

Mentors' Perceptions of Supervising Student English Language Teachers During One-Year Clinical Practice

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ABSTRACT

Mentoring in initial teacher education programmes is believed to play one of the primary roles in student teachers' professional development, as it enhances the professional learning of student teachers in the context of their classroom and school experience. The purpose of the article is to explore mentors' perceptions of their readiness, expectations, and relationship with student teachers during one-year clinical teaching practice. The article defines and discusses mentoring in an initial teacher education programme at a Czech university and reports the findings of a qualitative study which was conducted in a group of mentors who provided mentoring to student English language teachers during their one-year clinical practice. The clinical teaching practice is conducted in selected schools at primary and lower-secondary levels of education and mentors, student teachers, and university teacher educators communicate and cooperate closely. The study offers insights into the mentors' perceptions of various aspects of mentoring, including the relationship of the mentors and the student English language teachers in the specific clinical practice model. The findings of the study are interpreted in the light of the proposed reform of initial teacher education in the Czech Republic and as such might be recognised by the education community and policymakers.

Keywords: teaching practice, initial teacher education, mentor, mentoring, student/pre-service English language teacher

Introduction

Mentoring plays one of the fundamental roles in student teachers' professional development, as it enhances their professional learning in the context of the classroom and school experience. However, not much is known about mentoring processes, specifically the development of the mentoring relationship (Sheridan &

Nguyen, 2020, 296). Thus, the purpose of the article is to explore mentors' perceptions of various aspects of mentoring in terms of their readiness, expectations, and relationship with student English language teachers during one-year clinical teaching practice.

Theoretical framework

Recently, teacher education has been in a period labelled 'practice turn' (Reid, 2011). As a consequence, students in initial teacher education (ITE) are required to spend a substantial amount of time in school-based parts of the programmes. For example, acknowledging teaching as an academically taught clinical practice profession, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education recommends the States to require each pre-service teacher candidate to complete a full year (30 weeks or 900 hours) of clinical preparation¹ (AACTE, 2012). In Australia, pre-service teachers need to complete between 60 and 80 days of supervised professional experience (Wilson & Huynh, 2020). In New Zealand, the Teaching Council's recent revision of accreditation requirements has extended the minimum number of weeks that pre-service teachers must spend in practice settings to 16 (Hoben, 2021). Most European countries specify a minimum length of professional training, including in-school placements²; in some countries, however, institutions are autonomous (e.g. the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Slovakia) or a single system does not exist (e.g. Germany, the United Kingdom) (Eurydice, 2015, pp. 32–33). In spite of the autonomy that the Czech ITE institutions possess, the structure of programmes is specified by the mandatory guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic (MŠMT, 2017). According to these guidelines, for example, the teaching practice experience and its reflection should be allocated from 24 to 30 ECTS during the whole ITE (Bachelor's and Master's programmes together), which equals about 900 hours of work.

The length of the practicum matters; however, what other constituent parts of ITE programmes there are and how they fit together are also important. Lofthouse (2018, p. 248) proposes that professional and academic elements may be interwoven and integrated through a range of curricular and programme designs. Consequently, a diversity of such designs reflecting specific socio-cultural contexts and traditions may be observed across the world.

For illustration, in England, the practice turn has led to the proliferation and diversity of ITE providers (Lofthouse, 2018). Apart from university-led or

¹ Characteristics of effective clinical preparation are proposed, for example, by Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden (2007) and by AACTE (2018).

² In terms of ECTS credits for in-school placements, the number ranges across European states from 15 or less (e.g. Slovenia, Estonia) to 50 (Hungary), the average being 25 (Eurydice, 2015, p. 35).

school-led programmes (Furlong et al., 2000) utilising some kind of university-school partnership, there are also programmes which are solely school-based (*SCITT programmes, School Direct Programme*, Eurydice 2015, p. 36; Ofsted, 2017). These SCITTs decide about the academic part of the programme, i.e. whether or not to work with universities, which, according to Lofthouse (2018), has led to a withdrawal of well-established university schools of education in England from teacher education.

