The Divergence of Experts' Views on a Mentor Competence Profile

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Abstract

Aim. The paper focuses on the divergence of views of experts from four European educational institutions on key competences, which would become the basis for a successful performance of a mentor position. They should be taken as the key items of a mentor competence profile.

Methods. A panel discussion – specifically, a focus group interview as its alternative form – was used to determine how the experts assessed particular competences of the mentor competence profile, i.e. to identify which competences they considered to be the key ones of the mentor competence profile. The panel discussion was led by six focus groups, members of which were experts representing four different countries from six universities: two from Slovakia and the Czech Republic, and one from Hungary and Serbia.

Results. The intention of the conducted panel discussion was to find a common view and consensus on the key competences required for a successful performance of the mentor position. However, the results of the panel discussion showed a significant divergence of the opinions on the fundamental mentor competences depending on the country the experts were from. Differences in the views on the issue examined by experts representing different institutions from the same country also occurred, but proved to be inconclusive.

Conclusion. Mentoring is currently considered one of the most important means of developing pedagogical competences of future and novice teachers. The results of the conducted panel discussion may contribute to the creation of a platform on which an adequate professional mentor training can be designed.

Keywords: mentor, mentee, mentor competences, mentor training, international projects

INTRODUCTION

In the field of education, there has been a common practice in which mentors are appointed as teachers with a certain length of teaching experience and a higher level of professional teaching competences, but without undergoing any kind of professional training to perform the mentor position. As Alena Hašková et al. (2022) state, this is the reason why experts have been trying to create concepts of professional training of teachers for an adequate and effective performance of the mentor position. As an example of this tendency, they indicate two international projects in which experts from different countries have joined to work together on this issue. Basic data about these projects and subsequent activities carried out by the project partners were presented in the *Journal of Education, Culture and Society* (Radulović et al., 2022).

To create the aforesaid concepts one must chiefly consider what competences a mentor should have dispose, and what competences a mentor´s profile should consist of. Subsequently, it is possible to focus directly on these competences and create a relevant and reasonable mentor training programme. To come to a consensus on the key competences of a mentor competence profile, experts from different countries and different institutions within our research, were asked to identify the most significant competences for a successful performance of the mentor role in practice.

Background of the Research Carried out

Mentors play a crucial role in the educational process even though research in education sciences has been situated more on the competences of teachers (both novice and experienced) rather than on those of mentors´. In this context it is gratifying that in the recent years an increasing number of academic research projects worldwide (e.g., Bullough, 2012; Clarke et al., 2013; Dallat & Moran, 1998; Glassford & Salinitri, 2007; Hökká & Eteläpelto, 2014; Iucu & Stingu, 2013; Pavera et al., 2022) have been dealing with the issue of mentorship.

As mentoring practitioners, Alexandra Zografou and Laura McDermott (2022) after a comprehensive study of the subject of mentorship organised nine activity categories specified by Manju George and Sebastian Rupert Mampilly (2012) into three broader categories, which were:
- guiding activities;
- helping activities;
- encouraging activities.

They declared that these categories, as well as definitions of mentorships and characteristics of a mentor profile and the scope of mentorship, would be helpful in designing a mentorship programme.

In respect to benefits resulting from the mentor – mentee interconnection, Peter Hudson (2013) claims that mentoring supports the professional development of both the mentor and the mentee. David Clutterbuck (2005) additionally suggested a framework of competences, which both these sides develop during their mutual communication and cooperation. Based on previous studies on mentoring (see also Klasen & Clutterbuck, 2002), he describes five phases through which the mentor - mentees relationship evolves over time:
- rapport-building;
- the direction-setting phase;
- progress-making;
- winding down;
- moving on or professional friendship.

As Clutterbuck (2005) states, different phases of this process are based on different behaviour, dominantly of the mentor, what means that in each of them a mentor has to demonstrate different competences to respond to the mentee´s needs.

Clutterbuck and Gill Lane (2005) have developed a comprehensive list of identifying macro- and micro-competences. They emphasize that the macro-competences are necessary for a successful performance of mentoring, including fulfilment of the managerial and guiding tasks and roles of the mentor. These competences according to Clutterbuck and Lane should be perceived as the key components of a mentor profile, while the other

ones, the micro-competences are more specific, more related to the specific situation of the mentor – mentee interaction or to the phase of their relationship.

