



## Developing pre-service teachers' professional knowledge of teaching: The influence of mentoring



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Mentoring roles are influential to the kind of knowledge PSTs acquire.
- Summarizing and questioning lead PSTs to the elicitation of practical knowledge.
- The encourager role improves PSTs' learning of generalized knowledge of practice.
- The imperator role leads to situation-specific knowledge development of PSTs.

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### ABSTRACT

This study was situated in a Primary Teacher Education program in the Netherlands. The participants (N=16) comprised four each of: Pre-Service Teachers (PST); Mentor Teachers; School-Based Teacher Educators; and University-Based Teacher Educators. Video-recordings of four mentoring conversations for each PST which transcribed and translated for analysis. A mixed methodology was applied with analysis based on examining mentoring conversations in relation to the MERID-model through turn-taking analysis and Propositional Discourse Analysis. The study illustrates that mentors tend to use a more directive mentoring approach and that they dominate dialogue suggesting that there is need for reconsideration of the mentor-PST learning relationship and how it is understood in teacher education.

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### 1. Introduction

It is well recognized that professional experience (field experience, practicum) plays a vital role in teacher education programs. Pre-service teachers (PSTs) typically describe their professional experience as the most important and relevant aspect of their program (Ferrier-Kerr, 2009; Standal, Moen, & Moe, 2014) due partly to the fact that they value the opportunity to be mentored by experienced teachers in their learning about practice (Crasborn & Hennissen, 2010). There is little doubt that effective guidance by mentors is an essential condition for PSTs' development of knowledge and practice in the workplace (e.g., McIntyre, Haggar, &

Wilkin, 2005). Thus, as school level mentoring is so central to teacher education programs, the mentoring conversations involved in the process of becoming a teacher are important in shaping PSTs' learning about teaching (Loughran, 2006).

Talking about teaching during mentoring conversations allows PSTs to begin to recognize and name the knowledge of practice (described variously as practical knowledge (Fenstermacher, 1994), professional knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996), and practitioner knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004) to name but a few), and to connect it to their experience and the theoretical concepts introduced in their teacher education program at university. Kessels and Korthagen (1996) noted that the nature of practical knowledge that is revealed through mentoring conversations is event-structured, practice-oriented and context based, which means that through mentoring conversations, mentors have a considerable influence on how and what pre-service teachers learn (e.g., Edwards & Protheroe, 2004; Helman, 2006).

It has been suggested that mentoring can prompt PSTs' learning

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about teaching in ways that can accelerate shifts in gaining expertise (Ericsson, 2006) by increasing their level of participation in the knowledge construction process. As teachers' professional knowledge is typically tacit in nature and not readily accessible or verbalized by teachers (Fenstermacher, 1996; Mena & Clarke, 2015), mentoring can be a way of opening that up for sharing and co-construction during the practicum. Hence, despite the fact that mentors function in different ways and use different roles within mentoring conversations (Hennisen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen, & Bergen, 2008), a crucial role central to mentoring is associated with the ways in which experienced teachers help PSTs recognize and explicate their developing professional knowledge.

The purpose of this study is to explore the nature of teacher learning in terms of knowledge production during mentoring conversations, and to examine how exchanges between mentors (i.e., expert teachers<sup>1</sup>) and pre-service teachers (PSTs) (i.e., novice teachers) contributes to their gaining of expertise.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Mentoring is a cornerstone of teacher preparation programs not least because teaching is complex work and pre-service teacher education at the university cannot encompass all of the experiences necessary for preparing new teachers with the full complement of skills and knowledge for the ever-changing scenarios of practice (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). Mentoring has typically been promoted as a meaningful way for neophytes to begin to learn about their profession as it provides pre-service teachers with the required basic skills and professional knowledge to face the uncertainty associated with the complexity of practice (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009; Loughran, 2002). With an increasing interest for teacher education to focus on regular teaching situations (i.e., daily in-service instruction), mentoring at the school level offers an opportunity for PSTs to observe context-based lessons and to practice their own teaching with the support of an experienced teacher (Nilsson & van Driel, 2010).

