for the levels of the children. (Student teacher questionnaire response)

The reason for the difference in understanding of teaching experience would be the teachers' attempts at mentoring appeared to be determined by their practical constructions of teaching which were tacit in nature formed from their experiences as the teachers of pupils. This seemed to have a powerful influence on the mentors' understanding of how to offer guidance on what and how to do things in classrooms.

The mentors were expected to act as trainers, but a majority of the student teachers claimed that the mentors were unwilling to provide either oral or written feedback on their practices:

> I would like to see him/her in the class to give me feedback. (Student teacher interview response)

The mentors were expected to observe the student teachers with the aim of providing them with feedback on what happened during lessons. The idea for this was to refine future practice on the basis of feedback of what was observed. There seemed to be no point even to observation without feedback. But, the student teachers repeatedly noted that they did not have opportunities for the necessary feedback. The school experience without observation and thus evaluation of their practices were not supportive for their initial professional learning. The student teachers indicated that the mentors appeared to think of their mentoring tasks in terms of only providing the classes which were sort of laboratories for 'trial-and-error-learning', but not to realise the inadequacy of such an approach in ensuring they got the best supervision:

> If the mentor teacher had observed me, I would have seen my mistakes better. The role of the practicing school itself was not teaching. The children were only my subjects to test my knowledge. All of the teachers were very good, but they lack instructional roles. (Student teacher interview response)

Support from mentors

The mentors' roles were perceived as passing their necessary practical knowledge and skills to the student teachers, particularly in the area of making lessons appropriate for the levels of the pupils. Some student teachers expressed the view that they were supervised while learning about teaching in a practical sense and trying out ways to make their mainly theoretical knowledge accessible to the pupils:

> The mentor does his/her best to help us. For instance, s/he helps us prepare questions to the levels of the pupils. (Student teacher questionnaire response)

However, some commented that some of the mentors did not support them in preparing what they were asked to do in schools:

> To me, our mentor, personally, is very good person; s/he is kind and sincere. S/he works hard and appears to like his/her job. But, the only thing s/he lacks is how to help us. For example, when we ask for his/her help to complete our work, s/he couldn't help much. (Student teacher questionnaire response)

What seemed obvious from their comments was that some of the practices under the name of 'school-based assignments' were out of the mentors' knowledge. Others also commented that they needed to be provided with the necessary knowledge and skills, and that they could be in a better learning position with these opportunities:

> S/he closely examines what work we'll do in the class. But, s/he does not present his/her ideas such as 'you can do like this, like that'. This would be better for us. (Student teacher interview response)

Still others argued that they lacked a social relationship with their mentors. Nonetheless, one of the features of mentoring was its dependence on a one-to-one relationship as a means of ensuring one of the essential aspects of the school experience:

> We couldn't have enough dialogue with the mentor teacher. S/he provides us with resources. S/he does not show efforts such as 'learn something from me; get the best benefit from my experience.' (Student teacher questionnaire response)

It also appeared to be that the mentors and the student teachers had little in common because of the mentors' attitudes towards them:

> The mentors are not keen on helping us because they don't believe in the usefulness of teaching practice only one day in a week. (Student teacher interview response)

The student teachers were isolated from an opportunity of interrogating interactions between theoretical knowledge and conceptualised knowing or personal constructions which would enable them to perform from a good teaching base. One of the features of mentoring was to be its reliance on the one-to-one relationships as a means of ensuring one of the important satisfying aspects of the teaching experience. However, this appeared to be not practised by some mentors.

Support to mentors

As part of the partnership program between teacher education institutions and schools, there was also a hidden aim to introduce schools to the new ways of working in the classrooms by means of

student teachers. This was simply because the recent research revealed that teachers' professional development opportunities were very limited, and accordingly they were mainly not aware of new teaching and learning approaches to be utilised in primary classrooms (Ekiz, 2001). Almost all of the student teachers in the study realised that they contributed to the work of mentors particularly in the following areas:

> Our mentor also learns something from us. For instance, s/he learns how to make the lessons active because, s/he runs the lessons in routine ways. (Student teacher questionnaire response)

> Our mentor teaches us something. But we also teach him/her something. For instance, s/he has learned how to prepare 'working sheets' and to organise 'group work' from our activities. (Student teacher questionnaire response)

In primary schools, as the traditional teaching approach was very common, which was defined as a teacher-centred approach (Ekiz, 2001), the student teachers commented that through their activities in the classrooms the mentors gained an understanding of how to 'make lessons active', how to 'prepare working-sheets', and how to arrange 'group work' which were outside the common practice of the classrooms.