Given the amount of time that student teachers in ITE spend on school placements, the role of school-based mentors³ is critical (Becher & Orland-Barak, 2018, p. 477; Hoben, 2021, p. 42; Lofthouse, 2018, p. 248) for the realisation of ITE programmes, no matter whether they are university-led, school-led, or entirely school-based. Mentoring is widely recognised as one of the most important support systems for teachers entering the profession (Hobson et al. 2009; Pinnick, 2020). To define mentoring, however, is not straightforward, since definitions of mentoring vary greatly (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010) in terms of the nature of the relationship they reflect, the dimensions they cover, etc. Ambrosetti and Dekkers (2010) offer a definition of mentoring in ITE:

Mentoring is a non-hierarchical, reciprocal relationship between mentors and mentees who work towards specific professional and personal outcomes for the mentee. The relationship usually follows a developmental pattern within a specified timeframe and roles are defined, expectations are outlined and a purpose is (ideally) clearly delineated (p. 52).

The definition includes all three components that embrace mentoring, i.e. relationship, process, and context.

Mentor-mentee relationship

Mentor-mentee relationships have become a key factor in the context of ITE (Wilson et al., 2020) since they determine the learning experience of mentees,⁴ given its potential benefits for learning, performance, networks, and personal satisfaction (Sheridan & Nguyen, 2020). Establishing a non-hierarchical relationship has been identified by Hobson (2016) as one of seven imperative indicators of quality mentoring – its absence “makes it difficult to establish relational trust and for mentees to openly share their professional learning and development needs with mentors” (Hobson, 2016, p. 101). In addition, Wilson et al. (2020)

³ A number of different words are used to refer to mentors in English (cooperating teacher, supervising teacher, etc.) and in the Czech language. With reference to Greek mythology, we prefer the word ‘mentor’ since Mentor meant a “father figure, an approachable counsellor, a trusted advisor, a challenger, an encourager” (Carruthers, 1993, p. 9).

⁴ Mentee = student teacher/pre-service teacher.

argue that pre-service teachers' capacity to cope during a professional placement is closely linked to the quality of the mentoring relationship; those pre-service teachers who favour non-productive coping strategies (e.g. dwelling on the negative, self-blaming, worrying) tended to experience heightened challenges whilst on placement and reported difficult mentor-mentee communication. Similarly, Mackie (2018) proposes that the key mentoring relationship is that between the class teacher mentor and the mentee, and is essential in developing the mentee's teaching capacity. Sheridan and Nguyen (2020) explored the development of the mentor-mentee relationship during professional experience using a four-phase conceptual model of progression (Kram, 1983 in Sheridan & Nguyen, 2020), which includes:

- a) initiation (the start of the relationship);
- b) cultivation (mentoring functions expand);
- c) separation (the established relationship is substantially altered by context and/or psychological changes), and
- d) redefinition (the relationship evolves and/or ends).

The same authors conclude that the development of mentor-mentee relationships is complex and highly variable as the mentoring relationship moves between the four phases. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how the mentoring relationship develops and what processes contribute to supporting confident, autonomous teachers (Sheridan & Nguyen, 2020, p. 309). The development of the mentoring relationship is also determined by its length and closeness. Bentley et al. (2017) explored mentor-mentee relationships across a year-long practicum at one school and concluded that during the year, pre-service teachers were more likely to establish stronger and trusting relationships with their mentors; the mentees who felt comfortable with their mentors were more willing to take risks and utilised mistakes as valuable learning experiences. Contrary to that, Jederud et al. (2021) show how implementing a paired practicum, one of the structural changes that the practice turn has brought to Sweden, has a negative influence on the mentor-mentee relationship.

