To What Extent Does the Educational Biography of VET Teachers Influence the Understanding of Mentoring. Interim Results from the Mentor Qualification in Mecklenburg Western Pomerania

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to present initial results from the mentoring qualification of VET teachers at the University of Rostock. With the method of guided, narrative interviews, it is investigated whether the educational biography has an influence on the teachers' understanding of mentoring. Initial findings indicate that there are differences between teachers with an undergraduate degree and lateral entrants. The groups define different objectives and options for action in mentoring. Conclusions can be drawn for the practice of teacher training.

Keywords

educational biography, mentoring, cognitive apprenticeship, vocational teachers

1   Introduction

Against the background that individuals are involved in shaping social development, it seems worthwhile to take a look at a group whose explicit function is the transmission of professional knowledge and which shapes (future) professional images, especially through performative reproduction. Mentors take on precisely such a role in teacher training. Accordingly, this role will be examined more closely here and, in this context, initial results from the mentor qualification project at the University of Rostock[1] will be presented.

In addition, the attitudes with regard to mentoring and one's own mentoring role are examined, since even through a "cognitive apprenticeship" (Ghefaili, 2003) in the context of mentoring situations, the role of the vocational education and training teacher is not only reproduced but also passed on to the mentees. Here, underlying factors are to be taken into account, because "the promise of mentoring lies not in its contribution to novices' emotional well-being or survival, but in its capacity to foster an inquiring stance toward teaching and a commitment to

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developing shared standards for judging good practice" (Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1993, p. 700).

1.1 Method

The model of "educative mentoring", formulated by Feiman-Nemser, which refers to Dewey's remarks on education, serves as a reference (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Mentors…

> interact with novices in ways that foster an inquiring stance. They cultivate skills and habits that enable novices to learn in and from their practice. They use their knowledge and expertise to assess the direction novices are heading and to create opportunities and conditions that support meaningful teacher learning in the service of student learning. (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p.18)

In addition to formal instructions, the informal transfer of knowledge is taken into account, which conveys the fundamental understanding of the profession. This form of transfer can be described with Butler (1997) as performativity. The knowledge is not penetrated and transferred into one's own actions but is imitated by means of "apprenticeship". Imitation does not necessarily prevent cognitive confrontation but can be expanded in the form of a "cognitive apprenticeship". Cognitive and reflexive work can make the underlying theories conscious and thus be transferred into one's own instruments of action (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p.25). At the same time, institutional feedback forms an essential corrective (Foucault, 1993) and reinforces professional performativity. Individual biographies will be used to show the collective traces of mentors to get in touch with the interdependence of the individual mentalities and work in its social structure (Billett 2007).

Mentors accompany the second phase of teacher education after studying at University level in Germany (Kalisch & Kaiser 2019) and are officially qualified for this role in Mecklenburg – Western Pomerania. The subject of this qualification is primarily the legal and organizational aspects of mentoring. This is the starting point for the mentor qualification for VET teachers at the Institute for Vocational Education in Rostock, which also addresses the role and specific subject-didactic challenges of mentoring.

Funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, the Institute for Vocational Education at the University of Rostock is designing a mentor qualification for vocational teachers in various vocational fields of activity. The participating mentors are interviewed during the qualification in order to be able to take the above-mentioned factors into account and systematize them. The qualification extends over three school years with annually changing participants. In the three groups resulting from this structure, guided narrative interviews were conducted. The guiding theory behind this procedure is the approach of communicative action (Habermas, 2019) as further developed by Benhabib (1995). The interviews will be transcribed and, following Kuckartz (2018), analyzed with regard to their content structure and evaluated. The underlying guideline is structured along three narrative impulses that address 1. the educational biography, 2. the professional self-image, and 3. the individual understanding of mentoring.

The deductive codes resulting from the interview guide are iteratively supplemented by inductive codes in the course of the analysis. The formation of differentiating categories will be used to examine the extent to which biographical overlaps influence the understanding of one's own mentoring role.

1.2 Interview situation

In the first year of the project, eight participants were interviewed (2f, 6m). Among the interviewees was one person who was undergoing their traineeship at the time. Five of the interviewees had taken part in the qualification series described above. Due to the pandemic, the interviews could not be recorded in a face-to-face situation but were conducted and recorded by telephone. The interviewees were at home at the time of the interviews and the timing of the interviews was discussed individually. The interviews were conducted in a team, whereby one of the interviewers was a student from the University of Rostock who collected and analyzed part of the interview data for her master's thesis. The basic documents for conducting the interviews were the guideline and the respective pre-script and postscript.