To enhance teachers´ mentoring competences, Wenhui Li (2018) adds other strategies to develop these competences more effectively. In this respect, he emphasises the use of technology as a tool to complete the mentor procedure enabling a change in the educational environment of the 21st century. Based on the research of Peg Boyle Single and Richard Single (2005), Li presents a comparison between a formal mentoring model and e-mentoring. The latter includes three approaches: planning, programme structure and assessment (Malá et al., 2020). E-mentoring is understood as a relationship between a senior mentor and a novice teacher using electronic communication to train and develop competences needed in their workplace (Single & Muller, 2001).

In this respect, Jessica Aspfors and Terese Bondas (2013) focus on both novice teachers´ practice, and their approach to the school environment, including the school stakeholders, while Linda Haggarty et. al. (2011) focus more on the necessity of further education of the novice teachers after their entrance into their service (see also in Achinstein, 2006).

Many authors have discussed the role of educational institutions to provide experienced mentors in order to guide novice teachers and help them develop professional competences and skills (Bilíková et al., 2014; Entlová et al., 2018; Gadušová & Vítečková, 2013; Garvey & Westlander, 2013; Kemmis et al., 2014; Koballa et al., 2010; Langdon, 2014). However, it is not an easy situation for the mentors themselves. As Zdenka Gadušová et al. (2022) explain, school legislation may in some cases define qualification preconditions of the mentor, but in the actual implementation of the mentoring activity, the mentors are more or less dependent on themselves. Long theoretical lists of criteria the mentors have to fulfil in order to guide novices often lack space for concrete practical advice and recommendations on how to do it in order to tackle this challenging task; at the same time they will not be able to perform their role without these competences.

One of the international projects dealing with the issue of mentoring is the Erasmus+ project titled *Mentor training* (Erasmus+ program, 2020). The project team consists of representatives of different universities from four Central European countries:
- Constantine the Philosopher University, Nitra, Slovakia;
- the University of J. Selye, Komárno, Slovakia;
- the University of Ostrava, Ostrava, Czech Republic;
- the Prague University of Economics and Business, Prague, Czech Republic;
- Eszterházy Károly Catholic University, Eger, Hungary;
- the University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Serbia.

The main task of the project is to create a concept of professional mentor

training of teachers and to elaborate relevant teaching materials. Based on literature retrieval and analyses of available literature resources, a list of fifteen competences specifying possible basic elements of a mentor profile was compiled. The key competences, which the mentor training should focus on, were identified through the assessment of their significance of mentor position performance by the national experts from each project partner institution.

Research Methodology

The compiled list of the possible basic elements of a mentor profile consisted of the following 15 items, i.e., mentor´s competences:

C1 - the ability to provide active feedback and constructive criticism to a mentee;

C2 - the ability to create a permanent bond with a mentee, to be available to him/her for meeting and discussion at any time;

C3 - the ability to listen to a mentee and ask him/her relevant questions;

C4 - the ability to perceive and set adequate level of confidentiality, including its boundaries;

C5 - the ability to openly communicate with a mentee including positive non-verbal communication;

C6 - the ability to provide psycho-social support to a mentee;

C7 - the ability (including willingness) to share a mentor´s own experience and knowledge with a mentee;

C8 - the ability to create and strengthen a sense of belonging and trust;

C9 - to have interaction skills, e.g. the ability to effectively resolve conflicts and disagreements;

C10 - the ability to regulate a mentor´s own emotional expressions as well as the mentee´s;

C11 - the ability to develop a mentor´s own professional skills and knowledge;

C12 - the ability to support the positive thinking of a mentee;

C13 - the ability to self-reflect including the development of a mentee´s self-reflection;

C14 - to have positive leadership skills;

C15 - the ability to create and support mutual mentoring, such as counselling and offering help to other colleagues.

The particular items were formulated in a way to indicate the areas, which the mentor training should be focused on, i.e. what kinds of activities should predominantly be done within the mentor training. A panel discussion was held in order to find the most significant items among the identified basic ones, which could be specified as the key competences of the mentor competence profile.

According to Robert Bogdan and Sari Knopp Biklen (1992), obtaining necessary research data by conducting individual interviews with a high number of people is not only time-consuming but also organisationally demanding; therefore, mass gathering of opinions from groups of people with different professional experience is preferred. At the same time, they argue that through one group interview it is possible to get a view of the solved problem adequate to the one that would be the result of many repeated individual inquiries (personal interviews) always conducted with another respondent. This is why a panel discussion is used as a form of group or focus group interview at conferences, workshops, and in the academic environment in general (Morgan, 1988; Seidman, 1991).