The knowledge base for mentoring

Mentors' knowledge is deeply rooted in their teaching knowledge (Becher & Orland-Barak, 2018). Their knowledge about teaching is practice-oriented and emerges from their professional experience, their teaching skills, their pre-service teacher education, and, to a considerable extent, their own personal experience (Clarke, Killeavy, & Moloney, 2013). In order to conceptualise mentor knowledge, Jones and Straker (2006) used Shulman's (1987) model of teacher knowledge and transferred four domains of teacher knowledge to a model of mentor knowledge: Content knowledge → Teacher knowledge, social, cultural, and expertise; General pedagogical knowledge → Working with adult learners;

Pedagogical content knowledge → Professional training and development;
Context knowledge → The wider and political context (Jones & Straker, 2006, p. 169).

Methods

The aim of this small-scale study is to present qualitative evidence from within the context of one-year clinical teaching practice to uncover mentors' subjective perceptions of their readiness, expectations, and relationship with student teachers in a specific ITE programme in the Czech Republic. In particular, this study explored three research questions:

1. How do the mentors perceive their readiness to work as mentors?
2. What are the mentors' expectations of their mentoring role?
3. What role does the relationship of the mentor and student teacher play in the practicum?

The design of the qualitative study was inspired by a sequential explanatory design (Creswell, 1996), as the data was collected over a period of time in two consecutive phases in the period from May to June 2022. During the first phase, a questionnaire with open-ended items was used ($n = 14$). The data in the questionnaire was drawn from the mentors who cooperated with the 2020 and 2021 cohorts of students, and 14 out of 23 mentors returned the filled in questionnaire. In the second phase, during the in-depth interviews ($n = 3$) mentors' perceptions of their mentoring roles and the development of their relationship with mentees were examined. The informant selection and data collection in the semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were guided by the results of the questionnaire data analysis. The targeted context specific qualitative sample (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013 in Sheridan and Nguyen, 2020, p. 299) may be seen as a limitation of the study as it involves only a contextually bound small sample of participants, however, such a sample allows to collect different views of mentoring from a distinct group of mentors with different mentoring experience backgrounds and within different school settings (e.g. types of schools, sources of mentoring knowledge, teaching and mentoring experience, teachers' duties and responsibilities, their positions in schools, and types of schools).

Context

In the Czech Republic, all ITE programmes have to comply with the above-mentioned ministerial guidelines prescribing the proportions of individual components of the programme (subject matter, field didactics, teaching practice and reflection thereon, etc.). Otherwise, individual institutions make their own decisions regarding all aspects of the programme. Several changes on the system

level are yet to come, as declared in the Strategy for the Education Policy of the Czech Republic up to 2030+ (MŠMT, 2020). One of the aims of the reforms is to maintain and cultivate the collaboration of ITE faculties and field/practice schools, especially in terms of a sufficient amount of school-based teaching practice, of reflection on school-based practice, of first-rate mentors, and adequate financial rewards for school-based mentors supervising the school-based teaching practice (MŠMT, 2022, p. 8). Currently, such a system is non-existent, as a result of which ITE providers are left to find, for example, their own ways of training mentors.

The English Language Teacher Education (ELTE) study programme at the University of Pardubice is a two-year master's degree programme which prepares teachers of English who are fully qualified to teach primary and lower-secondary learners. The way the practicum is interwoven with the academic and other professional components of the ELTE programme, as well as its length, makes it unique in the context of Czech ITE. The current programme reflects the best traditions of the programme integrating a year-long in-school placement (Pířová, 2005; Černá et al., 2017), and the understanding of teaching as an academically taught clinical profession (Alter & Cogshall, 2009).

The clinical practice itself spans the second and third semesters. The first semester, however, is a preparatory phase, during which the students are familiarised with its philosophy. Furthermore, university faculty members (tutors), together with the students, are engaged in finding and negotiating the best possible in-school placements for the students. In the second semester, students are on their placements one day a week for 13 weeks (equalling 52 hours), during which they get to know the school, observe their mentors' classes, team-teach with their mentors, teach their own lessons, and engage in other teaching-related activities. During the third semester, the school-based part of the programme is extended to three days per week, which equals 195 hours of work at school. The student teachers are involved in similar activities as in the previous semester; however, their own teaching becomes more extensive, which enables them to conduct action research.

