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THEORETICAL APPROACHES ON LEARNING FACILITATION IN MENTORING

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Abstract: *Within the professional insertion process of the mentee teacher, an important role is held by the mentor and the professional relation that is established between the former and the latter. The mentor needs to facilitate the beginner's inclusion in the organizational environment (the school) and guide him in the teaching career. Within this context, it is learning facilitation that we refer to, rather than the learning process itself, where the methods used by the mentor are specific to adults' education.*
The paper deals with a theoretical approach on several aspects of learning facilitation in mentoring, specifying the fact that learning facilitation produces changes both in the mentee and the mentor's role. Taking into account the fact that facilitation represents a new learning culture, that involves support, counseling and responsibility, communication has become extremely important within the professional inclusion process. In the present paper I am going to identify the main communication difficulties encountered by the mentee at the beginning of his teaching career. I am also going to present a few recommendations related to providing an effective feedback. Feedback in mentoring needs to be offered as often as possible, in order to guide and orient the mentee, as well as to convince him/her to remain in school after the mentoring period is over.

Keywords: *mentor, mentee, mentoring process, facilitation`s method, communication, feed-back*

1. INTRODUCTION

Mentoring is becoming a more and more widely-used concept in teachers' formation. There are many definitions of mentoring in the specialized literature. Mentoring can be approached as a complex learning process, by which an experienced person in the field, the mentor, deals with an information transfer, or contributes to the formation of competences of a person at the beginning of his/her career, the mentee.

Mostly associated with the direct, face-to-face contact between individuals, namely those who are experienced in a field and possess certain abilities to convey it- the mentors-and those who need support-the mentees, mentoring represents an extremely important step in the professional inclusion process. Basically speaking, a mentor supports a person, the mentee, all throughout a transition process, in order to cope with new situations similar to the one when the mentee is integrated in the organizational culture of the school.

Mentoring is a process the essence of which consists in conveying abilities and

information from experienced people to beginners [1].

Mentoring is, most often, associated with direct, face-to face contact between individuals, involving mentors - people who are experienced in a certain field and possess certain skills in order to convey these skills, and mentees - people who need the mentors' support. We could say that a mentor supports the mentee in his or her completing a transition process, in order to cope with new situations, such as his or her integration process in a school's organizational culture.

A mentor can be defined as "a person who helps someone to develop himself/herself by learning; more specifically, a professional who works for a person, a group or an organization for the personal or organizational development." [3].

The concept of professional inclusion refers to integrating a young beginner or a new employee in the professional environment for which he/she received specific training. In the context of the necessity of teaching career professionalization, the professional inclusion of mentees entering the educational system has become a must.

As legally stipulated by OMECTS 5485/29.09.2011, any person who possesses certified experience within the educational system at school or high school level, who holds a permanent teaching position, who is a beholder of the first teaching degree, and who continuously attends teaching development courses can become a professional inclusion mentor .

The objectives of this type of mentoring are different from the ones of teaching practice mentoring. A professional inclusion mentor aims at integrating the mentee in the school, his/her preparing for designing, organizing and developing effective didactic activities.

Taking into account the way in which the relation mentor-mentee is accomplished, we can identify two types of professional inclusion mentoring.

1. **Face-to-face mentoring**. Either formal (within organized programs) or informal (by developing a one-to-one relation), this type of mentoring involves direct, face-to-face contact between mentor and mentee.

2. **Online mentoring** performed by means of the e-learning platform, by using information technology. Such a relation is the result of the mentee's observation and counseling from the mentor's (tutor's) part, where communication is moved to the virtual environment and has its specific features.

Irrespective of the mentoring type, the process is based on a series of principles:

- Acknowledging the differences between individuals regarding learning style, motivation, interest.
- Personal and professional development is a matter of personal choice.
- Encouraging people towards self-development.
- Encouraging collaboration, not competition.
- Reflecting on past experiences.
- Developing the ability of transferring and applying the learned lessons to new situations.