In the academic environment, a panel discussion is usually part of a planned educational activity or extracurricular programme, which is aimed identification of the opinions of a given group of people (panellists) under the guidance of a researcher (moderator). The panellists discuss and exchange views together, while the moderator actively enters and directs the discussion. A panel discussion is a specific form of group interview, through which a wider range of problems or questions can be responded in to comparison to carrying out individual interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Lewis, 1992). It is commonly used in a meeting or at a conference to discuss a specific topic amongst a selected group of experts, all who share their knowledge and experience, as well as give facts, opinions and insight to the discussed topic or questions. The presence of an audience, whose questions, besides the moderator´s question, the panellists respond, can be in-person or virtual (remote). Usually, the purpose of a panel discussion is to provide the audience with an insight, along with some takeaways and real values in relation to the discussed matters. This is why an alternative or modified kind of the panelling – specifically, a focus group interview – was used in our research, as we did not need to familiarise the audience with the discussed matters, but instead determine the experts´ views and opinions on the given issue.

The main difference between a panel discussion and focus group interview lies in the roles of their moderators; essentially, both of them are personal inquires or interviews (Lewis, 1992) A panel discussion is significantly led by the moderator who is an integral part of the whole debate with the panellists. On the contrary, the discussion in the focus group interview has rather a character of mutual discussions carried out inside the experts groups, which are supported by the moderator (Morgan, 1988; Watts & Ebbutt, 1987).

In our research, there was used a panel discussion with six focus groups, all of which were given the same task by the moderator:
- to discuss competences a mentor should have, and, subsequently;
- to choose five competences from the fifteen which, in their opinion, are the most important for the mentor role performance.

The panel discussion pertaining to our research was carried out at one of the Mentor Training project meetings held in Lednice, Czech Republic, in September 2022. The focus groups of the panel were created from the experts representing the project partner higher educational institution.

Results and Discussion

The panellists were divided into six focus groups, each of which represented a different education institution:

- FG1: Constantine the Philosopher University ín Nitra   CPU-SK;
- FG2: the University of J. Selye in Komárno   UJS-SK;
- FG3: the University of Ostrava in Ostrava   UO-CZ;
- FG4: the Prague University of Economics and Business in Prague UEB-CZ;
- FG5: Eszterházy Károly Catholic University in Eger   KEU-HU;
- FG6: the University of Novi Sad in Novi Sad   UNS-SRB.

The overview of separate conclusions stated by the experts of the higher education institutions concerned is presented in Figure 1.
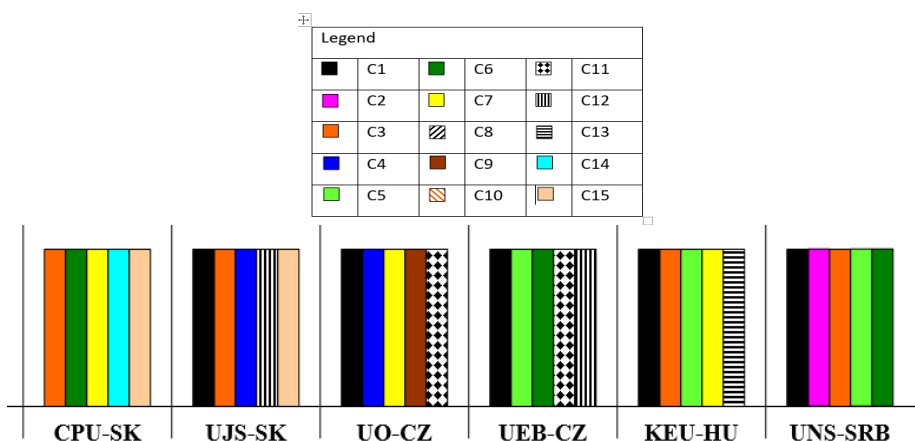

Figure 1

Key mentor competences identified from the given ones by the particular focus groups of experts

Source. Own research.

The intention of the panel discussion conducted was to pinpoint a common view and consensus on the key competences necessary for a successful performance of the mentor position (Figure 2). However, the results of the panel discussion showed a significant divergence of the experts´ opinions on key mentor competences depending on the country they were from. The only exception was in the general assessment of the

C1 competence – *the ability to provide active feedback and constructive criticism to a mentee.* This competence was equally assessed as one of the five top competences by the Czech, Hungarian, Serbian and in part Slovak experts: in their case only one of the two focus groups – the University of J. Selye in Komárno included the C1 competence in the five most significant mentor competences. The result obtained can be perceived as a general consensus of all national experts on one of the most significant competences a mentor should have.

