

Mentors' identity approaches of pre-service teachers

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Abstract

The impact of the student-teacher mentor's identity is crucial for the development of pre-service teachers during their practicum, influencing skill acquisition, knowledge assimilation, and the nurturing of self-esteem. This research delves into the area of mentoring approaches for early childhood and primary student-teachers in Spain. Using a qualitative approach, data from 35 mentors was analyzed to understand their approaches in guiding pre-service teachers. The study identified three distinct mentor identities approaches: those focused on developing students' design skills, fostering socialization, and facilitating professional growth. To enhance the quality of mentorship, universities and school-university partnerships should prioritize the training of mentors in these approaches, ensuring they can provide optimal guidance for the future educators they support.

Keywords: *mentoring; pre-service teachers; approaches, identity.*

1. Introduction

During internships, student-teachers highly value their mentors (Lindgren, 2005; Marable & Raimondi, 2007), seeing them as a crucial source of practical advice for their future profession. Positive internship experiences yield numerous benefits for future teachers, including increased confidence, self-esteem, professional growth, enhanced problem-solving abilities, development of classroom management skills (Malderez et al., 2007), and adaptation to teaching norms in schools (Wang & Odell, 2002).

Since the Bologna Process, which established the European Higher Education Area, mentors for student-teachers in Spain have gained importance. The law outlines mentors' functions, including welcoming, advising, evaluating pre-service teachers, and introducing them to teaching practice. However, mentors often lack training and guidance for these responsibilities. Universities typically only request mentors to provide evaluation reports on specific tasks

performed by their mentees during the practicum period, without offering additional support or training.

Despite the absence of specific institutional training in Spain, extensive research has been conducted on the general functions of student-teachers' mentors (Martínez & Raposo, 2011), mentor competencies (Cuelliga, 2015), and student-teachers' opinions on mentoring (Mendoza-Lira & Covarrubias-Apablaza, 2014; Vallejo et al., 2019). Traditional studies often categorize mentors from the students' perspectives (Colomo & Gabarda, 2019). However, no studies in Spain specifically analyze the identity of early childhood or primary teachers as mentors of pre-service teachers based on their interactions with mentees.

Our goal is to outline the identities mentors associate with when guiding future teachers in schools, aligning with legal requirements and the attributes of a quality mentor (Ellis et al., 2020). Established mentors tend to resist change, posing potential issues in the midterm. Identifying these identities enables universities to initiate development projects for current and future student-teachers' mentors. Recognizing the pivotal role of practicum in teacher education programs, there's a clear need for a more proactive and responsible approach to teacher education as a whole (Hoffman et al., 2015).

2. Pre-service teachers mentoring

A mentor's identity becomes apparent through the functions and actions mentors perform in their professional role. A mentor's identity is reflected in their actions, emphasizing certain functions over others. The various responsibilities and functions arising from research on pre-service teacher mentoring illustrate the connections between specific actions and a mentor's purpose in a given context.

Mentoring involves various activities such as supervision, evaluation, orientation, advisory, and organizational tasks. Wildmand et al. (1992) identified eight key mentoring activities based on analysis of reports from 150 pre-service teacher mentors, including encouraging reflection, directing actions, providing support, offering information and resources, maintaining motivation, receiving feedback, and acting as mediators. Mentoring advice covers professional issues, cultural context, academic literature, classroom matters (e.g., management, lesson planning, special needs), and instilling confidence in student-teachers (Achinstein, 2006; Rajuan et al., 2007). Teachers, as noted by Sanders et al. (2005), play a crucial role as models and planners in mentoring, with 40% of interactions focusing on content decisions. Douglas (2011) found an emphasis on lesson planning rather than reflective work with student-teachers.

Mentoring processes prioritize psychological support, aiming to create a sense of acceptance and inclusion for student-teachers (Rippon & Martin, 2006). Psychological support helps students contextualize challenging experiences (Marable & Raimondi, 2007). Effective mentors

can offer support through methods such as hands-off facilitation, progressively collaborative approaches, integrating student-teachers into the school community, and acting as professional friends by sharing experiences and offering guidance only when necessary.