Concerning the mentors, one group is represented by mentors who have been cooperating with the department for some time and the other comprises mentors nominated by the school leadership following previous consultations with the tutors (one mentor, one mentee). The mentors are expected to function in a range of roles across the structural, supportive, and professional dimensions of mentoring using various strategies (Yeomans & Sampson, 1994). The tutors provide the mentors with information and guidance (i.e. with mentor training reflecting the specifics of the programme) through online meetings (MS Teams), personal meetings at schools (once per term at a minimum), materials (LMS Moodle), and emails or phone calls.

Participants

Teacher mentors for the study were recruited from thirteen schools where pre-service teachers of the ELTE programme did their teaching practice in 2020 and 2021 to provide a range of contexts (e.g. primary level of education only, primary and lower-secondary level of education only, lower- and upper-secondary level of education only) and varied in terms of their cohort of pupils and size (small – medium – large enrolments in metropolitan, urban, and rural areas). During an email survey, twenty-three mentors were approached and out of them fourteen participated in the study, all of them females. Three out of these fourteen mentors were nominated to be interviewed (via MS Teams) in the second phase of the study. Their selection was intentional and might be considered representative as the mentors who were interviewed are from different school settings and contexts, vary in their positions in schools and their duties and responsibilities, and bring diversity in their experience with, and competence in, mentoring pre-service teachers (for the mentors' demographic information see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Mentors' demographic information

Mentor	Level of education	Subjects taught	ELTE qualified (Yes/No)	Years of teaching	Interviewed (Yes/No)
M1	Primary and lower-secondary	English	Y	20	N
M2	Upper-secondary	English	Y	11	N
M3	Lower-secondary	English, Music	Y	22	N
M4	Primary	All primary subjects	Y (primary level, ELT specialization)	14	N
M5	Lower-secondary	English, Russian, German, Music	N	27	N
M6	Lower-secondary	English, Czech	N	30	Y
M7	Primary and lower-secondary	English	Y	19	N
M8	Primary and lower-secondary	English	N (finishing ELTE master's study)	3	N
M9	Primary and lower-secondary	English	Y	>20	Y
M10	Primary and lower-secondary	English	Y	11	N
M11	Primary and lower-secondary	English	Y	23	N
M12	Primary and lower-secondary	English mainly	Y	12	N
M13	Upper-secondary	English	Y	23	Y
M14	Lower-secondary	English	N	19	N

Data collection

Qualitative data was collected in both phases of the research through open-ended items (Oppenheim, 1992). The questionnaire comprised eleven items investigating the motives of the mentors, their expectations and readiness for mentoring, ways of guiding and supporting the mentee, and mentoring time load, support from the university, and demographic information.

The questions used in the semi-structured in-depth interviews were constructed on the basis of the responses collected with the questionnaires. They were designed to establish an atmosphere of trust and rapport in order to obtain rich, detailed, and personalised information from the mentors, checking back the information provided by the individual participants and thus validating the data from the questionnaires. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed afterwards.

Data analysis

The responses from the questionnaires from the first phase were at first clustered under the individual questions and then coded using Atlas.ti. It allowed us to create codes for the categories of different mentors' perceptions "dealing with the same theme" and those were "given the same code" (Boeije, 2002, p. 397). For the interviews, the individual ones were coded at first to identify the categories of the mentors' perceptions. The researchers coded the questionnaires and interview transcripts, then discussed the results to come to an agreement to obtain internal validity of the identified coded themes revealing the mentors' perceptions of their readiness, expectations, and relationship with student teachers (Sheridan & Nguyen, 2020, 302). The themes that appeared both in the questionnaires and interviews were constantly re-examined and discussed to depict the mentors' perspectives as well as possible.

Authenticity and trustworthiness

In the research, the strategies of member checking and triangulation were used to assure the authenticity and trustworthiness of the research findings (Creswell, 2011, p. 259). The technique of member checking (Creswell, 2011, p. 259) was used to validate the findings from the questionnaires in the follow-up interview phase (see Data collection part). The data was also triangulated when using a sequential process of data collection, different methods of data collection to corroborate evidence from different mentors. The researchers worked as a pair in the phases of data collection (interviews) and data analysis (coding of the questionnaires and interviews) to assure the validity of the findings through negotiation. The respondents were familiarized with the research project, namely with its purpose, duration and procedures. All of them signed an informed, revokable consent with being involved in the project.