While the different assessment of the C1 competence in the case of the Slovak experts depended on the factor of their affiliation, in the assessment of the C3 competence – *the ability to listen to a mentee and ask him/her relevant questions* – there was recorded a consensus of all experts on their views on this competence, independently on the factor of their affiliation. The C3 competence was assessed as one of the top five competences of a mentor´s profile by Slovak, Hungarian and Serbian national experts. The experts from two Czech educational institutions did not include this competence in the top five competence list.

The rest of the achieved results shows a considerable heterogeneity of the national experts´ views on the key competences of a mentor´s profile. The Serbian and Hungarian experts equally assessed the C5 competence – *the ability to openly communicate with a mentee including positive non-verbal communication* – as one of the key mentor competences. The assessment of this competence by the Czech experts depended on their affiliation – similarly to the Slovak experts concerning the C1 competence. While the focus group of the Czech experts from the Prague University od Economics and Business perceived the C5 competence a key for mentors, the other group of Czech experts from the University of Ostrava did not include it in the top five competences. Neither of the two Slovak focus groups expressed the significance of the C5 competence.

An even lower consensus of the experts´ views was achieved at the assessment of the C7 competence – *the ability (including willingness) to share a mentor´s own experience and knowledge with a mentee.* It was specified as a key mentor competence by the focus group of Hungarian experts - Eszterházy Károly Catholic University in Eger. Different views of the two focus groups of Slovak experts, as well as of the two focus groups of Czech experts agree that the placement of the C7 competence among the top five mentor competences depended on their affiliation. In particular, the experts from CPU in Nitra (Slovakia) and from the UO in Ostrava in Ostrava (Czech Republic) express the significance of the C7 competence while the experts from the UJS in Komárno (Slovakia) and the Prague University of Economics and Business in Prague (Czech Republic) did not consider it to be particularly significant. The same opinion was expressed by the University of Novi Sad in Novi Sad (Serbia).

An analogical situation occurred with the assessment of the C6 competence – *the ability to provide psycho-social support to a mentee* in which the

experts stated their different opinions. The C6 competence was specified as a mentor key competence by the focus group of the Serbian (the University of Novi Sad in Novi Sad), Czech (the Prague University of Economics and Business in Prague), and Slovak (Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra) experts. The experts from the other three focus groups – the University of J. Selye in Komárno, the University of Ostrava in Ostrava, and Eszterházy Károly Catholic University in Eger – did not place this competence in the top five list. The different views of the experts proved their dependence on the factor of their affiliation.

The C11 competence – *the ability to develop a mentor´s own professional skills and knowledge* – was specified by the two Czech focus groups, while the C15 competence – *the ability to create and support mutual mentoring, such as counselling and offering help to other colleagues* – by the two Slovak focus groups. The C12 competence – *the ability to support the positive thinking of the mentee* – was included in key mentor competences by the Slovak focus group at the University of J. Selye in Komárno and the Czech focus group at the Prague University of Economics and Business in Prague. The C4 competence – *the ability to perceive and set adequate level of confidentiality, including its boundaries* – was determined as a key mentor competence by two focus groups: one from the University of J. Selye in Komárno (Slovakia) and one from the University of Ostrava (Czech Republic).

The other competences were specified as key mentor competences by the following focus groups separately: the C13 competence – *the ability to self-reflect including the development of a mentee´s self-reflection* – by the experts from Eszterházy Károly Catholic University in Eger (Hungary); the C14 competence – *to have positive leadership skills* – by the experts from Constantine the Philosopher University ín Nitra (Slovakia); the C9 competence – *to have interaction skills, e.g. the ability to effectively resolve conflicts and disagreements* – by the experts from the University of Ostrava (Czech Republic); and the C2 competence – *the ability to create a permanent bond with a mentee, to be available to him/her for meeting and discussion at any time* – by the experts from the University of Novi Sad (Serbia).

The C8 and the C10 competences – *the ability to create and strengthen a sense of belonging and trust*, and – *the ability to regulate a mentor´s own emotional as well as the mentee´s* – were not assessed as one of the top five key competences of a mentor by any of the focus groups.