Mentors convey essential information about school rules, routines, and norms (Bartell, 2005) and handle evaluations and forms for the higher education institution. Some mentors adopt an advisory and directive role, providing instructions and suggestions on lesson planning and teaching methods (Douglas, 2011), rather than facilitating personal reflections on classroom strategies and innovations (Feiman-Nemser, 2000; van Ginkel et al., 2016). This approach may not motivate mentees to develop their independent thinking (Hoffman et al., 2015).

Effective mentors often serve as coaches and models for best instructional practices, attending to educational issues that student teachers may overlook. They offer constructive feedback on pedagogical aspects, including classroom management, curriculum planning, and providing resources for files and materials, addressing a variety of student teachers' needs. Richter et al. (2013) propose two mentoring constructs: constructivist-oriented mentoring, emphasizing reflection and autonomous decision-making, and transmission-oriented mentoring, involving the transmission of necessary conceptions and behaviors for effective teaching tasks.

Based on the literature review and the need to investigate the identities of mentors for student-teachers in Spain, our research question focuses on the identity approaches that mentors consider with in their role as mentors in schools.

3. Methodology

Initially, we gathered data through a survey featuring open-ended questions, followed by the interpretation of meaning derived from the textual content. Subsequently, we employ a qualitative research technique, utilizing a direct content analysis approach to pinpoint the mentors' core sets of approaches.

3.1. Context

In Spain, primary school teacher studies are regulated by Order ECI/3857/2007, which outlines the requirements for official university degrees necessary for practicing as a primary education teacher. According to the law, mentors in this context are responsible for: a) endorsing the student's commitment to tutoring, b) welcoming trainees during specified periods throughout the school year, c) facilitating students' initiation into teaching practice, d) providing guidance on pedagogical and didactic matters, and e) evaluating students' practicum development based on criteria and guidelines from the corresponding School or University Faculty's practicum plan. Primary teachers from various public and private schools across Spain were invited to participate in the study. These teachers collaborate with multiple universities to facilitate

internships for Education bachelor's degree students. During 2 to 3-month practice stays in schools, student teachers observe real teaching activities and engage in various supportive teaching tasks as deemed essential by their respective universities for the learning process. The mentors of these teachers are required to submit a final report assessing the students' activities during the practice period, and this evaluation contributes to the students' final grade in their practicum subject.

3.2. Participants

Initially, 41 mentors of student teachers in early childhood (ages 3-5) and primary education (ages 6-12) schools in Spain, each with a minimum of two years of mentoring experience, were invited to participate via email. Ultimately, 35 mentors (85% of the potential sample) positively responded. The majority were female (77.1%), over 40 years old, and held a bachelor's degree (91.4%). Specializations included 48.6% in primary education and 44.8% in both early childhood and/or primary education. Additionally, 74.3% had over five years of mentoring experience, with 88.6% having mentored at least one student-teacher in the last academic year.

3.3. Data collection

The structured survey comprised two sections. The first gathered personal, academic, and professional details from participants. The second focused on mentors' functions, requiring detailed information on each function, including the label (a), the purpose (b), and a prototypical task (c). Respondents were instructed to use a minimum of 50 words for each aspect.

3.4. Data analysis

We employed MAXQDA2018 for direct qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) by creating 35 participant documents, each containing relevant data. Thematic units within the "mentor's function" were considered, with a categorization process involving initial coding and assigning two labels: one for mentoring position and another for identity approach. Redundant thematic units were merged, resulting in 175 identity approaches, averaging five per participant. A subset was reviewed for interrater agreement, yielding an excellent Cohen's kappa value of 0.80.

Descriptive statistical analysis, presented in Table 2, illustrates frequencies and percentages of categorized thematic units and identity approaches mentioned by mentors. Besides, a hierarchical cluster analysis (HCA) classified cases based on the total number of identity approaches within each mentor's six positions.

Table 2. Distribution of mentors assuming at least one approach within each approach (n=35).

