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The Role of the Mentor in the First Year of Teaching

SAMAL KADYROVA

This article explores the effectiveness of mentorship relationships in addressing first year teachers' challenges at the beginning of their career at one of the Kazakhstani private schools. The study examines the concept of mentoring, the challenges beginning teachers face, the benefits of them, and the experiences of mentorship relationships worldwide and on the territory of Kazakhstan. One-on-one interview has been chosen as the most appropriate research strategy because it helped the researcher to develop a detailed understanding of the mentorship relationship experiences within the mentoring program at school. The results of this study have shown that all participants experience various difficulties in the inaugural period of their career. Even though the existing mentoring programs are the way to enhancement; they have definitely a positive effect on first-year teachers' professional development.

Keywords: First-year teachers, mentorship, teacher relationships, professional development

Introduction

Teaching is a challenging and complicated profession, and the requirements can be overwhelming, especially for newly-graduated in-service teachers. Mentoring and induction programs for first-year teachers are created on purpose to address these challenges faced in the first year of teaching. According to Little (1990) and Montgomery-Halford (1998), there are two obvious advantages of mentoring: socializing newer teachers with the educational stakeholders and creating curricula for the first time. Moreover, mentoring programs can minimize the risks of teachers leaving the profession (Murray, Mitchell & Dobbins, 1998) and improve retention of novice teachers.

A great amount of research that has been done on mentoring programs has focused mainly on studying the effectiveness of mentoring programs for first-year teachers (Feiman-Nemser, Parker & Zeichner, 1992; Sims, 2002). Most research describes and compares mentoring programs worldwide (Salleh & Tan, 2013). Despite the fact that the mentoring programs are officially implemented in Kazakhstani educational organizations, there are no studies that could be located in this context (Yedrisova, 2012). This current study has been conducted in one of the private schools in the Western region of Kazakhstan.

School administrators of the private school implemented a Manual for the Implementation of Coaching and Mentoring Programs (hereinafter mentoring manual, or MICMP) in the year of 2014, which teachers have been following. According to the mentoring manual (MICMP, 2014), the main aims of the mentoring program are creating a teaching network, preparing well-experienced mentors and creating conditions for professional growth of the whole teaching staff at a private school. Moreover, close cooperation with senior teachers and the engagement of novice teachers in various formal and informal activities fulfill the aims of the mentoring program (MICMP, 2014). Active participation also demonstrates the willingness of beginning teachers to become a part of the school. The mentoring manual has been in use for almost three years, since the establishment of the school. Since that time, it has been reconsidered, edited and improved based on the outcomes of the program (MICMP, 2014).

In addition to investigating novice teachers' experiences of mentorship relationships, this study also focused on whether the experiences of mentoring program could address first year teachers' challenges. According to Marlow (2007), the outcomes of such mentorship relationships cannot be fully predictable as they may result in success as well as failure. Both participants of the relationships have their own perspectives on the same event; therefore, they influence, and are influenced, differently (p. 2). The attitude and perceptions of every participant may influence the flow in such relationships.

International Experiences of Mentoring Relationships

According to Feiman-Nemser (1997), the notion of mentoring was introduced to the field of educational system in the early 1980s and was aimed to decrease the level of turnover among first-year teachers. Broadly speaking, mentoring is a form of collaboration process in which the senior practitioner becomes a good model for a less experienced teacher (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez & Tomlinson, 2009), by transferring his or her "knowledge, skills, support, reflections and visions" (Fragoulis, 2014, p. 51). Since the 1980s, various mentoring and induction programs for novice teachers have begun to appear worldwide. Along with the widespread

development of programs, the interest in these programs has risen too. There is a great deal of research about various induction and mentoring programs. Most research is aimed at gathering data about the results of existing mentoring programs, their efficacy and impact on first year teachers' professional development (see Feiman-Nemser, 1997; Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009; Marlow, 2007; Salleh & Tan, 2013 for more information).

