Full length article

Student teachers' experiences of participating in mixed peer mentoring groups of in-service and pre-service teachers in Finland

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The study examines student teachers' experiences of new PD model.
- The idea was to invite pre-service and in-service teachers to same PGM groups.
- The research method used was phenomenography.
- Students' experiences varied in depth and in the kinds of learning promoted.
- In future, more emphasis should be placed on the integration of theory and practice.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This article examines from the student perspective a new Finnish model of teacher development that uses the peer group mentoring (PGM) method for combining pre-service and in-service teacher education. Reflective reports of student teachers (N = 19) who participated in PGM were analyzed using the phenomenographic method. The results show that students' experiences varied from considering the activity as (1) a coffee break or (2) peer-support, to seeing it as (3) identity construction or (4) a way of participating in a professional community. In further development of the model more emphasis should be placed on the integration of theory and practice.

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1. Introduction

The transition from teacher education to working life is recognized as a critical phase in the continuum of teachers' professional development (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; McKenzie, Santiago, Sliwka, & Hiroyuki, 2005; Stokking, Leenders, De Jong, & Van Tartwijk, 2003; Tynjälä & Heikkinen, 2011; Zuljan & Požarnik, 2014). For decades research has highlighted the challenges new teachers face when entering the profession, and this professionally and emotionally demanding transition is often described in terms of 'reality shock' or 'practice shock' (Kane & Francis, 2013; Stokking et al., 2003; Tynjälä & Heikkinen, 2011; Veenman, 1984). Tynjälä

and Heikkinen (2011) have identified six common issues that new teachers encounter when transitioning from initial education to work: (1) threat of unemployment, (2) inadequate knowledge and skills, (3) decreased self-efficacy and increased stress, (4) early attrition, (5) uncertainty regarding the role and position of newcomers in the work community and (6) the importance of workplace learning. Another key cause of reality shock is seen to lie in the disconnect between university-based teacher education and everyday school life, reflecting the perennial tension between theory and practice in the teaching profession (Allen, 2009; Ball & Forzani, 2009; Korthagen, 2010; Lewis, 2013; McMahon, Forde, & Dickson, 2015; Zeichner, 2010). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] (2011, p. 5) has identified the "limited connections between teacher education, teachers' professional development, and school needs" as one of the key points of stress in the continuum of teacher development and called for improved partnerships between teacher education

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institutions and schools in order to provide student teachers with a more integrated experience.

Recent decades have seen a surge in national and local induction programs aimed at supporting newly qualified teachers in their early career (Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2010; Heikkinen, Jokinen, & Tynjälä, 2008; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Zuljan & Požarnik, 2014). In many such programs beginning teachers go through an induction or training period before final graduation, which usually includes at least mentoring but often also observation, training seminars and formative assessment in addition to normal school work (Zuljan & Požarnik, 2014). In Finland there is no such formal induction system, and on graduating from the five-year Master's teacher education program teachers are fully qualified in the profession. The core strength of the Finnish system is its high-quality and research-based initial teacher education program, with its objective of educating autonomous and critically reflective teachers (Hansén, Forsman, Aspfors, & Bendtsen, 2012; Sahlberg, 2011; Välijärvi & Heikkinen, 2012). Yet, beyond graduation, professional development varies and schools have no formal statutory system for inducting new teachers (Jokinen, Heikkinen, & Morberg, 2012).

During the last decade, however, a new model of professional development, peer group mentoring (PGM), has been developed to support the professional learning of teachers in Finland in their early career. PGM differs from the traditional model of mentoring in its theoretical basis, which has direct consequences for how it is practically organized: whereas traditional mentoring is based on the idea of transferring knowledge from more experienced worker (mentor) to beginner (mentee), PGM is implemented in groups of novice teachers and their more experienced counterparts and is based on ideas of socio-constructivism, dialogue and knowledge sharing (Heikkinen, Jokinen, & Tynjälä, 2012; Kemmis, Heikkinen, Fransson, Aspfors, & Edwards-Groves, 2014).