Mentoring position / Identity approaches	n (%)
1. To supervise and evaluate students	9 (25.7)
1.1 By evaluating students' activities and completing forms	9 (25.7)
2. To foster students' development towards professional issues	5 (14.3)
2.1 By exchanging information on the context of education	5 (14.3)
3. To develop students' planning and design skills	32 (91.4)
3.1 By providing instructions and resources to design lessons plans	11 (31.4)
3.2 By revising and evaluating lesson plans made by students	27 (77.1)
3.3 By providing advice to adjust a lesson plan to classroom characteristics	19 (54.3)
3.4 By providing new perspectives to elaborate a lesson plan	7 (20.0)
3.5 By discussing and reflecting collaboratively on lesson plans made by STs	13 (37.1)
4. To develop students' teaching skills in the classroom	32 (91.4)
4.1 By evaluating and giving feedback on students' teaching activities	8 (22.9)
4.2 By advising the adaptation of teaching practices to classroom conditions	12 (34.3)
4.3 By serving as a model, showing how to teach	10 (28.6)
4.4 By reflecting collaboratively about students' teaching activities	8 (22.9)
4.5 By supporting students' enquiry processes of their teaching performance	8 (22.9)
4.6 By giving instructions on teaching practice	12 (34.3)
5. To ensure personal well-being, engagement, and satisfaction	8 (22.9)
5.1 By nurturing the students' self-esteem, confidence, and trust	8 (22.9)
6. To facilitate socialisation at the school level	29 (82.9)
6.1 By introducing students in activities of the whole school community	20 (57.1)
6.2 By introducing students in new educational practices of other schoolteachers	8 (22.9)
6.3 By relating students to pupils' families	9 (25.7)
TOTAL Mentor I-positions / Mentors positions	175/35
	(100%)

4. Results

We found three clusters of mentor's identity approaches following the HCA analysis. In Cluster 1, identified as "Mentoring oriented to student's design-skills development," mentors perceive their role as planning and designing skills of future teachers through instructions, assessment, and guidance for effective lesson planning. While they maintain an operational mentoring approach, they do not actively encourage the professional or personal development of the students nor position themselves as role models to be emulated. Cluster 2, designated as "Mentoring oriented to student's socialisation," emphasizes mentors' commitment to integrating pre-service teachers into the educational community. Their focus includes ensuring students feel at ease, confident, and engaged, encouraging participation and sharing experiences with other schoolteachers. While they provide instructions on lessons, they do not prioritize professional development beyond the classroom or engage in collaborative reflection with students on their

overall performance. Cluster 3, identified as "Mentoring oriented to student's professional growth," places a strong emphasis on fostering the professional development of students in the broader context of education. Mentors in this cluster engage in collaborative reflection, offer feedback, and encourage discussions to support students' growth. However, they infrequently provide detailed instructions for planning and design skills in the classroom, and they show less concern about the social inclusion of students within the school environment.

This study aimed to investigate and characterize the various identities assumed by Spanish early childhood and primary teachers in their roles as mentors to prospective educators. Over 80% of mentors identified themselves as facilitators of the socialization process for student-teachers, aligning with the second function outlined in the law (welcoming trainees). However, only 23% of mentors prioritize ensuring the well-being, commitment, and satisfaction of student-teachers. It is evident that mentors grasp the expected functions outlined by the law, despite receiving limited information and training from universities. While mentors acknowledged a diverse range of mentoring identity approaches (refer to Table 2), over 77% of teacher-student mentors specifically engage in revising and evaluating lesson plans created by students (Douglas, 2011), with more than 50% offering advice for classroom adjustments (Rajuan et al., 2007). Similarly, emphasizing social support (Koç, 2012) and fostering a sense of acceptance and inclusion for pre-service teachers by involving them in school community activities emerged as prevalent identity approaches, highlighted by over 50% of the study participants.

5. Conclusions

These three identities approaches are thoroughly examined based on mentors' disclosed actions with student-teachers. Mentoring has a significant impact on how future teachers understand and approach their profession. Therefore, knowing the conceptions and approaches that mentors convey to their pre-service teachers is of vital importance for educational institutions. Notably, certain functions considered relevant in other studies, like quality control and self-learning with student feedback, are not explicitly mentioned by mentors, including a lack of emphasis on self-reflection. Given anticipated resistance to change, universities or school-university partnerships should take training responsibilities for developing comprehensive identities, modeling best practices. Training in specific models can facilitate changes in mentoring practices (Hoffman et al., 2015). As main limitation we point to the sample size, warranting future research with larger samples, potentially including secondary education. Exploring how student-teachers' mentor identity integrates with broader teacher identities and their mutual influence presents also an interesting research direction.

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