There are many worldwide examples of mentorship relationships. Salleh and Tan (2013), for instance, introduce the experience of implementing mentoring programs in Shanghai schools in China. In brief, school-based mentoring programs in Shanghai schools include not only the customary one-on-one approach but also group mentoring of principals and research group mentoring of teachers. In a group mentoring usually one well-experienced teacher becomes a mentor for several newly-graduated teachers; in research group mentoring, the leader guides several less experienced teachers of one subject within the department, demonstrating the opportunity of mentoring several people simultaneously.

Another example of mentoring programs was presented by American researchers Feiman-Nemser, Parker and Zeichner (1992) in their National Center for Research on Teacher Education (NCRTL) Special Report. The authors conducted a comparative analysis of two mentoring programs in Los Angeles, California, and Albuquerque, New Mexico. The main aim of their study was to show the connection between the mentoring program and mentee's teaching growth and improvement. Feiman-Nemser et al. (1992) considered the roles and functions of mentors in a way unlike other researchers. In this study, the authors identified local guides, educational companions and change agents. Local guides are teachers who help beginning teachers to solve their immediate challenges at school. Educational companions are those teachers who scaffold new teachers with their work, like lesson planning and working with students. Change agents, in their turn, expand the borders of usual functions and actions of the mentor by striving to socialize their mentees (Feiman-Nemser, Parker & Zeichner, 1992).

The idea of seeing mentors as educational companions is also supported by the Marlow (2007), who has worked on The School of Education & Human Development Mentoring Project (UCDHSC), a "leadership program that connected first and second year science teachers with experienced science teachers" (Marlow, 2007, p. 3). The main aim of the program was to examine the beneficial impact of a mentoring program on its participants' self-efficacy and development.

To conclude, the literature showed various experiences of building mentorship relationships. Within the customary one-on-one approach, there was also the practice of a group mentoring (Salleh & Tan, 2013). Moreover, the roles of mentors depended on the function they did: educate, guide or socialize (Feiman-Nemser, Parker & Zeichner, 1992; Marlow, 2007). What was happening with the establishment of mentoring program at the same time in Kazakhstan?

The History of Mentoring in Kazakhstan

Regarding the history of the establishment of mentoring programs in Kazakhstan, it is better to start from the period of the USSR as Kazakhstan was one of its republics until 1991. During the USSR period, policy makers paid a lot of attention to the socialization of young teachers. An example of this is "the school of a young teacher," where newly arrived teachers were taught important things related to the teaching profession. Furthermore, there existed the notions of *shevstvo* or *nastavnichevstvo*, which are both translated as "mentoring" (Sherbakova & Sherbakova, 2015).

During the USSR period, *nastavnichevstvo* went beyond just mentoring to mean that one specific person took the responsibility for a younger one. Unfortunately, such types of relationships are not widespread today. There are a few examples of mentorship relationships in Kazakhstani schools, but mostly in autonomous and private schools which were created by the school administrators of these schools.

Challenges Novice Teachers Face

Beginning teachers face serious challenges, from classroom management and discipline issues to building a good rapport with fellow teachers, school administrators and parents (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986; Shamatov, 2006). According to Fantilli and McDougall (2009) many young specialists struggle with designing lesson plans. The findings of their mixed-methods research showed that creating lesson plans and conducting them is the most challenging experience for novice teachers (p. 823).

According to Shamatov (2006), more often first-year teachers struggle with simultaneously creating positive and trusting relationships with their students, and attempting to build a level of respect and authority. A good rapport with fellow teachers is another challenge for first-year teachers. On the one hand, they need to follow cultural values of having respect for their elders; however, in order to become a member of a school

team, novice teachers must gain the recognition of senior teachers. School administrators also present serious challenges to first year teachers (Shamatov, 2006) by pressuring them on purpose to achieve good final results as indicators of a successful school. However, despite the difficulties novice teachers have with lesson planning and building a rapport with school administration, there are many other things which could please beginning teachers.

Benefits of Mentorship Relationships

The literature presented many advantages of mentorship relationships. Significantly, the influence of an experienced person who cares and offers good alternatives is significantly beneficial for novice teachers. Moreover, mentoring has a positive effect on young teachers' personal development. First of all, meaningful mentoring and induction programs reduce the attrition rates among novice teachers (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006), and positively influence teacher quality and retention (Kelley, 2004). Smith and Ingersoll (2004) have found that teachers who work cooperatively with senior teachers from the same subject area and who actively participate in induction activities, such as lesson planning and lesson observation, were less likely to leave the field during their first year. In addition, if the induction and mentoring programs are well organized, first year teachers are less likely to transfer to other schools (Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009).