PGM has previously been applied specifically as a method for promoting the professional development of working teachers, but is now recognized to have potential for various other purposes and target groups. The aim of the present study is to examine, from a teacher student viewpoint, a new model of teacher professional learning that uses the PGM method to combine pre-service and in-service teacher education. In this research we understand the concept of induction in a broad sense, covering the whole transition phase from final years of teacher education to first years in profession (see Swachten, 2015; Zuljan & Požarnik, 2014). Thus, the model can be viewed as an induction method, but also more broadly as a professional development model for teachers in different phases of career, and actually the line between these two is consciously being blurred. The context of the study was Paedeia Café Finland, developed as part of the European PAEDEIA project (2012−2015) (Heikkinen, Swachten, & Akyol, 2015; Korhonen, Heikkinen, & Kiviniemi, 2015). The aim of the project was to build bridges between teacher education and working life and to develop practices for supporting student teachers in the transition phase. Before describing the study in more detail, we will shortly discuss the continuum of teacher development, induction as a particular phase of the continuum, and peer group mentoring as a method for professional learning both during induction and in further career phases.

1.1. The continuum of teacher professional development

The professional development of teachers is increasingly conceptualized as a continuum of initial teacher preparation, induction and continuing professional development (Avalos, 2011; Day, 1999; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; McMahon et al., 2015; OECD, 2011). The idea behind the continuum approach is to move away from over-emphasis on initial preparation by distributing teacher learning and professional development across career stages, and to thus support and promote the lifelong learning of teachers. It recognizes that initial preparation cannot provide teachers with all the skills and knowledge they need in the profession, but instead can only lay the foundation and motivation for career-long development, preparing novices to learn in and from their practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). However, this continuity is frequently hampered by a lack of connecting tissue within and between the different stages of teacher education (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Jokinen et al., 2012). Thus, as McMahon et al. (2015, p.163) put it, the reconceptualization of teacher development "as a journey and not a destination" requires rethinking of the purpose and pedagogy of teacher education in both the initial and further phases.

One way of renewing teacher education policies to better meet the ideals of the continuum approach is to develop new pedagogies that would bring university-based teacher education and schools closer to each other, into a continuous dialogue. For example, Zeichner (2010) has proposed the creation of 'hybrid spaces' and McMahon et al. (2015) 'rich pedagogies' in teacher education that would bring together prospective teachers, experienced teachers and teacher educators alike to work together in learning communities. Similarly, Wood (2012) has discussed the importance of "liminal spaces" in teacher development, referring to processes of transition and boundary crossing. According to McMahon et al. (2015), rich pedagogies would encompass practice-focused approaches that are collaborative and enquiry based, draw on the educational heritage of social constructivism and build on the critical and reflective foundations laid down in the initial phase. In many ways these proposals reflect the wider paradigm of professional learning, emphasizing job-embedded and collaborative models that are based on the view that by developing processes of reflection and enquiry teachers develop their practice and continue to feel motivated about what they do (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; McMahon et al., 2015; Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). What is also typical of these pedagogies is that they tend to blur the boundaries between formal and informal learning by recognizing and making use of the learning that takes place not only in the formal education institution, but in every sphere of life (Heikkinen et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2009).

Learning communities take a variety of forms, such as teacher study-groups (Carroll, 2005; Hung & Yeh, 2013), communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), collaborative inquiry (Butler & Schnellert, 2012), inquiry communities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) and collaborative action research groups (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003). Also PGM can be regarded as one form of professional learning communities. Regardless of the name, the aim of such communities is to promote professional dialogue and inquiry together with colleagues from either same school or beyond it, with the ultimate aim of changing practices and social relationships in classrooms and schools, so that learning outcomes are maximized for all learners (Le Cornu, 2005). Previously, collaborative models of professional development have been typically focused on later stages of professional development, but are now being embedded also in initial teacher education in order to nurture in beginning teachers the rationale and skills associated with professional learning that will extend throughout their career (McMahon et al., 2015). As Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) argue, because learning to participate in professional learning communities is one of the most central factors in the ability of teachers to sustain their professional growth, it is crucial that beginning teachers learn how to participate in such communities already in pre-service teacher education.

1.2. Induction as a phase of the continuum

The induction phase of the professional development