1.3 First results

The analysis of the interviews shows that there is a different understanding of mentoring, to varying degrees. In the statements of the interviewees, both substantive-professional and emotional task realms are defined. At the same time, codes emerge that on the one hand take up the claim of apprenticeship (grey background in Figure 1):

> Yes, () openness, no? Well, um, there are (.) colleagues who, for example, don't want trainees or students to observe their lessons, uhh, I don't know for what reason, uhh (.) to deal openly and clearly with the fact that not every lesson that the mentee sees is one that one absolutely has to imitate, but that one also sees that there are also ad hoc lessons, things shot from the hip, that this is of course not the image that is expected of such an examinee in the traineeship, but (.) (Transcription Expert1: 88 - 88)

and codes that can be located in cognitive apprenticeship (white background in Figure 1):

> Pooh, yes, mentoring would be, according to my understanding, hmmm, a direct pairing of a mentor and a, (.) well, let's call it a student or apprentice(.) and(.) the mentor should have the goal of creating someone(.) that is, a person who perhaps, in the best case, also becomes a bit better. So maybe in the professional context or whatever, than himself. (Transcription Expert3: 78 - 78).

Figure 1
Mentoring, Extract from code tree
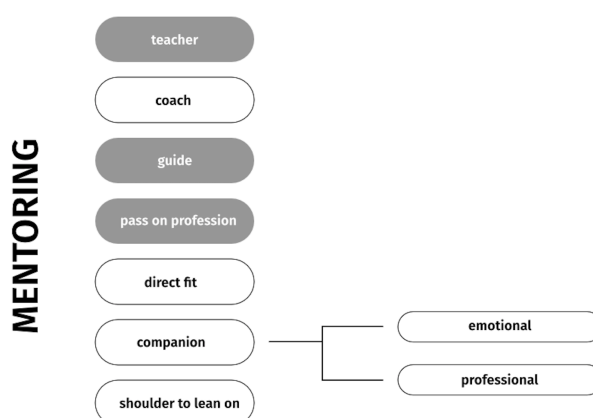
Note. Own representation.

The analysis of the available data clearly shows that there are differences in connection with the respective educational biographies. An example of this can be seen between the mentors who completed an undergraduate degree (Figure 2, second border "grundständig") and the mentors who began their school career by entering the field (Figure 2, first border "Seiteneinstieg"). For example, the respective focus of the mentoring concept differs. While the mentors with a degree focus on the appropriate professional combination of mentor and mentee and the professional, billable support, the mentors who started as lateral entrants refer on the one hand to social competencies (coach, support/ "Unterstützer*in", contact person/ "Begleiter*in") and on the other hand to the continuation of their professionalism (passing on their profession/ "Beruf weitergeben") and thus to their personal professional image.

In addition, the available data show that the description of the goals of vocational training differs between these two groups (Figure 2, second box "Berufliche Bildung"). The mentors with an undergraduate degree formulate a more differentiated goal area of professional education than the mentors who entered the teaching profession via a lateral entry. At the same time, the analysis also shows that the evaluations also differ depending on the subject area.