In brief, the considered literature suggests that having obtained the position of a teacher, many beginning teachers face some challenges in the inaugural period. Therefore, the necessity for mentoring programs is crucial. Firstly, mentorship is offered as one of the best solutions in coping with difficulties. Besides, mentoring can make a useful contribution to the education and development of young specialists as well as senior teachers too. However, there is lack of information about the current experiences of mentoring programs in Kazakhstani secondary schools, an aspect which needs further scrutiny.

Methodology

In order to explore the experiences of mentorship for first year teachers at one of the Kazakhstani private schools in the western part of Kazakhstan, three sub-questions were designed:

- What challenges do novice teachers face in the initial period of their career?
- What are the benefits of mentorship relationships?
- What are the recommendations for improving mentorship relationships?

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study as they allow the researcher to obtain in-depth qualitative data by probing and asking complex and open-ended questions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The purpose of the interview was to gain a deeper understanding of novice' teachers' personal views on mentorship relationships (Creswell, 2014).

According to the nine steps fully described in Creswell's (2014) work, the interviews were first audio taped, transcribed, and then coded into specific themes and sub-themes. Overall, five people took part in the interviews. Of the five participants, three were female, and two were male. Due to the voluntary nature of participation, the majority of respondents who agreed to be interviewed represent the Department of Foreign languages. Specifically, two of them are teachers of English language; the other two are teachers of Global Perspectives and Project Work (GPPW), and the fifth one is a teacher of Physics. The majority of teachers have approximately from five to eight months of experience (Table 1).

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Total experience of teaching	Subject	Language of the interview
FYT1	26	Female	5 months	English	English
FYT2	24	Female	5 month	GPPW	English
FYT3	23	Male	5 month	Physics	Russian
FYT4	23	Male	7 month	GPPW	English
FYT5	25	Female	8 month	English	English

The interview was taken on the condition of confidentiality by providing a consent form for participation. Moreover, before going to the field I gained permission to conduct the study from the school principal. With the principal's support, I identified appropriate potential candidates for the study. Participants were selected on a volunteer basis and were fully informed about the purpose and nature of the study. Participants of the study were fully informed that the information gained from the interview would only be used for research purposes and would not be recorded in excess of what is required.

Results

The following six themes were identified from the responses of the teachers: first year teachers' challenges, the ways of coping with the challenges, senior teachers' support, the experiences of mentorship relationships, benefits of the mentoring relationship, and the recommendations for improvement.

Theme 1: First year teachers' challenges

All of the respondents faced challenges in the initial period, even though the challenges were not all the same, starting from the lesson planning and ending by the administrative tasks. Two out of five respondents said that lesson planning is one of the most challenging experiences because before coming to school they were not taught how to do it. As one teacher stated:

As it was my first year of teaching I faced many challenges, especially with the lesson planning and fulfilling online electronic journals where you put the grades. I had no idea about it for first two months. (FYT2)

Another teacher, by talking about the difficulties, stressed the help of his mentor by saying that "My mentor and I discussed how to conduct lessons, where to actualize our attention, which students need more help and our attention" (FYT3). However, they were not precise in what was difficult in writing lesson plans.

Some respondents agreed on the difficulties of the school system where they work. They pointed out that they could not deal with the great amount of responsibilities at school. The assessment strategy is more diverse, and the accountability to the administration and parents is high. Participant 1, for instance, added that understanding the assessment criteria was very difficult, "The problem is totally new for me, especially [the ways of] assessing students and evaluating them [was]... such a new thing" (FYT1).

Most interviewees, however, stated that the most challenging experience for them was building a good rapport with their learners. Despite the fact that the respondents taught different grades, it took approximately two months to get accustomed to their students. As one of the respondent stated, "It took a while to adjust to each other. I think that I spent on it about two months" (FYT3). For Participant 4, the experience with one particular class made him frustrated and stressed for some time. These difficulties are represented in Table 2.

