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Teach Me How to Be a Kindergarten Teacher: Expectations of Kindergarten Student Teachers from Their Mentor Kindergarten Teachers

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Abstract

Teaching is a complex task that involves practical and theoretical knowledge. Students gain practical knowledge through practicum that takes place in kindergartens or schools. The student teacher trains under the auspices of an experienced kindergarten teacher or teacher who becomes their mentor. The object of this research was to examine the expectations of student teachers from their mentor kindergarten teachers. Fifty-four student teachers answered a specially written questionnaire, distributed through Google docs, about their expectations from their mentor kindergarten teachers. The data analysis was qualitatively being the most suitable research method to answer the research question being a primarily exploratory research. It is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. The results show that the student teachers expect to gain practical knowledge of skills and tools that are important to their profession and that the mentoring relationship will be supportive, encouraging and attentive. The significance of this research is that mentor kindergarten teachers will be more aware of what their mentees expect from this relationship, especially in light of the fact that there is no agreed concept of the mentor's role in the literature. Therefore, this research can provide important guidelines.

Keywords

Mentoring, Preservice Kindergarten Teachers Training, Teacher Education, Student Teachers, Mentor Teachers

1. Introduction

Teaching is a complex task that demands proficiency in multiple tasks, and extensive theoretical knowledge combined with practical skills. Becoming a teacher takes time practice and experience (Campbell & Brummett, 2007). Teacher's training comprises of college or university based learning combined with practical placements, which take place in schools or kindergartens. Student teachers who graduate from training institutions spoke of a gap between what they learned and what was required from them at school placement (Peleg, 1992; Amir & Tamir, 1992). The source of the disconnection being in the preference for theoretical learning is over the practical knowledge (Zeichner, 1993). Practical training has been described as an opportunity for pre-service teachers to engage in a developmental process of observing and experimenting with teaching practice, and learning about the skills, knowledge, philosophies and attitudes of the professional teacher (Walkington, 2004: p. 1). The practicum has also been reported by students to be the part of the training program that they found most useful (Brett, 2006; Walkington, 2005a; Brandburg & Ryan, 2001).

The practicum is under the auspices of an experienced teacher who mentors the student teacher in the skills and practices of becoming a professional teacher. Consequently, the mentor teacher plays a very significant role in the training of student teachers.

This research focuses on what the student kindergarten teachers expect they will learn from their mentor kindergarten teacher during their practical experiences. In order to do this, this research will examine the qualities of mentoring relationships and behaviours that enhance the professional development of the student teacher's training to be kindergarten teachers. It will also delve into the roles of both the mentor and the mentee from the perspective of the student teacher.

2. Mentoring

The term mentoring can be traced back to Homer's Odyssey, in which the name "Mentor" signifies wisdom, maturity, integrity and personal investment and the nature of mentor and mentee is personal and mutually respectful, but essentially unequal (Little, 1990; Smith & Aldred, 1993). Mentoring is a hierarchical relationship where the mentor is more experienced than the mentee (McCormack & West, 2006). In comparison, recent research suggests that it is a reciprocal relationship that is mutually beneficial (Heidersfield et al., 2008; Kostovich & Thurn, 2006; Jewell, 2007; Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh, & Wilss, 2008).

Induction includes an important mentoring component and has the ability to create excellence in teaching. These programs cultivate and strengthen new teachers with the ultimate outcome of making the education process more effective (Gschwend & Moir, 2007).

There seems to be no acceptable description of the mentor's role in teacher training. For example, terms like guide, advisor, counsellor, instructor, supporter and encourager are commonly used (Hopper, 2001; Bray & Nettelton, 2006; Sundli, 2007). However, the role is more complex than as suggested, for instance role modelling teacher behaviour and pedagogy (Hopper, 2001; Le Maistre Boudreau & Pare, 2006). Fairbanks, Freedman and Kahn (2000: p.103) define mentoring in teacher education as "complex social interactions that mentor teachers and student teachers' construct and negotiate for a variety of professional purposes and in response to the contextual factors they encounter". Whereas in comparison in an article by Lai (2005) the mentor's role is described as being divided into two main concepts, mentoring as skill acquisition and as a process of enculturation.

