Problems of mentoring practices encountered by the prospective ELT teachers: Perceptions of faculty tutors

Abdullah Yördem\textsuperscript{a}, Bertan Akyol\textsuperscript{b}\textsuperscript{,1}

\textsuperscript{a}Lec., Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Çanakkale, Turkey
\textsuperscript{b}Assist. Prof. Dr., Adnan Menderes University, Aydın, Turkey

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the problems of mentoring system from the perspectives of faculty tutors and reveal the possible solutions proposed by them. The data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews with the participation of seven English Language Teaching (ELT) department educators. By means of semi-structured interviews it was intended to get experienced faculty tutors’ perspectives for advancing mentoring which might consequently have a positive effect on improving teaching quality. Interview questions were sent to the faculty tutors through emails. They were asked to give elaborate answers to the questions and return them back. The interview consists of two parts. The first part includes participants’ personal information; the second part comprises three questions intended to reveal faculty tutors’ perceptions of the existing problems of mentoring and solution proposals. The faculty tutors were aware of the problematic aspects of mentoring such as: “unhelpful mentors”’ no or little awareness of the importance of a decent mentoring system”, “looking upon mentoring merely as a means of additional income”, and “not being instructed about what they should do”. The faculty tutors addressed these problems with solutions such as: “emphasis of the mentoring system must be on the mentoring process rather than on administrative causes”, “there should be mentor-training seminars”, “a list of selection criteria for school mentors should be drawn up and implemented”, and it was repeatedly underlined that efforts should be made to reduce the number of trainees assigned to a mentor or a school.

Keywords: Mentoring, faculty tutors, preservice teachers, problems of mentoring;

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, school-based mentoring has come to play an increasingly prominent role in supporting the initial preparation, induction and early professional development of teachers in many parts of the world (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, &Tomlinson, 2009). Hobson et al. (2009) define mentoring as the one to one support of a novice or less experienced practitioner (mentee) by a more experienced practitioner (mentor), designed primarily to assist the development of the mentee’s expertise and to facilitate their induction into the culture of the profession and into the specific local context.

Anderson and Shannon (1988) argue that mentoring can best be defined as a nurturing process, in which a more skilled person, serving as a role model, teaches, sponsors, encourages, counsels and befriends a less skilled or less experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter’s professional development. Mentoring functions are carried out within the context of an ongoing, caring relationship between the mentor and the protégé.

Anderson and Shannon (1988) made several conclusions having read Homer’s epic poem “The Odyssey” in which the term “Mentor” has its roots: First, mentoring is an “intentional process”. Second, mentoring is a “nurturing process”. Third, mentoring is an “insightful process”.

Good quality mentoring in schools makes an important contribution to developing the professional skills of new teachers and ensuring the best quality learning experiences for pupils. New teachers benefit from this mentoring as they work towards the Standard for Full Registration. High quality continuous professional development can only take place with commitment from schools, education authorities and teacher education institutions to developing effective mentoring. (HM Inspectorate of Education, 2008)

Under a formal mentoring process the protégé not only reaches the competency level of the mentor but grows beyond the established baseline along with the mentor. The mentor may share materials but also goes beyond the sharing and moves into the development of materials within a collaborative team. This requires reflective practice, collaborative

\textsuperscript{1} E-mail address: yordemabdullah@yahoo.com
\textsuperscript{2} E-mail address: bertanakyol@yahoo.com
planning and action research coupled with a joint action plan by the mentor and protégé. Through this process both mentor and protégé soar to new heights of professional growth and competence (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2003).

2. Practicum and Mentoring in Turkey

‘Mentoring’ has become the central issue of the ‘restructuring programme’ in education faculties in Turkey since 1998 (Yavuz, 2011). In Turkish universities pre-service teachers do not have school experiences in their first two years, however, their third involves 28 days in schools over two semesters. During this period, they observe their mentors’ (teachers) professional behaviour in class, relationship with their students, classroom management techniques, behaviour management, teaching methods and strategies, and assessment practices. Pre-service teachers within their third year at the university are expected to gain the following skills: improve questioning skills; acquire confidence in classroom control; understand how to assess students’ works; design lesson plans; prepare exam questions, mark and analyse results; organise group work; and implement lessons. In their fourth year they attend a school either 6 hours a day for 28 days or 3 hours a day for 56 days over two semesters. Both the mentor (cooperating teacher) and lecturer observe the final-year pre-service teacher’s teaching practices. They discuss how the pre-service teacher can improve teaching practices. Apart from responsibilities delegated by the school administration and mentor, the university requires final years to teach a minimum of 10 lessons with planning, implementing, assessing and evaluating as key to their development. Mentors are also expected to assist the pre-service teachers with knowledge and skills in these areas, including micro teaching skills such as group work, classroom management, content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge (Hudson, Usak, Gencer, 2010).