Opposed to the results of our research presenting fifteen items of mentor competences, Aspfors and Göran Fransson (2015) conducted a qualitative meta-synthesis of ten studies within which they identified four common themes related to the needs of mentor training:
- School and mentoring context;
- Theory and practice;
- Reflection and critical thinking;
- Relationships.

Some of the aspects highlighted in these dimensions roughly correspond with the items of mentor competences. The fifteen abilities listed within the mentor profile can be found in the description of individual themes and dimensions presented in the results of the above mentioned synthesis. Still, further insights and deeper analyses are necessary in order to gain broader perspectives on this issue (Hobson et al., 2009; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Another analysis of eight studies focusing on the mentor instructors´ use and acquisition of supervisory skills was developed by Frank Crasborn and Paul Hennissen (2010). In their research, they concentrated on three areas of mentor instructors: their roles, their supervisory behaviour, and their interactive cognitions. Each of these areas was analysed in a partially different way than the mentor competence profile presented above. The authors designed four coding instruments (input, clarity, content, and phasing) to achieve more nuanced conceptualisations in mentoring research. Some of the identified factors, such as the use of audiovisual techniques and software for the purpose of capturing mentors´ reflective moments in action, could be taken into account in our research on this topic.

Furthermore, several aspects corresponding with the listed elements of a mentor profile within our research were emphasised in the study delivered by Yukari Kato (2021). An analogy can be seen in sharing information between mentors to improve their mentor skills as well as in sharing a mentor´s own experience and knowledge with a mentee. The ability to openly communicate with mentees was clearly recognised in both studies. The mentors in Kato´s study had the ability to learn from mentees as well as participation in mentor meetings, both of which correspond to a mentor´s ability to create a permanent bond with mentees, to listen to them, and to provide them the active feedback and support as described in the list of our research. In addition, the ability of self-reflection and the ability to develop a mentor´s own professional skills and knowledge were mentioned in both research studies discussed.

Conclusion

The results from the panel discussion (Figure 2) indicated significant differences among the panellists` opinions on the issue of key competences of mentors. The divergence of the experts` views on a mentor competence profile might be related to subjective approaches of different education institutions dealing with mentor training, or with strategies of educational policies of the countries concerned.
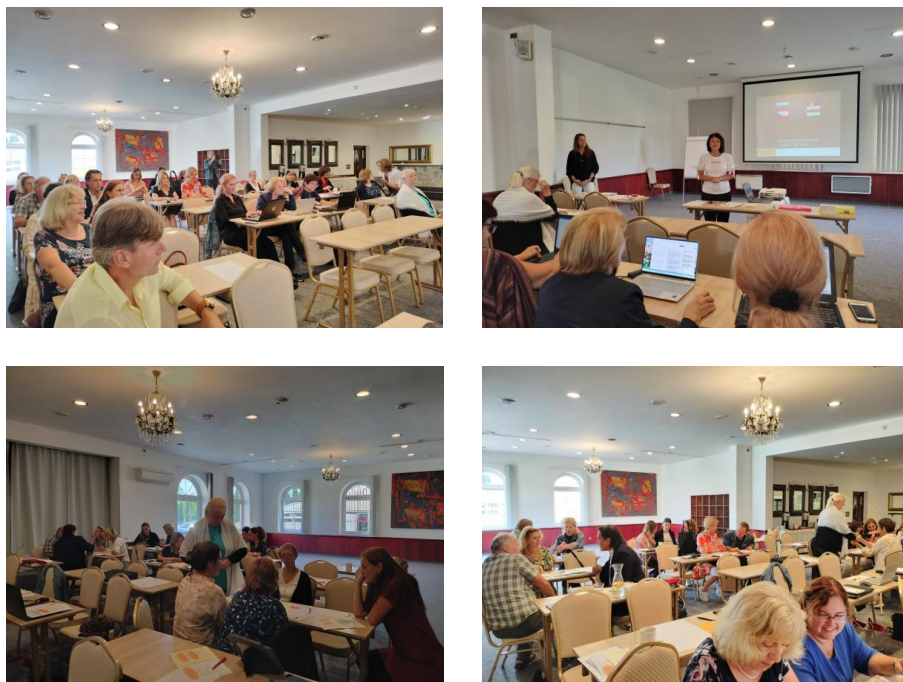
Figure 2

Lednice CZ, September 2022, Participants of the panel discussion

Source. Photos made by the authors.

Acknowledgements

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