Table 2
Commonly Reported Challenges

Participant	Challenge 1 Building rapport with students	Challenge 2 Carrying out school-based tasks	Challenge 3 Designing lesson plans
FYT1	X	X	
FYT2	X	X	X
FYT3	X		X
FYT4	X		
FYT5	X (switching classes)	X (adapting to new curriculum)	

Theme 2: Coping with challenges

Three interviewees reported that the challenges they faced made them frustrated, but they tried to cope with difficulties thanks to self-analysis and support from colleagues. Being under stress, they attempted to overcome the difficulties by trial and error. It is important to mention that the majority of respondents admitted the role of fellow and senior teachers within their departments, who really helped them by giving advice. More specifically, they mentioned a great support from senior teachers in different aspects that helped them to overcome difficulties:

So, first of all, they try to explain how the school system works and also they gave me some advice how to deal with students who do not behave, and, they always like encourage me that I can ask any questions anytime not only my mentor but my colleagues too. Yes, that was big big...such a good help for me. (FYT1)

Theme 3: Senior teachers' support

Although young teachers prevail at school, there are many well-experienced teachers. Even the teachers who have worked more than two years can become good advisors during the induction period for a new teacher. Interestingly, all of the respondents pointed out the great support from senior teachers, in the form of a good advice, observing lessons, lesson planning or sharing experience.

However, young teachers are given advice in terms of teaching methods and approaches. As one of the respondents pointed out: "Well, first support is like advice; then, some techniques to manage if it is with teaching and management, they give me advice, techniques. I try to use them"; the teacher also added that apart from methodological advices, senior teachers are generous for cheering up in difficult moments: "Also, they give some mental support, like everything will be good, ok, don't worry...some support" (FYT4). In brief, all novice teachers noticed the support from senior teachers in different aspects of teaching practice: managing the class, teaching methods and approaches, introducing the school system. Moreover, some beginning teachers were given more personal advice.

Theme 4: Experiences of mentorship relationships

At the beginning of a school year, the Heads of the Departments assign the mentors for newly arrived teachers, following the instruction given in the MICMP. The mentees have formally designated mentors, and they usually have an agenda for their meetings. There are several points on which they work throughout the year. These are, for example, enhancing teaching practice, giving instructions to children, and learning new teaching methods and approaches.

The frequency of meetings. According to the responses of the teachers, at the very beginning the mentees with their mentors met officially very often:

In a week, we could meet even four times because I had so many questions. But now because I am getting used to this process...we meet about two times a week and we have something like questioning discussions. (FYT1)

Over time the frequency of meetings settled down to one or two times per week. However, one out of five respondents said that they meet with a mentor once a week at a definite scheduled day and time. The frequency of meetings is most likely to depend on the individuality of each mentorship pair.

Lesson observations. The usual practice shows that apart from formal meetings, each mentee has the opportunity to observe his/her mentor's lessons. This means that according to this program, novice teachers work with designated mentors within one department and very often teach the same subject. In this way, mentees receive theoretical guidance, and actual lesson observations. As Participant 5 stated:

My mentor usually attends my classes during the week and I also attend her lessons and after it we have some kind of feedback. On Mondays we discuss any moments of teaching, any questions that I have or she has. (FYT5)

Accessibility of mentors. The accessibility of mentors is also important, as four of the participants noticed that their mentors are available anytime they need. They claimed that they could come up anytime and ask for help: "If I am overloaded with the work, I always come to my mentor. Even if she is busy, she could give me five-minutes in order to talk to me" (FYT4).

One of the interviewees even mentioned the high responsibility and interest of the mentors themselves as sometimes they ask questions and follow the progress of their protégés. The teacher said, "We met a lot, we used to meet a lot as I had so many questions, and, even when I did not ask she always asked me questions in order to check If I knew it or if I did not and she often attend my classes" (FYT1).

Professionalism of the mentors. Although mentors are assigned by the Heads of the Departments, all of the respondents are pleased with their mentors. They noted the professional skills of their mentors, the way

they conduct lessons and give feedback. One of the teachers even demonstrated her admiration for her mentor by saying that, “I have a great mentor with a good experience, she helps me always. I have observed that my mentor is well-experienced, she could make a very interesting lesson from nothing...to create an activity, for instance” (FYT3).