In the present paper the main communication difficulties encountered by the mentee at the beginning of his teaching career are identified. Also, a few recommendations related to providing an effective feedback are presented. Feedback in mentoring needs to be offered as often as possible, in order to guide and orient the mentee, as well as to convince him/her to remain in school after the mentoring period is over.

2. FACILITATING AS A LEARNING PROCESS IN MENTORING

In the mentoring activity, an important role is represented by the effective implementation of learning strategies, of mentees' support and monitoring within the professional inclusion process.

Therefore, creating a collaborative learning environment, which is comfortable from the social and affective point of view, has become a condition that leads to successfully completing a mentee's professional inclusion experience.

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The whole mentoring process is organized around the mentee. He/she is the one who takes part in making decisions related to what he/she is going to learn, the most suitable learning strategy, within the limits of the learning content.

Within this context, we are talking about learning facilitation, rather than a learning process itself, and the methods used by the mentor are specific to adults' education.

Facilitation has the meaning of "guiding, orienting the person who learns on how to define his/her learning direction, to determine his/her aims and specific objectives, to discover his/her own learning pace and keep control on his/her own learning process." [2] "Facilitation is the process by which a person supports other people to complete their activity and improve their communication style." (Farrell&Weaver).

Therefore, facilitation **is not** a formation, teaching, assessment, or control process; it involves the following:
- ensuring effective reciprocal communication;
-avoiding intrusion, aggression on the personal space;
- avoiding strict rules and regulations;
- helping the mentee to interact with his peers;
- availability for the mentee's requirements.

From the pedagogical point of view, the person who learns assumes an active role within the facilitation process, a role which is reflected in his/her interest in the mentoring activity. Learning facilitation determines changes in the trainee's role.

Therefore, the mentee becomes an active participant in the learning process:
- Participates in formulating the questions;

- Contributes to finding the answers;
- Gets involved in discussions and debates;
- Solves problems.

At the same time, the mentee produces and shares information and knowledge, but he/she also learns in collaboration with other trainees. It should also be mentioned that learning facilitation also produces changes in the facilitator's/mentor's role.

The mentor becomes a collaborator, a learning partner, who is able to provide the mentee with more options and responsibilities within the professional inclusion process. The facilitator/mentor provides support in learning facilitation, as follows:
- He/she asks questions
- Listens
- Provides constructive feedback;
- Encourages
- Motivates
- Controls

Special attention should be granted to the communication role within the professional inclusion process. Interactive learning relations cannot be built without communicating well.

The main communication difficulties encountered by the mentee during his/her probation period depend on the following factors:

- The style of the relation that is built between the mentee and the mentor, which is to a great extent conditioned by the communication manner between the two. This is the reason why –in order to give real support to the mentee- the mentor needs to convey messages that cover not only the intellectual aspects of communication, but also the affective ones, in a clear and personalized manner, making use of his/her sense of humor,

encouraging the mentee's autonomy, praising him/ her on his/her strong points, and stimulating the mentee to improve the weak points.

- Intonation of the voice and clarity of expression represent another essential aspect of communication between mentor and mentee. The mentor needs to pay attention to the way he/she formulates the questions addressed to the mentee, so that the latter is stimulated and encouraged to communicate in a friendly manner. During the discussions, the mentor can also refer to the mentee's daily activities, the social context within which he/she activates, etc.

In communicating with the mentee, listening represents more than the mentor's passive act of paying attention during a discussion. Listening involves concentrating one's attention on the discussion, the context and the interest that the mentor shows to the person who conveys the message. Active listening involves providing the person who transmits the message with appropriate feedback!