Limitations

A major limitation of the study is its scope because the study is limited to the context of one ITE programme and a proposed reform in one country. Thus, the findings apply only to the context that was investigated. Another limitation may be the focus solely on the mentors' perceptions. It is desirable to complement it by exploring the mentees' point of view.

Findings and discussion

Readiness

The mentors' perceptions of their readiness can be presented on a continuum: ready to mentor – partially ready to mentor – not ready. Nevertheless, the data analysis does not reveal much variation in the mentors' perceptions. They perceive themselves as being ready, or partially ready. There appears a single negative response, which is linked to a more general negative attitude towards mentoring on the part of a particular mentor (M10) who was nominated to become a mentor by the leadership of the school without her previous consent.

The mentors perceive their readiness as being based solely on one source, mainly their teaching or mentoring experience, or they rely on multiple sources.

a) readiness based on teaching experience:

I've been teaching for many years; I think I'm well prepared to become a mentor.
(M5)

Thanks to the length of my teaching experience I was hoping to be able to provide advice to my student teacher, show her important things, answer her questions, etc. (M14)

The quote illustrates the mentors' reliance on teaching experience; the mentors typically emphasise the length of their experience (many years, long-term, 30 years, etc.) rather than any other aspect (e.g. richness, quality). Teaching experience is undoubtedly an important part of the mentor's knowledge base, but, in itself, it does not make a good mentor. It is crucial that the mentors are able to make accessible their practice and the teaching principles that support it; otherwise they may fail as mentors even if they are successful practitioners who provide good role models (Corrigan & Peace, 2006, in Pířová & Duschinská, 2011, p. 80).

b) readiness based on mentoring experience:

I've been mentoring student teachers of Charles Uni for many years; I believe I ill manage it :-) (M13)

When specifying the mentoring experience the mentors have had, they use indefinite expressions such as *some experience*, *several students*. In the quote above, Mentor 13 suggests the length of her experience. Some mentors rely on the experience they previously gained when mentoring student teachers in different (ITE) programmes (M13 above; M2 below), which may vary considerably in terms of their conception. Nevertheless, the transferability of the experience from one ITE context to another may be questionable. The contexts matter, and therefore reflecting the contextual differences of individual ITE programmes is crucial for mentors to be ready. Knowing the wider context is an important component of mentors' knowledge base (Jones & Straker, 2006, p. 169).

c) readiness based on mentor training:

In the years 2016–2019 I participated in two courses of mentoring in JOB and “Teacher as Coach” in the Libchava Academy (M9)

Mentor 9, who does not mention her extensive teaching experience at all, is an example of a teacher who underwent some kind of mentor training, which is provided in the Czech Republic by commercial agencies or by ITE institutions that educate mentors in cooperating schools. Mentor 9 was nominated by the school leadership to participate in the commercial courses mentioned above, though at that time her school was not cooperating with any ITE institutions. Participation in some kind of mentor training is scarcely mentioned by the mentors.

Being explicitly asked about potential support, the interviewees agreed that mentor training might be helpful, but particularly for new mentors. But the opinions of Mentor 13 seem ambivalent – she suggests that mentor training would be beneficial, but she expresses her reservations regarding mandatory mentor training:

If you had told us at the beginning “Now you are mentors and you have to go through compulsory mentor training”, I would understand it as meaning that you are trying to impose the way of doing it on me, which I would not like. (M13 IW3)

The length of the training seems to be an issue for the mentors as well; all the interviewees would be willing to devote several hours or a maximum of one day to such training, given the demands of their workload.

The findings of this study identify a low level of involvement of the mentors in training. This is most probably caused by its limited availability because of the non-existence of a system of mentor training in the Czech Republic. This finding is consistent with the empirical studies which report a discrepancy between the requirements associated with mentor selection and training and the reality (Hoben, 2021).