The fourth participant said that the mentor attempted to share not only the experience but also the knowledge and critical advice. The teacher claimed that the mentor was fully engaged in the process of mentoring:

If I do not understand, she gives me critical support, let us say critical advice, constructive advice, for example, what I need to do. I think that my mentor is fully engaged in the process, she tries to do all her best, shares with her experience and knowledge. (FYT4)

Theme 5: Benefits of mentoring program

All of the respondents stated to the fact that mentoring is advantageous and beneficial for both participants of mentorship relationships for mentees as well as for mentors (Table 3). It is worth noting that within the mentoring program, many mentors and mentees establish long-term relationships based on trust, respect and professional development.

Table 3

Commonly Cited Benefits of Mentoring Program

Participant	Benefit 1: Professional development of mentees	Benefit 2: Professional growth of the mentors	Benefit 3: Guidance, professional advice	Benefit 4: Reflection to the teaching practice
FYT1			X	
FYT2				
FYT3			X	
FYT4	X	X		X
FYT5	X	X	X	X

Benefits for mentees. First of all, the interviewees pointed out that mentoring had a positive effect on beginning teachers’ professional development. In their opinion, mentors help them to navigate in a school system, especially the private school where they currently work, because of the huge amount of information received and the high level of responsibility.

I think for most advantage of mentoring program is that it is a big contribution to the professional development of the novice teacher, especially when a new teacher comes to school for talented children and there should be fast training, and lots of information coming from different aspects. (FYT5)

Benefits for mentors. The research showed that mentors also benefit from the mentorship relationships. Primarily, expert teachers may enhance their professional development by looking at many things through the lens of a new fresh insight to their teaching. As one of the respondents pointed out:

I think it is a reciprocally, mutually advantageous and beneficial process...because this is not only about the professional development of the mentee, I think it is about the professional development of the mentor, the experienced teacher. (FYT5)

Other benefits included collaborative work and reflection, which might positively influence the teaching practice of mentors. As one respondent noticed, “It is beneficial even for expert teachers in order to see the gaps in their teaching skills, in content, in their practice as a whole” (FYT4). The respondent meant that by teaching someone, the mentor can consider his or her teaching style from the perspective of another person.

Theme 6: Recommendations suggested by the participants

Many teachers stated that this kind of mentorship should be in every school. The participants see mentorship relationships as important they help young specialists cope with difficulties at the beginning of their career, they serve as a good example of teaching for young specialists, and they encourage senior teachers to also upgrade their skills by teaching beginning teachers.

The importance of organizing mentoring program before a school year. One important recommendation the respondents gave is the necessity of organizing mentoring program for first year teachers before a school year. It is also advisable to organize weekly seminars and workshops in the framework of the mentoring program. It could be a short ten-day module where the beginning teachers could get all the necessary information about the school system and its requirements.

When you are new to the system, and you do not know these little peculiarities like by this time you have to go, write down and put all the grades online or you have to put all the formative assessments into the folders, or notebooks or something and you do not know these kinds of things. (FYT2)

Reducing the level of formality in the mentoring program. During the interviews the mentees expressed their concerns regarding the huge amount of unnecessary paperwork, for instance mentees' diaries. In their opinion, filling out the diaries and feedback after the official meetings takes a lot of time. Mentees suggested reducing this tension by making the mentoring program more informal. One of the respondents observed,

Maybe, the mentee's and mentor's diaries should not be so formal as it is now because questions could be different, issues could be different. Mentors and mentees should be free to lead the diary in any form so in order to be free to express their own ideas, their own plans. (FYT5)

The influence of mentoring on first-year teachers' self-confidence. Few respondents reported that many young specialists are not confident, and that the mentor program is crucial to improving their confidence. They suggested that mentors encourage their mentees more, to relate them not as colleagues but as friends. Moreover, they believe that these mentorship relationships may extend outside the class, based on a feeling of respect and trust:

Mentors should talk to them not just co-worker, like a person who is more experienced or sometimes observe lessons not only for looking the mistakes, but just encouraging. Why not? I mean just ask how it is going on? Sometimes there is pressure on young teachers because everybody wants results, not just talking about the work, encouraging them, not too personal staff just encourage. (FYT1)

To conclude, interviewed teachers gave the following recommendations for improvement of mentoring program such as organizing the workshops for newbie teachers before a school year, reducing the level of formality and raising the self-confidence of newly-arrived teachers.