Unlike the mentors in many European countries and the USA, the mentors in Turkey are not selected or trained according to some criteria or within a particular programme. Therefore, subject teachers, who are selected by the head teachers, become mentors regardless of their experience, teacher knowledge and skills, and personal attitudes towards mentoring and faculty students as mentees. Thus, neither subject teachers functioning as mentors nor head teachers actively and systematically engage in training faculty students. Basically, faculty students observe mentors and practising peers, fill out observation forms, and engage in teaching in the classes after consulting with mentors regarding the teaching time, the level of the pupils, and the topic of the new subject. At the end of the term, mentors evaluate faculty students using forms supplied by the faculty and head teachers complete the paperwork regarding the faculty students. Similarly, faculty tutors pay visits to practice schools to observe and evaluate faculty students at the end of the teaching practice. However, these visits are generally not systematic; for example the visits are not planned and structured before the teaching practice course starts and both the frequency and the timing of these visits depend on the availability of the individual mentor and the faculty tutor due to the intensive teaching timetables of teachers and faculty tutors, lack of collaboration between the two stakeholders, and the absence of a well-defined mentorship programme (Topkaya et al. 2007; Yavuz 2007; Yavuz, 2011).

3. Problems the Student-Teachers Encounter at Practice Schools

Yavuz (2011) enumerated in her study which she conducted with six ELT students in the fourth year of their training and one English teacher who was the subject mentor of the students at the practice school some of the problems student-teachers had in their teaching during their practicum period at schools:

1. Lack of prior knowledge of pupil profile
2. Lack of prior knowledge of pupils’ level of English
3. Lack of mentor feedback
4. Mentors’ lack of assistance in planning and choosing teaching materials
5. Lack of time for planning
6. Contradicting instructions from the faculty tutor and mentor

Student teachers in the study of Yavuz (2011) carried out at the ELT Department of Çanakkale University, Turkey, mentioned frequently inadequate assistance of the mentors. For example, faculty students planned their teaching according to the guidelines of the teachers’ book and phases of the course book but since pupils were not at the prescribed level of English, faculty students needed mentor guidance in selecting the teaching activities and materials regarding the right level of English. They also identified the different expectations of the university tutor and the mentor in giving instructions, and in the way of teaching a topic as a problematic issue in teaching practicum. The faculty tutor, unlike the mentor, encouraged faculty students to use target language in giving instructions, to divide the topic into smaller parts (such as, teaching positives and negatives separately) and making a detailed teaching plan. This elicited a very important reality of the gap between the theory in the particular ELT department and the practice in the school as the faculty students mentioned that their class mates who worked with different faculty tutors and mentors experienced similar problems.

The participants in the study conducted by Yavuz (2011) argued that the following items are problematic:

- Students obviously needed more critical, constructive, structured, and immediate assistance and feedback for their survival stage of teaching;
- Unhelpful and discouraging mentors and uncooperative school management;
- Lack of the teaching practice time at practice schools;
- The large number of pupils in practice classes;
- Mentors’ negative attitudes, such as failing to be helpful, understanding and communicative in schools;
- Difficulties in getting feedback and assistance from mentors and faculty staff regarding their (student teachers) performances and their written reports;
- The partnership booklet prepared by YÖK was not clear enough to follow some activities and, therefore, the mentors and faculty staff had different understandings, which led to different procedures;
- Teachers are assigned by the head teachers as mentors without meeting any selection criteria or having undergone a training programme by the school administration depending on the availability of teachers;
- Poorly-prepared mentors in terms of knowledge, methodology, giving constructive feedback and a positive attitude can be an obstacle to student teacher learning;
- Differences between the academic course content and mentors’ expectations create problems in transferring theory into practice;
- Differences between the academic course content and mentors’ expectations create problems in transferring theory into practice;
- Differences between the academic course content and mentors’ expectations create problems in transferring theory into practice;