From this perspective, the tentative plans of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport to provide extended time for teaching practice reflection and to introduce changes in mentor remuneration, mentor training, and systematic faculty support of mentors (MŠMT, 2022, p. 8) may lead to the development of the desired competence in mentoring. In the light of the findings, however, some aspects of the plans seem to be ambitious – the mentors are willing to devote much less time (up to eight hours) to mentor training than the reform proposes. Obviously, if the reform is implemented, efforts need to be made to explain the purpose and aims of mentor training to potential mentors so that they can identify with them.

d) readiness based on student experience in ITE:

As I did the practicum as a student teacher, I had some ideas what it means to be a mentor. So, I was partly prepared. (M12)

Mentor 12 felt partially prepared for mentoring since she had experienced the same ITE programme as a student. Apart from contextual differences, such an experience may be both facilitating and limiting. On the one hand, it may help to build understanding of the expectations in terms of the roles of the mentor in the ELTE programme; on the other hand, experiencing a particular model of mentoring as a mentee may be limiting. Individual mentors, however, differ in terms of their personality and knowledge base and, as a consequence, use a different repertoire of roles and strategies across the structural, supportive, and professional dimensions of mentoring (Yeomans & Sampson, 1994).

e) readiness based on multiple sources

I worked as a mentor in the Fulbright Commission programme for one year and in the programme, I also participated in two workshops focused on mentoring. (M2)

I am certainly not a professional mentor, I have not participated in any courses or seminars, but I have some teaching and mentoring experience. (...) I also rely on my student experience... (M1)

I have 30 years of experience with school education and I have mentored two student teachers already. (M6)

Several mentors refer to multiple sources of their readiness. Mentor 2 mentions her year-long experience of mentoring a student within the Fulbright programme, which also included mentor training. Interestingly, she does not comment on her mentoring experience outside the Fulbright programme and on her teaching experience (11 years). For Mentor 1, all kinds of experience, that of teacher, mentor, and student, which is not specified in any way, contribute to her sense

of readiness to mentor. Mentor 6 relies on her extensive teaching experience and on some mentoring experience.

To summarise, the mentors mostly perceive themselves as ready to mentor utilising their idiosyncratic resources. Being experienced, in terms of teaching and/or mentoring, is what constitutes a sense of readiness for the mentors. Thus, becoming a mentor is embedded in experiential learning. The findings suggest that mentor training is available under specific conditions, for example, participation in a project, having financial support to attend commercial courses, or cooperation with an ITE institution providing training.

Without mentor training, however, the knowledge base of mentors may appear insufficient in some dimensions, particularly “working with adult learners” and “professional training and development” (Jones & Straker, 2006, p. 169). Introducing a system of mentor training is one of the aims of the proposed reform of ITE in the Czech Republic (MŠMT, 2022), which might contribute to both ITE and the professional socialisation of novice teachers.

Expectations

The mentors formulate both positive expectations and concerns of different types.

a) positive expectations

I expected that the student would be interested in teaching. (M6)

I knew that the mentee is competent and nice and that it would be a pleasure to collaborate with her. (M13)

I know the student; I expected good collaboration. (M3)

The mentors' student-related positive expectations stemmed from a general assumption that a student in an ITE study programme is interested in teaching (M6) or from knowing the student well prior to the practicum (M13, M3) – on the basis of knowing students, positive expectations for future collaboration are generated.

I expected the student teachers to be helpless ... (M9)

Mentor 9 expected her mentees to need much more help. Interestingly, her mentees appeared to be more mature, both professionally and personally, than she expected.

