

# THE DUAL ROLE OF SCHOOL MENTORS: HOW TO ESTABLISH TEACHING AND SUPERVISION GOALS?

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## Abstract

In several countries, the schools' responsibilities in preparing student teachers for their future work have increased over the last decade (Sandvik et al., 2019). In cooperation with the universities, school mentors are expected to set an example of how to teach pupils and use appropriate teaching practices in lessons. School mentors are expected to be capable of choosing teaching practices that achieve several educational goals and to connect student teachers' theoretical concepts with practical training. However, not all school mentors are sufficiently prepared to supervise students and many do not appreciate the importance of their role in training future teachers. The purpose of the present study was to investigate Estonian school mentors' teaching and supervising goals when they teach pupils and supervise student teachers as well as to identify how teachers in the role of mentors understand university expectations. The sample included 16 teachers, all of them had supervision experience with student teachers and they all taught various subjects at university teacher training schools (in grades 1 to 6). Observations and stimulated recall interviews were used to collect the data. Thematic analysis indicated that teachers have difficulty establishing goals for themselves as teachers and mentors. The results demonstrated that Estonian school mentors have the challenge of combining two responsibilities: how to maintain balance between their teaching and supervising. It also appeared that mentors did not perceive clearly what universities expected from them as supervisors and, therefore, relied rather on their personal perception and experience than a clear knowledge of their supervision goals. Mentors' main goal in model lessons for student teachers was to establish good teaching experience. To conclude, it is necessary to encourage cooperation between teachers and universities and support mentors' professional development.

**Keywords:** *Mentor teacher, teaching goals, student teachers, improving the competence of mentors, thematic analysis.*

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## 1. Introduction

Transforming teacher education from university to a school-based system heightens the teachers' and school mentors' responsibility to prepare student teachers for their future work (White, Dickerson, & Weston, 2015). School mentors who supervise student teachers' school practice are expected to set an example of how to teach pupils and use appropriate teaching practices (Cohen, Hoz, & Kaplan 2013), to be capable of choosing practices that achieve several goals and to connect student teachers' theoretical concepts with practical training (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014). Teachers may establish different goals for their teaching; for example, some might focus on motivating pupils and developing their social skills (Mansfield & Beltman, 2014; Vaughn, 2014) or recognising a pupil's individuality and personal achievements (Deemer, 2004); others might concentrate on national curriculum performance (Kuzborska, 2011). Furthermore, school mentors should support student teachers in obtaining a set of core practices for teaching, e.g., developing a classroom culture, learning about pupils, planning lessons, and leading classroom discussions (Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009).

Although, the school mentors must be prepared to perform two roles: teaching subject to their pupils and supporting a future teacher's teaching competencies (Langdon, 2017; White, 2014), not all of them are sufficiently prepared to supervise and many do not appreciate the importance of their role in training future teachers. Moreover, some teachers have referred to the lack of time needed to supervise students (Hodgson, 2014) and some of them prioritise the pupils' academic progress over supervising student teachers (Ambrosetti, 2014; Jaspers et al., 2014). To achieve initial training requirements, school

mentors should be familiar with university expectations of them as supervisors (Butler & Cuenca, 2012) and receive training in supervising from universities (Ng & Chan, 2012).

Based on the overview of previous studies and educational documents the universities expect from school mentors setting good teaching examples (Cheng, Cheng, & Tang, 2010), helping students to prepare and to carry out trial lessons (Butler & Cuenca, 2012), and providing students with feedback on their teaching (TÜ Pedagogicum, 2019). University expectations may also depend on how the school practice is organised and how particular the roles of school mentor are in conducting the school practice. If the students' school practice is carried out at the same time as their studies and during the whole period of their studies, then contacts with school mentors are frequent and their responsibility in the process of shaping student teachers is rather substantial (Eurydice, 2012). School mentors may not understand exactly how they should support students during school practice (Van Velzen & Volman, 2009) and they tend to set aside supervising of students (Clarke et al., 2014).

## 2. Objectives

Little is known about the teaching goals of teachers, who perform two roles: first, teach pupils, and second, supervise and set an example of teaching for future teachers during their school practice (Ambrosetti 2014; Sandvik et al. 2019). The purpose of the present study was to investigate Estonian school mentors' teaching and supervising goals when they teach pupils and supervise student teachers as well as to identify how teachers in the role of mentors understand university expectations. To achieve the objective, two research questions were asked.

**RQ1:** How do school mentors explain and clarify their teaching and supervising goals, established for supervising student teachers during in-school training?

**RQ2:** How do teachers perceive university expectations of them when they perform the role of school mentors?

## 3. Method

In the present research, a comprehensive identification of the dual role of school mentors was studied. In order to describe the teaching and supervision goals of school mentors and determine how they apply teaching practices and interpret them in the context of supervising student teachers, observations and stimulated recall interviews were used. The data collection process contained three stages: 1) school mentors' lessons were observed and recorded, 2) recorded situations were selected for stimulated recall interviews (SRIs), and 3) based on the teachers' video-recorded lessons stimulated recall interviews (SRIs) were conducted. Using an inductive approach, the coding process was elaborated, and sub-themes and themes were identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### 3.1. Sample

Based on purposeful sampling, 16 teachers were selected from previous studies (Salo et al., 2015; Uibu et al., 2017). The choice of teachers was based on three criteria. First, they taught various subjects in grades 1 to 6. Second, they had supervision experience with future teachers (min = 1 year, max = 30 years). Third, they had participated in a one-year mentor training program for school mentors, organized by the universities. Teachers' average age was 47 years (min = 32, max = 63) and their teaching experience varied from 7 to 40 years.