Figure 2
Code-Analysis with MaxQDA
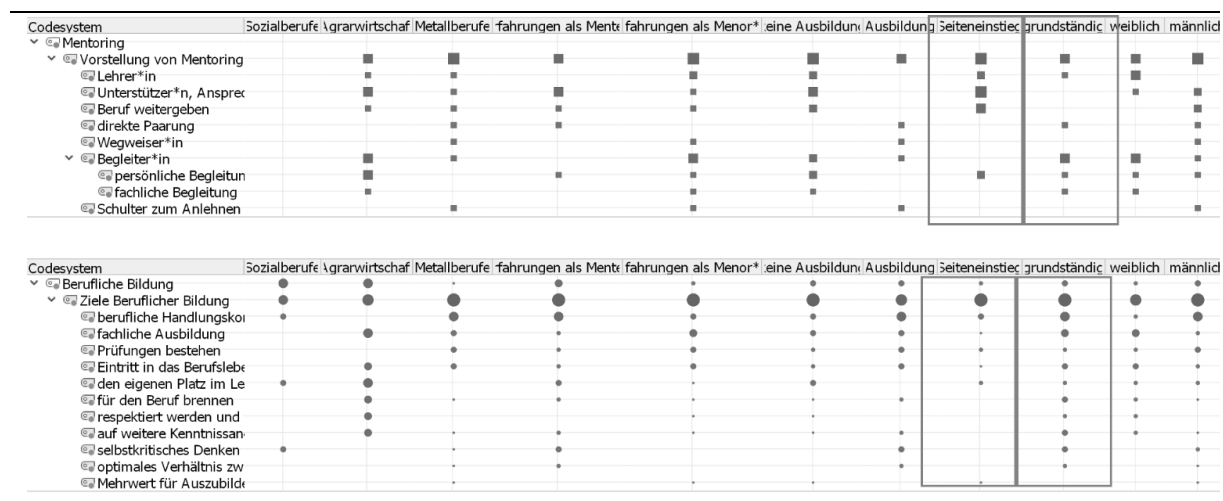
Initial indications of these differentiations can be further examined on the basis of the respective educational biographies. The interviewees were asked to name the greatest challenge that made entering the teaching profession difficult. At this point, an excerpt from the code tree should provide an initial overview:

In addition to the social hurdles listed (motherhood, working-class children, system logic), the mention of pedagogical difficulties (pedagogy, implementation of pedagogical concepts, lack of routine) is particularly striking. It is mentioned by almost all interviewees, but especially emphasised in detail by those who came into teaching via a lateral entry. At the same time, it becomes clear that these teachers are already shown the lack of recognition for their work as a teacher during their traineeship, which obviously increases their insecurity in pedagogical matters.

> We actually all got along well at school, um, with the lessons, we also, I think, all did well, yes, and proved ourselves, but in the study seminar we were made to feel very, very clearly that as lateral entrants, um, we were second-class teachers and I found that unpleasant. (Transcription Expert6: 11 - 11).

Figure 3

Hurdles into teaching, Extract from code tree
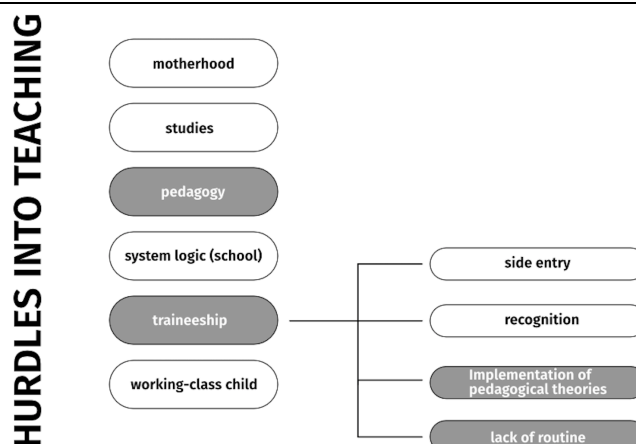
Note. Own representation.

1.4 Discussion

The available data show that there seems to be a connection between the educational biography and the interaction as a mentor. Overall, there are very diverse educational biographies that could be defined as non-straightforward from the outside. This is probably a special feature of vocational teachers, which makes a comparison with the educational biographies of teachers in general education schools seem worthwhile. Accordingly, studies such as the present one are relevant in order to scientifically approach research gaps concerning the educational biographies of VET teachers (in Germany as well as in Europe).

Another point that will be examined more closely in the further process is the different weighting of cognitive and emotional interactions in the mentoring process. Here, further interviews and their analyses will be able to show whether there are other aspects besides the differentiation between undergraduates and lateral entrants that influence this characteristic.

For teacher training, it becomes clear that there seems to be great uncertainty in practice with regard to didactic transfer. This aspect should be given greater consideration in teacher training. In connection with the "missing routines", it becomes clear that there should be a more action-oriented approach in the teaching of basic pedagogical principles. It would be conceivable to extend the interviews on the understanding of mentoring to the students in order to gain further insights.

All in all, the available data are not yet sufficient to make comprehensive statements about the present conspicuities. However, they do provide initial indications that will be taken into account in the coming process.

By continuing the presented research project in the next two years and potentially increasing the existing data collection, the presented (initial) results can be further validated and analyzed in more detail. Finally, based on the findings, further practical advice and guidelines for the education and training of VET teachers (in Germany and Europe) can be formulated.

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