According to Wang and Odell (2002) three mentoring conceptual approaches are used in teacher education programs worldwide: knowledge transmission approach (the understanding of mentoring is derived of research and not from mentors' own practices); theory-and-practice connection approach (knowledge of mentoring has to be constructed through the integration of both teaching education research and mentors' practical knowledge and professional skills); and, the collaborative inquiry approach (knowledge about mentoring is based on the active construction of mentors' practical knowledge through the application of the skills and concepts they have learnt in their context of teaching). Similarly, Kemnis, Heikkinen, Fransson, Aspors, and Edwards-Groves (2014) described three archetypes of mentoring: support (traditional mentoring as support); supervision (assessing new teachers to pass through probation); and, collaborative self-development (peer-group mentoring). However, although most of the models for mentoring assume that any of the constructs identified are flexible and reciprocally dependent (Aspors & Fransson, 2015) many teacher education programs (whether knowingly or otherwise) are criticized for reproducing uni-directional views of mentoring that are more aligned to traditional approaches in which validated knowledge from research in teacher education is conveyed (transmitted) to PSTs.

It is typically the case that there is often the assumption that initial teacher education is university led - including a period of training in the schools (practicum). Nonetheless, a practical turn to teacher education (Mattsson, Eilertsen, & Rorrison, 2011) has largely been claimed leading to, in some educational systems, an increasing move to the implementation of school-based Teacher Education programs (Douglas, 2014). In such programs PSTs learn the basics of the profession as they train (learning to teach in the workplace).

Either way, the implicit message of the professional experience for PSTs is that experienced teachers are responsible for sharing their professional knowledge in order to give PSTs an authentic experience of the professional activities associated with 'doing teaching' in context. In order for that to occur, the supervisory behaviours that surround those interactions require a close alignment of supervisory actions, ideas, discussion and support in relation to PSTs' learning needs (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Jaspers, Meijer, Prins, & Wubbels, 2014; Kemnis et al., 2014).

This perspective of mentoring is aligned to the idea of "educative mentoring" (Feiman-Nemser, 1998), a process which consists of assisting PSTs' urgent concerns and questions without losing sight of the general goals of teacher development (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Such a perspective is based on a type of supervision that encourages PSTs to learn from practice and go beyond offering technical advice or emotional support. It basically implies: interacting with novice teachers; fostering an inquiry stance; and, creating opportunities to support teacher learning. It basically "... builds on Dewey's (1938) concept of educative experiences which are experiences that promote rather than retard future growth and lead to richer subsequent experiences" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 17).

From a methodological point of view, there are several ways to approach the study of mentoring by identifying roles, analyzing beliefs or looking at interactions. Research that consists of scrutinizing conversational shared meanings between the mentor and the mentee is common. Studies that address this dyadic phenomenon conceive it as a genuine way to understand professional interchanges (Orland-Barak & Klein, 2005). Mentoring interactions have often been analyzed by the following three approaches: (1) Discourse Analysis (DA)/Conversational analysis (CA); (2) interpretative - or cultural - analysis; and, (3) Interactional sociolinguistics.

The first one - without focusing too much on the differences between DA or CA - is usually limited to the analysis of the sequences of utterances, propositions or cycles in a search for meaning or speech agreements out of the conversation without paying attention to personal attributes, contextual factors or personal identities (Gee, 2011). Hawkey (1998) analyzed transcribed conversations between two mentors and PSTs to describe styles of mentoring (i.e. directive advisory approach vs. elicitive approach). Similarly, Harrison, Lawson, and Wortley (2005) analyzed prompts of critical questioning in two mentoring interactions and how that influenced mentees' articulation of practice.

In the interpretative analysis, the focus is on the parts of the speech that reflect ideologies, personal beliefs or values, because it is argued that they may influence teachers' representation of practice (Schiffrin, 1994). Strong and Baron (2004) analyzed 64 mentoring conversations (before and after a beginning teacher's lesson) to find participants' joint construction of meaning. Orland-Barak and Klein (2005) went beyond analyzing verbal interactions (conversations and annotations) to also examining visual texts of twelve mentors as a way of enriching the meanings as to what they perceived as an optimal mentoring interaction. Also, Yuan (2016) studied participants' engagement in mentoring interactions as a way of interpreting identity formation.

<sup>1</sup> In this research study the term mentor is used to describe the supervisor of a PST and will include mentor teachers, school-based teacher educators and university-based teacher educators that support the learning of PSTs during their professional experience.

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