### 3.2. Instruments

*Observations.* The authors compiled the observation sheet describing 18 teaching practices aimed at 18 pupils' cognitive and social development goals. The observation criteria included individual and collaborative practice according to pupils' cognitive and social development. All the practices that teachers used during the introduction, body and end of lessons were video recorded and noted in the checklist. Thereafter, two situations were chosen, one of them contained practices supporting pupils' cognitive development, the other included example of social development (Lyle, 2003).

*Stimulated recall interview (SRI).* The SRI was compiled based on the teachers' video-recorded lessons and focused on stimulating class situations. Topics for the interview were chosen according to the results of earlier studies and the aims of the present study. The interview consisted of 12 questions covering topics related to the teachers' goals in teaching pupils, supervising student teachers and university expectations. Teachers were encouraged to explain their teaching practices in relation to supervising student teachers (*How could this practice be useful to pupils?*) and perceptions about

university expectations (*What do you think the university expects of you as a supervisor?*). Thematic analysis was implemented to examine the teachers' teaching and supervising goals. To ensure trustworthiness of the study double-coding was used and inter-coder reliability coefficient Cohen's kappa was calculated for the topics of supervising practices (k ranged from 0.74 to 1.00).

#### **4. Discussion**

Thematic analysis indicated that teachers have difficulty establishing goals for themselves as teachers and mentors. The goals that teachers set on supervision depend on several factors. They might arise partly from the teachers' understanding of what universities expect from them as mentors (Uusimäki, 2013). If mentors have not been adequately trained and supported, they determine supervision goals according to their understandings and skills, and this may lead to results that do not satisfy future teachers (Butler & Cuenca, 2012). Nevertheless, teachers considered most important the setting of the pattern of carrying out lessons by using teaching practices and communicating with pupils. It was assumed that students can get acquainted with the best practices in lessons given by school mentor who have good teaching skills. School mentors reported it important to support future teachers during teaching as, student teachers should have the chance to show during the school practice that they are able to make teaching-related decisions and take responsibility. Mentors also aimed to observe how students cope with planning and carrying out the teaching process and giving advice to students. However, evaluation of student teachers' actions, were somewhat put aside because school mentors felt uncertain in these areas. They thought that giving negative feedback was necessary, but they were afraid that their criticism would influence the students' future teaching practices. When setting goals for their supervision, school mentors wanted to ensure that student teachers learned how and what to teach during their school practice.

Our study showed that in Estonia, similar to other countries (Jenset et al., 2018), one of the problems with supervising future teachers is that school mentors do not explain to students how they should analyse pupils' development. Due to the fact that teachers think that it is their responsibility to monitor the professional development of future teachers (Ambrosetti, 2014), they focus on how the students perform in lessons (Hall et al., 2008). Although, student teachers are interested in the application of different teaching practices which will improve their teaching skills (Cohen et al., 2013), school mentors focus on practical advice when giving feedback to student teachers. The reason might be that mentors are not in command of the theoretical educational terminology (Van Velzen, 2013). Also, school mentors fail to explain to student teachers how pupils learn during the learning process. The analysis of lessons carried out together with student teachers helped them to give meaning to their actions. The same tendency was also referred by White and her colleagues (2015).

Answering to the second research question, how do teachers perceive university expectations of them when they perform the role of school mentors, has indicated that school mentors did not know exactly what universities expect from them. The first reason why they were unsure about the university expectations might be limited cooperation with the universities. In concordance with previous studies (Hodgson, 2014; Van Velzen et al., 2012), the mentors referred to a lack of time as a factor that hinders cooperation between schools and universities. Another reason might be a lack of clearly formulated requirements for supervisors. Although mentors were unsure about university expectations, they figured that universities expect them to help students to connect their theoretical knowledge with the practical experience of teaching. Based on previous research the one other reason might be that universities do not pay enough attention to identifying the training needs of teachers who supervise students during their school practice (Ambrosetti, 2014; Young & MacPhail, 2014). In their study, O'Dwyer and Atli (2015) highlighted that teachers need more support than just passing a training programme, because many questions emerge during the real process of supervision.

#### **5. Conclusions**

School mentors have many responsibilities; for example, guiding student teachers in planning and carrying out lessons, setting the pattern of teaching in model lessons and giving feedback on the students' performance (Clarke et al., 2014; Cohen et al., 2013). The results demonstrated that Estonian school mentors have the challenge of combining two responsibilities: how to maintain balance between their teaching and supervising. Mentors' main goal in example lessons for student teachers was to establish good teaching experience. However, when setting an example for student teachers, teachers should pay more attention to teaching practices that support the comprehensive development of pupils. School mentors admitted that supervising student teachers is a bidirectional process which, in addition to the development of students, improves the teachers' knowledge about teaching.

It also appeared that mentors did not perceive clearly what universities expected from them as supervisors and, therefore, relied rather on their personal perception and experience than a clear knowledge of their supervision goals. Teachers perceive university expectations better, and feel more confident when supervising students, if universities have involved them in the research and development of teacher education. Thus, school mentors need more support from the universities during the students' school practice. The universities should clearly express their expectations to teachers who supervise student teachers and provide them with back-up materials.

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