There are several types of listening:

- Listening without paying attention. This is a situation when the mentor behaves as if mentee conveyed no message at all. He/she does not look at the mentee in the eyes when he communicates, is distracted by other activities, which can be demotivating for the mentee. When not offered the appropriate feedback (either verbal or nonverbal), the mentee may interpret the mentor's lack of reaction as: "No one is interested in my contribution", accompanied by the subsequent demotivation.
- Listening followed by passing a judgement. There is listening and feedback in this situation, but it involves just negative judgements, without pointing out the positive aspects and the mentee's effort. This type of listening might inhibit the mentee and lead to his/her shrinking into his self and avoid communicating with the mentor.
- Listening followed by deviating from the topic. In this case, the mentor answers the mentee's message, but he changes the subject. As a result, the mentee may feel confused.

We recommend positive listening, which involves the following:

- Increased interest in the person who speaks and the message he conveys;
- Reflection on what the speaker intended to say;
- Attempt to find out what has not been said.
- Listening followed by questions. It is considered an active form of listening. The mentor confirms the reception of the message, by formulating questions, such as: *Who? Where? How? When?* Special attention should be granted to the question *Why?* We recommend avoiding passing judgement. The mentor should give positive feedback, encourage the mentee to analyze and study thoroughly.
- Empathic listening is considered to be the maximum level that listening can reach. Mentors prove their empathic capacity, by imagining themselves in the mentee's place.

In order to avoid the mentee's demotivation, the mentor can complete a series of actions:

- Answer the mentee's requirements as soon as possible;
- Start communication on an optimistic note; address the mentee in a friendly manner;
- Invite more dynamic people to collaborate and stimulate people who are not so willing to interact;
- Periodically send encouraging/motivation and/or congratulation messages;
- Not discriminate; avoid creating tense atmosphere;
- Frequently send suggestions on the manner the projects should be elaborated;
- Make the mentee aware on the practical importance of what he/she learns;
- Suggest to the mentee that he/she should make notes on his opinions,

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things that have not been clarified, comments, encountered difficulties, and mention them to the mentor.

Feedback is vital in the mentoring activity and represents a necessity in guiding the professional inclusion process, in order to motivate the mentee and also to convince him to remain in school after he finishes the mentoring period.

The mentor needs to provide positive feedback, by active listening, which involves listening and formulating questions, and also getting involved affectively, by empathic listening. Apart from the above-mentioned aspects, feedback should be perceived by the mentee as an effective communication relation with the mentor.

Feedback in mentoring should be provided as frequently as possible, in order to orient the mentee and indicate him that he is following the right path.

In order to provide effective feedback, one should take the following recommendations into account:

- Feedback should be focused on positive aspects;
- Feedback should be constructive and not centered on criticism, ironical observations, etc.;
- The aim of feedback is to support the mentee and not assess or judge him;
- Feedback should be descriptive and not evaluative or critical. We recommend to avoid the words "good" , "bad", or similar ones, because they do not say anything about the behavior that the mentee should express/demonstrate;
- Feedback should provide alternatives;
- Feedback should be concrete and specific in order to help the trainee to take progress;

- Feedback should be offered immediately, in order to change/strengthen the mentee's behavior and not after a while!

In conclusion, in the mentoring process, the feedback given by the mentor to the mentee should be constructive for the mentee, very positive and motivating.

3. CONCLUSIONS & ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Mentoring is a dynamic and complex activity that takes place in a sequence of steps. The way in which these steps are taken depends on effective communication between the mentor and the mentee.

In all stages of the mentoring process, the mentor must prove good communication skills to provide guidance and support his younger colleague.

However, the decisive factor in the success of a communication remains the mentor. Throughout the relationship, the mentor is more of a facilitator, he doesn`t give lessons to the mentee, he supports and encourages in order to achieve the objectives.

At present, face-to-face mentoring is becoming an essential step in the Romanian teachers' professional formation, as a result of recent legislative initiatives.

It can be referred to as implementing an activity that represents a process of gradually acquainting the mentees with the typology of communication forms and the types of relations that can be established within the face-to-face or distance activities, as well as the working manners that are specific to the two parties involved, the mentor and the mentee.

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