I expected that this experience would broaden my horizons and provide insights into ITE, and perhaps it would bring enrichment in new trends and methods in ELT. (M7)

I expected that I would get some inspiration for new activities for pupils. I looked forward to collaboration and sharing experience. (M11)

I would expect some new methods ... and the use of ICT in teaching ... what websites, what apps are available now. (M6, IW1)

The expectations of Mentor 7 and Mentor 11 are associated with their own professional development. Generally, while mentoring student teachers, the two mentors expect an enriching experience; they expect to learn innovative approaches, methods, and techniques for ELT as well as to become aware of the ITE context. In addition, the expectations of Mentor 11 are connected to the interpersonal dimension of mentoring. Mentor 6 formulates her expectations, which reflect her own current specific professional needs – given the recent emphasis on the development of learners' digital competence in the Czech curriculum, she expects to learn not only new ELT methods but also to observe some innovative use of ICT in English lessons.

b) expectations coupled with concerns

I didn't have any great expectations, I was just curious who the student teacher would be and about his approach to learning. I was also worried a little whether I would have enough time for both teaching and mentoring. (M1)

I was looking forward to cooperation with a person from the academic setting (...) At the same time, I had some worries whether I would have enough time for mentoring because of my workload. (M12)

Mentor 1 labelled her expectations as curiosity regarding the student teacher and his approach to learning. Her positive expectations were coupled with concerns about the time, i.e. whether mentoring would be manageable together with teaching. Similarly, Mentor 12 shares the same time-related fears, while she is positive about prospective collaboration with a university student.

c) concerns

Maybe I was worried a little because the situation at schools (COVID, quarantine) was not ideal at all and I was considering whether we would manage the practicum online. I was also worried about the mentee's ability to learn, how much time I would spend on mentoring. (M2)

The concerns of Mentor 2 are related not only to the specific situation (the threat of a resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic) but to the issues already mentioned (the time needed for mentoring). Mentor 2 is well aware of all the burdens of online education during the covid-19 pandemic and, perhaps, envisaged the challenges of doing the practicum online, including the demands in terms of time.

d) expectations not shared

Two mentors (M4, M10) claim having no expectations at all. While Mentor 10 responded *None* and left out the section of the questionnaire blank, Mentor 4 explained that it was her preventive strategy. We can only hypothesise as to their reasons for not sharing their expectations.

To sum up, the mentors express both positive expectations and some concerns about the practicum. The positive expectations, which predominate, are related to a future mentee and prospective collaboration with her/him and to the mentors' own professional development. Some mentors formulate their positive expectations about their future mentees, but, at the same time, couple them with concerns about the time needed for mentoring. Furthermore, one mentor articulates only her apprehensions which she connects with a potential online practicum because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Surprisingly, the mentors, irrespective of whether they had some previous mentor training or not, do not mention either expectations or concerns in terms of their mentoring role. Furthermore, the findings show that the mentees, novices in the profession, are expected to stimulate the professional development of their mentors, i.e. experienced teachers.

In addition, the analysis of the mentors' expectations also discloses their reasons for becoming mentors. The interviewees suggest that financial bonuses are not the incentives motivating the teachers to become mentors; there are other driving forces, as the analysis of the mentors' expectations suggests: mission – helping the profession or the ITE institution (*It's important to help the students... to enable them to do the practicum so that they can try things out in a real school* (M6, IW1); *If I don't do it [mentor student teachers], who would?* (M13, IW3); *... being grateful, paying back for university education* (M9, IW2)), and recognition of expertise (*I have something to pass on.* (M9, IW2)). The mentors' time-related worries concern the feasibility of teaching and mentoring at the same time; the interviewees suggest that freeing mentors from other duties (e.g. substituting for absent colleagues) would be very welcome. The proposed reform intends to reflect the demands of mentoring discussed above, unfortunately; at the moment it is too early for detailed guidelines to introduce structural changes.

Mentor-mentee relationship

a) initiation – knowing the mentee

I know the student, so I expected good cooperation (M3).

... I knew that the mentee was competent and nice and that it would be a pleasure to cooperate with her ... (M13).