Discussions and Conclusions

The literature agrees that the inaugural period for a first-year teacher is challenging. The expected challenges, which were found in this study and in the literature, include building a good rapport with students, lesson planning and the school system as a whole. The literature, however, stressed challenges of a more socializing character such as building a good rapport with students, fellow teachers and school administrators (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986; Shamatov, 2006).

The biggest challenge the teachers faced at the beginning of their career was building a good rapport with students. All respondents mentioned this difficulty. This finding of building a good rapport with students corroborates the study of Shamatov (2006), who explained the difficulty of building positive relationships of trust while maintaining respect and control. The literature, however, also reported the challenges connected to building rapport with school administrators and fellow teachers (Shamatov, 2006). However, the current study did not reveal any information about it. The respondents mentioned only the difficulties related to the whole system of the school which will be discussed below.

Another big challenge cited by the respondents was lesson planning. One respondent pointed out the difficulty that occurs when the teacher is required to teach appropriately but he does not know how. Moreover, the respondent added that they as novice teachers worried about it much because conducting lessons was their main occupation and they revealed the potentiality of novice teachers. If something were to go wrong, it could lead to unfavorable consequences. This finding about lesson planning confirms the previous research claiming that the challenges with deciding what to teach often go with deciding how to introduce the material (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009).

In all the cases shown in this study, there was a consistency in the respondents' statements about the greatest help of the mentoring program. They acknowledged a plentiful number of benefits of the mentoring program among which were the professional growth and development of both participants of the relationships, mentor and mentee. Broadly speaking, the findings demonstrate the positive trend of creating mentorship

relationships at school. The main advantage of the mentoring program was facilitating to the first-year teachers to cope with challenges in the inaugural period. Teachers pointed out that mentoring had a positive effect on the beginning teachers' professional development. In their opinions, mentors helped them to orientate to a school system, especially the private school in which they currently work because of the huge amount of information coming from different directions and a high level of responsibility. This result confirms the previous findings, which suggest that the influence of an experienced person who cares and offers good alternatives is significantly advantageous for newly arrived teachers (Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006; Kelley, 2004; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

In addition, the previous research has shown that mentoring has a positive effect on young teachers' personal development, which facilitates them not to leave the profession or transfer other schools (Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009). The literature review has also shown that the mentoring program "had made them feel they could achieve more" and "increase their confidence" (Sims, 2002, p. 2), which was not, however, indicated by the respondents.

In brief, all of the respondents in this study were satisfied with their mentors. Firstly, they acknowledged the high professionalism and attitude to work of their mentors. The mentees had the opportunity to be heard anytime and observe the mentor's lessons to see teaching in action. Secondly, the mentees acknowledged the greatest support given by the mentors in different aspects of teaching from choosing materials for lessons and sorting out little things. Finally, they appreciated the personal skills of their mentors as they always felt encouragement and empathy.

Taking into consideration the previous research and the recommendations given by the participants of the current study, there are some recommendations for the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan regarding the improvement of the existing mentoring programs in Kazakhstan. Firstly, it is advisable to expand the experience of the existing mentoring program to other mainstream schools. However, before the implementation, a short course in the form of weekly seminars or workshops is needed. In this case, I would recommend organizing courses for several stakeholders such as school administrators, potential mentors and new teachers separately. Perhaps most importantly, all stakeholders of the educational system should be aware of the mentoring program.

In conclusion, this research makes a modest contribution to the discussions and debates on the topic of the experiences of mentorship relationships for first-year teachers, particularly in the Kazakhstani context. First of all, this study describes the difficulties many newly-arrived teachers encounter at the initial period of their career. Secondly, from the findings it is apparent that the mentoring program positively influences the novice teachers. Finally, even though the existing mentoring program at one of the Kazakhstani private school is quite beneficial, it can be improved.

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