Challenges

The student teachers, on the whole, noted that they faced a major challenge which was connected with the absence of the mentors while they were engaged in active teaching. One major challenge was to take the class under control:

> Since our mentor leaves the class to us, we have difficulty with in classroom discipline. S/he shows authoritarian attitudes towards children to control the class, but we don't do this. This creates a classroom discipline problem for us. (Student teacher questionnaire response)

To a considerable extent, effective teaching practice was perceived as knowing pupils whom they would be teaching well. Due to the fact that they were only in the practising schools one day in a week, they came across problems with classroom discipline, which was seen as a main concern:

> We couldn't know pupils enough by going into the schools once a week. So, we have problems in classroom discipline. The pupils also couldn't be accustomed with us. (Student teacher interview response)

One purpose of school experience was primarily to develop the student teachers' knowledge and experience as practitioners by providing them with extensive access to pupils in classrooms. Due to the absence of this, they did not even know the pupils whom they were teaching. The limitation of time spent in classrooms created further concern in the sense that they felt themselves as having two roles which were 'being a student' and 'being a teacher' concurrently:

> It could have been better if the teaching practice was two days in a week. I feel like a student four days at the faculty of education, and as a teacher for one day in the school. I don't believe we need theoretical knowledge anymore. It could have been more effective if we spent more time with pupils. (Student teacher interview response)

This view coincided with the mentors' view:

> The teaching practice should be at least two subsequent weeks. In the first week, student teachers should observe mentor teachers in practice, and in the second week

they should practice teaching under the observation of mentors. (Class mentor interview response)

Evaluation of mentoring program

In order to explore the effectiveness of mentoring, the mentors' views were also consulted by the interviews. This was because it was believed that attention should be paid to the perspectives of teachers who had begun to experience enhanced roles and responsibilities as mentors in initial teacher education because they knew better the effectiveness of the mentoring program as they observed students' teaching experiences. All of the mentors in the study stressed that the duration of the school experience should be extended from 'only-one-day-per-week' to 'at-least-two-subsequent-weeks' in order to create an effective mentoring program:

> The program seems to be okay. But it is possible to develop it by allocating more time for teaching practice in schools. Experience can be developed by the practice. (Class mentor interview response)

> It could have been better for student teachers if they work with more than one mentor teachers, observing their classes and practising there. (Class mentor interview response)

Significantly, although mentors reported that they had the necessary time for mentoring, the student teachers were not able to receive professional development gains adequately due to time difficulties:

> We have enough time to help them. But they don't have enough time because they tell us that they have to study courses and prepare for the exams at the Faculty of Education. (Class mentor interview response)

The mentors were asked to provide their suggestions in order to make the mentoring program effective. These suggestions were mainly the duration of the mentoring program and having experiences in different classrooms due to the fact that they would be teaching different age groups when they graduated. This seemed to be a must, because mentoring in school-based education relied on a competence-based teacher education model which required demonstrations and explanations of pre-determined skills by mentors in a variety of classes:

- The teaching practice should be at least a month,
- They should acquire knowledge about school management and its related laws,
- The teacher educators should follow teaching practices closely,
- The student teachers should observe and practice in different classes of different teachers. (Class mentor interview responses)

As far as this last suggestion was concerned, the mentors pointed to the conceptualising of the strategies for the particular classes they could have by their mentors' valuable experiences from various angles.

CONCLUSIONS

Mentoring is now in Turkey regarded as a central strategy in the education of student teachers. It has been a particular role to play in introducing the student teachers to the real world of teaching by first-hand-experience. Although the concept of 'mentoring' under the partnership program occupies a central position in the education of the student teachers, the study shows that it has not been adequately understood or implemented well by mentors in schools. What was surprising about mentoring practice was that although the roles and responsibilities of teachers in supporting student teachers were enhanced, the practice had not been changed significantly. This is conducive

to the view that "educational change involves *learning* how to do something new" (Fullan, 1991, p. 289). The student teachers were still being left alone in classrooms with apparently an idea of 'learning by trial and error'. The reason for leaving student teachers alone in class could be the culture of teaching, in which isolation and privatism constituted its one particular form. As Hargreaves (1994) argued, "classroom isolation brings with it problems (which is that) it … shouts out possible sources of praise and support. Isolated teachers get little adult feedback on their value, worth and competence" (p.167). In relation to this study, Fullan (1991, p. 308) observed that "the role of mentor is new and clashes with some of the individualistic traditions of teaching".