Gömleksiz, Mercin, Bulut, and Atan (2006) developed a questionnaire to explore pre-service teachers’ views about their mentors (supervising teachers) while in the school setting. The questionnaire was administered to 336 pre-service teachers enrolled in “School Experience II” course. It was reported that student-teachers did not find the university staff efficient in their teaching of practicum or in evaluating the coursework. They also stated that the teaching staff did not pay enough attention to “School Experience II” course. The student-teachers enrolled in Classroom Teaching, Social Studies Teaching, Mathematics Teaching and Science Teaching Programs stated that the teaching staff has negative views on performing and evaluating “School Experience II” course.

Tok and Yılmaz (2011) came to the conclusion in their study conducted with the participation of 100 student teachers that; Student teachers underlined 12 problems they confronted during practicum. Most of the problems student teachers mentioned are about supervision and interpersonal problems. Here are some: mentors are not understanding and tolerant, they are biased, they do not give instructive feedback, they treat students as if they were a student not a colleague. Students were not given opportunities to choose what they want to teach. Mentor teachers use violence in the classroom. The physical environment of the schools is not convenient. Mentor teachers are indifferent to students. Mentors make them do their personal work and mentors are not good models.

Tok and Yılmaz (2011) argue further that, although the concept of „mentoring” under the partnership program occupies a central position in the education of the student teachers, student teachers are not pleased with mentors’ guidance activities. They do not get the guidance required by the teacher education institution and Higher Education Council.

Ekiz (2006) suggests that Although the concept of ‘mentoring’ under the partnership program occupies a central position in the education of the student teachers, it has not been adequately understood or implemented well by mentors in schools. The researcher further argues that although the roles and responsibilities of teachers in supporting student teachers were enhanced, the practice had not been changed significantly.

4. Method

Qualitative data collection method was utilized. A semi-structured interview with the faculty tutors was conducted in order to collect data. Interview questions were sent to the faculty tutors through emails. They were asked to give elaborate answers to the questions and return them back. The interview consists of two parts. The first part includes participants’ personal information; the second part comprises three questions intended to reveal faculty tutors’ perceptions of the existing problems of mentoring and their solution proposals. Answers to three questions were sought: “What are the problems of practicum system?”, “What are the problems of mentoring system?”, and “What are the possible solutions proposed by faculty tutors?”. 7 educators of ELT departments of four different universities participated in this research study. They are all experienced educators and faculty tutors at the same time. Their educating experience ranges from 13 to 28 years. Four of them are female and three are male educators. Their ages range from 35 to 50 years old.

5. Findings and Results

In this part of the study, the data gathered through interviews will be analysed and supported by direct quotations of the participants. Seven faculty tutors, who were working in four different universities, were interviewed individually at the end of the fall semester of the academic year 2012–2013. The focal points of the interviews were problems about mentorship and mentoring system at practice schools in Turkey. In this context, the questions below were used to structure the interviews:

1. What are the problems of mentoring system in Turkey?
2. What do you think are the reasons creating these problems?
3. What can you propose as a solution to these problems?

The faculty tutors were interviewed via emails at the end of the semester. They all voluntarily participated to the interviews and sent their answers to the interview questions. The interview questions embodied the themes, which are presented in three categories: problems of mentoring system; the reasons creating these problems; and faculty tutors’ solution proposals.

5.1. Problems of Mentoring, Reasons and Solution Proposals

Almost all the faculty members drew our attention on similar problems. Some of the problems that were touched upon are as follows:

- Participants’ no or little awareness of the importance of a decent mentoring system,
- The system is looked upon merely as a means of additional income,
- General lack of awareness and/or interest in the role of mentoring by all parties,
- Mentors are not explicitly told, instructed about what they should do,
- There is no standard application of mentoring.

One of the participant faculty tutors stated that:

“In my opinion, the mentoring system does not function adequately or completely, in the way intended even by YÖK (Council of Higher Education) and MEB (Ministry of Education). Many of the stakeholders and participants (in schools, faculties and MEB) are too little aware of the importance and impact of a good mentoring system on the professional development of trainee teachers and also on the practicing mentor teachers. The mentoring system seems to be regarded as a marginal activity necessary to organise the teaching practice in schools, but not as a central component for training well-educated, competent teachers.”