The relationship between the mentor and the student teacher (often knowing the student as a former pupil or knowing the student's siblings, experience of earlier collaboration with the student, etc.) appears to be a crucial determinant which influences the mentor's decision whether to engage in cooperation with the university. Furthermore, if the mentor knows the student before the practicum starts, i.e. there is already some relationship, she is likely to have positive expectations concerning future collaboration with the student teacher. Interestingly, while the mentor-mentee relationship is in the initiation phase, the former relationship is actually in the redefinition stage from teacher-pupil to mentor-mentee.

In the interview, Mentor 13 said:

I didn't know her [mentee T.], but both mentee K. and Professor S. spoke for her a lot (M13, IW3).

She further explains that student teacher K. was a specific case since she was a former student of the grammar school, with strong bonds with the school. The same mentor did not know student teacher T., who came the following year and, therefore, she was reluctant to accept her. The interventions of student teacher K. and a university tutor helped.

b) initiation – not knowing the mentee

Conversely, not knowing the student teacher is a source of worries for the mentor.

... certainly, partly nervousness about what student will be assigned to me and whether our professional and personal selves will match up (M8).

If the mentor does not know her prospective mentee, she tries to build a mutual relationship with the mentee from the very first moment of their cooperation:

We certainly talked with both, both girls, so that we got to know each other ... to learn about our families a little ... about what made them choose teaching as a profession, whether they really want to teach or not ... (M9, IW2)

The actions taken by Mentor 9 (i.e. initiating contact with the mentee, establishing shared goals, trust, and mutual respect) comply with the initiation stage of the development of the mentor-mentee relationship (Sheridan & Nguyen, 2020).

c) cultivation of the relationship

When being interviewed, Mentor 9 and Mentor 6 described the development of the mentor-mentee relationship:

... with the mentee I think ...when we were meeting more frequently it [the relationship] was getting more and more friendly ... (M6, IW1)

At first you really see the mentee: 'well, a student came to do the practicum' and then it [the relationship] changes, say, alters, transforms into a collegial relationship...suddenly I forget that she is a student teacher, she is a real colleague (M9, IW2)

Mentor 6 exemplifies how the frequency of contact contributes to the development of the relationship to the cultivation phase (Sheridan & Nguyen, 2020). Moreover, Mentor 9 suggests how the relationship is no longer hierarchical, but becomes reciprocal, collegiate, and in fact is redefined from one of mentor-mentee to one of colleague-colleague. Ambrosetti and Dekkers (2010) argue that in the context of ITE, the relationship follows a developmental pattern within a specified timeframe, which is two semesters in this study. With reference to Bentley et al. (2017), it may be concluded that the length of the practicum in the ELTE study programme at the University of Pardubice is conducive to the development of the mentor-mentee relationship. Moreover, the one mentor-one mentee format of the practicum is also favourable regarding the development of the relationship, unlike the paired format (one mentor with two mentees), which changes the relational dynamics (Jederud et al., 2021). If viewed from the perspective of the proposed reform of ITE in the Czech Republic, the intentions to introduce the paired format of the practicum may impact considerably on the development of the mentor-mentee relationship.

Conclusions

The aim of the study was to investigate mentors' perceptions of their readiness, expectations, and relationships with student teachers during the ELTE one-year teaching practice. The findings of the study are interpreted in the light of the proposed ITE reform in the Czech Republic. We may conclude that introducing structural changes (the length of the practicum, the system of mentoring and mentor training, the faculty and other support for mentors) may bring the expected benefits at the system level. However, there are partial aspects of the reform, namely at the individual level, which need to be reconsidered. They concern the mentor-mentee relationship, which stands at the centre of mentoring. It appears that a former teacher-pupil relationship accelerates, or even enables, initiation and cultivation of the mentor-mentee relationship. From the mentors' perspective, it is professional ethics that urges teachers to engage in mentoring student teachers and, thus, accept shared responsibility for ITE. Also, from the students' perspective, their freedom to nomination of a school/mentor may be beneficial. Having free will to enter the mentor-mentee relationship is significant, though this approach is criticised by the reform, which intends to centralise in-school placements in a lower number of institutions implementing the paired

format of the practicum. However, the mentor-mentee relationship is one that it is difficult or even impossible to develop in the proposed paired practicum format.

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