The evidence suggests that while the mentors had a clear view of the extent of their roles and responsibilities, these were seldom found in practice. Their activities with the student teachers did not parallel with either those they described by themselves or those set up by the Higher Education Council. Besides, they could not engage in joint inquiry or challenge them, because of the lack of regular interactions. The mentors appeared to value traditional practice not so much because they would have good reasons as because they would have always done it that way. This would influence them to expect the student teachers to adopt what they did. This is so; it has been pointed out that teachers' values and beliefs both professionally and personally, underpin what they do and the way they do it (Nias, 1989; Day, 1999).

It is therefore correct to suggest that the mentors should be encouraged to discover what it is they value and why they value it. Teachers involved in mentoring can become more effective if they are provided with a central awareness of the details of what they should do and how they should operate in their roles. Such awareness would create a shared understanding between class mentors and teacher education institutions in the education of student teachers as well as helping them work with their pupils in a productive way. For this, one strategy would be to ask mentors "to reflect on what they believe would constitute enhanced effectiveness in their particular circumstances, and then to identify strategies which might improve their effectiveness" (Brooks and Sikes, 1997, p. 145).

The student teachers were typically involved in a very limited range of classroom activities without, in most cases, being observed and thus had little reflection "in and on" (Schön, 1983; Day, 1999) their teaching practices. One mentor's role was described as a co-inquirer (Collison and Edwards, 1994) who encouraged student teachers to find out their weaknesses and strengthens as well as developing their own learning. Thus, the mentors should be co-inquirers in order to provide an opportunity for exploring jointly the diversity of classroom experiences.

The mentors viewed the amount of time the student teachers spent in schools for experience as a limitation. This seemed to impact heavily on their unwillingness to supervise the student teachers. Time management should be re-organised, and the teacher education institutions and schools should re-evaluate time management issues to ensure that all the student teachers had an equal and beneficial experience. It should be considered that allocated time was a pre-requisite of effective mentoring of the program. Furthermore, instead of designing the same school-based assignments for all of the departments, a room for manoeuvring should be allocated for each department in order to design and arrange its own school-based assignments. This was because, as the study shows, the nature of some of the assignments was impossible for the student teachers to complete.

Interviews provided strong evidence that since there was a lack of regular interaction between the class mentors and the student teachers, doubts could be raised about the effectiveness of mentoring practices. There was a need to train mentors how to supervise the student teachers. This went far beyond a brief introductory session on how to help the student teachers. It required mentors both to be skilled in the evaluation of their own practice as well as others. In this case, it was necessary to say that 'know yourself' comes first, 'help others', follows.

There remains, however, at least a complementary investigation to be undertaken which should aim to reveal the criteria for the selection of mentoring teachers in their roles, and according to what criteria they were described by schools as effective teachers. This proposed investigation would provide evidence for at least one significant question: 'Can effective teachers also be effective class mentors?'

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS WITH STUDENT TEACHERS

1. What do you think about this model (teaching experience one day in a week)
2. What expectations did you have from the class mentors in helping you?
3. Did the class mentors help you in relation to your expectations? If so, how?
4. Do you think that this model has limitations? If so, what are these?
5. Do you see that you lack knowledge and skills in practice? If so, what are these?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS WITH CLASS MENTORS

1. What do you think about this model (teaching experience one day in a week)
2. What do you think about your roles and responsibilities for mentoring the student teachers?
3. Do you think that you have enough time to help the student teachers? How much you are busy?
4. Do you think that this model has limitations? If so, what are these?
5. Do you see that the student teachers lack knowledge and skills in practice? If so, what are these?
6. Do you think that you provide necessary supervision with the student teachers?
7. According to you, how can student teachers learn better in teaching practice?