As a reason creating this problem the participants argued that a general lack of dissemination of information about mentoring in general and the YÖK-MEB mentoring programme in particular. Although information is obviously available, those involved in the system are either unaware of it or have not had it brought to their attention, or they feel no interest or motivation to discover more about the topic. One of the faculty tutors pointed out that mentoring is looked upon as an additional income. She stated that:

“...It is often looked upon as a method of generating additional income for school teachers and administrators, or sometimes as a necessary evil that must be endured so that trainee teachers have the opportunity to spend time in a classroom. More enthusiastic mentor teachers can experience a lack of support for their mentoring work, and can feel they are in an isolated position. There seems to be a general lack of awareness and/or interest in the role of mentoring (by all parties) and certainly in the processes involved in being a successful mentor. In addition, the organisation of the programme is often less than ideal, with arrangements for trainees only being settled once the university semester has already started, creating difficulties in programme planning.”

As a solution proposal to these problems one of the participants pointed out that:

“First of all, information regarding mentoring and the mentoring system must be widely disseminated. The various aspects and details of mentoring should be explained, discussed, debated, accepted or rejected by those involved. This can be achieved by mentor training, seminars, meetings, and the like. Such activities should also serve to reduce the problem of lack of contact and collaboration between the faculty and schools.”

Another university tutor suggested that there should be a course about mentoring in the undergraduate programs and schools should work together with university supervisors to meet the needed expectations from the trainees.

The next problem that underlined by the faculty tutors was that mentors were not appointed properly. One of the participants pointed out that:

“...As a solution proposal to this problem she suggested that:

“...A further reason for some problems may be due to the fact that no criteria seem to be applied in the selection of mentors. Neither the faculty tutors nor often the school teachers themselves are consulted regarding this selection – it is usually carried out entirely by administrators”.

As a solution to this problem she suggested that:

“..."a list of selection criteria for school mentors should be drawn up and implemented. Only those who are willing and have some appropriate training or qualifications should be considered as school mentors. Such criteria and training may also be useful for faculty tutors, as well”.

One of the faculty tutors pointed out that:

“...Regarding the organisation of the mentoring programme, the administrative process seems to begin at a date which is too close to the commencement of the training period, resulting in insufficient time to complete all the necessary procedures comfortably”.

Problems of mentoring practices encountered by the prospective ELT teachers: Perceptions of faculty tutors
And that her recommendation as a solution recommended by the participant faculty tutor to that problem was that:

"The administrative process should be started at an earlier date, in order to ensure that all details are settled long enough before the beginning of the practicum and leaving enough time for any necessary changes, preferably by the end of the previous semester".

6. Conclusions

The faculty tutors were aware of the problematic aspects of mentoring such as unhelpful mentors’ no or little awareness of the importance of a decent mentoring system, looking upon mentoring merely as a means of additional income, lack of awareness and/or interest in the role of mentoring, and not being instructed about what they should do which is in line with (Hudson et al., 2010), (Ekiz, 2006), and (Yavuz, 2011). The faculty tutors addressed these problems with solutions such as emphasis of the mentoring system must be on the mentoring process rather than on administrative causes, there should be mentor-training seminars, a list of selection criteria for school mentors should be drawn up and implemented, efforts should be made to reduce the number of trainees assigned to a mentor or a school, it must be ensured that all parties are valued equally and that a more open attitude to the contributions of others is cultivated by all participants, better organisation of the system should be ensured, and finally, it was repeatedly underlined that efforts should be made to reduce the number of trainees assigned to a mentor or a school, through recruiting more schools or more mentor teachers to participate in the programme.

As any study would have, this one also certainly may contain a number of limitations. Firstly, this study is based on faculty tutors’ subjective judgements of the mentoring system. More objective data could have been gathered if mentors and student teachers also participated in the study. Secondly, the limited number of faculty tutors participating in the study can be mentioned as another limitation. The study was conducted with only 7 faculty tutors. For this reason research addressing more faculty tutors might produce more in-depth results.

References

Alberta Teachers’ Association (2003), Beginning Teachers’ Handbook, Edmonton, Alberta.