Mentoring is similar to apprenticeship, in which practical skills of teaching are emphasised and there is an appreciation for the practical knowledge that the mentor has accumulated in the years. This provides a very technical aspect of teaching and does not focus on processes but only on the practical behaviour that allows for successful teaching. Whitehead (2000) argues in addition that teachers draw upon their personal learning experiences when teaching, particularly if they do not understand the theory behind the teaching practice as is often the case with student teachers.

The skills-based approach sees mentoring as training student teachers in the skills of teaching a subject. This concept has been the dominant one view in the context of university-based model of teachers' training. Mentor teachers in this view have a primary role in providing student teachers with opportunities to practice teaching skills in their subjects. Learning focused mentoring relationships make a significant emotional and intellectual difference in the induction experience for new teachers, as well as in their continuing professional practice. These clearly structured entries into the profession frame the learning journey from novice to expert teaching (Humbard et al., 2000). For mentoring programs be effective they must be seen as a part of the overall induction

process (Wong, 2004). Induction includes an important mentoring component and has the ability to create excellence in teaching. These programs cultivate and strengthen new teachers with the ultimate outcome of making the education process more effective (Gschwend & Moir, 2007).

3. Mentees

With the emphasis of teachers' training moving away from the universities and a greater emphasis put on the school and kindergarten-based concept of teachers' training, the schools and kindergartens play a more significant role in the teachers training process. According to Feiman-Nemser (2003) the learning needs of student teachers are broader than the technical aspects of teaching and include "issues of curriculum, instruction, assessment, management, school culture and the larger community" (p.26). Therefore, the idea of teachers training becomes in addition an issue of enculturation, in which the preservice teacher needs to reach an understanding of the influence of school culture and behaviour. This conception of mentoring suggests that the role of the mentor is about helping student teachers fit into the school culture, according to Feiman-Nemser. This is more difficult to accomplish in kindergartens because of the nature of the way kindergartens are organised, they usually stand isolated from other kindergartens and the kindergarten teacher is not only the pedagogical expert in child development, but also acts as the leader and manager of the kindergarten in all aspects: administrative, organisational and pedagogical.

The ability to form and develop strong bonds made the transition from student to professional much easier. These relationships, although often personal, are built on shared purposes and like-minded goals between the student teachers and their mentors (Carr, Hermann, & Harris, 2005). In all relationships; belonging is a central component (Boreen, Johnson, Niday, & Potts, 2003). Students treated as an equal by their mentors allowed them the confidence to continue to be successful and removed the fear of developing their individual styles. It is essential though, for the mentor not to cloud their professional judgements and the ability to evaluate the student kindergarten teacher in a professional capacity.

The mentoring relationship has mutual benefits for the mentors and mentees. Benefits to mentoring preservice teachers include increased reflection on practice, professional growth, contribution to the profession (Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh, & Wilss 2008; Kostovich & Thurn 2006; Jewell, 2007). The benefits to mentees include observation of professional skills, sharing professional experiences, receiving constructive feedback about their professional progress and developing reflective practices (Lai, 2005; Rajuan, Beijaard, & Verloop, 2008).

A recurring theme in mentoring literature was the important role of providing feedback to the novice teacher. It is essential that the feedback be specific in order for the beginning teacher to grow and improve as a professional. Garza (2001) found that "when mentors provide beginning teachers with written feedback about their teaching behaviours, a concrete image becomes known" (p. 324). Further emphasizing the importance of this concept, Garza continued, "This gives beginning teachers an opportunity to decide about the modifications necessary for effective classroom performance" (p. 324).

Ambrosetti (2010) examined the mentoring relationships between mentor teachers and student teachers, from the perspective of the student teacher. She found that mentees prefer a mentoring relationship that is supportive and comfortable, in which they receive feedback about their progress. They preferred mentors that they can learn from, rather than someone who will judge and grade them, which raises an interesting dilemma about student teacher's appraisal by mentor teachers.

Teaching is a craft that demands an integration of theoretical and practical knowledge. Students acquire the theoretical knowledge in an academic institution, whereas the practical knowledge is school or kindergarten based. Student teachers are assigned to a practicum placement where he or she undergoes additional training under the auspices of a mentoring teacher or kindergarten teacher. This relationship is complex and the literature does not provide an agreed concept of what is the role of the mentor teacher to ensure that the student teacher receives the optimal practical experience. This research will examine this issue from the student teacher's expectations of what for them are the necessary elements to enable them to succeed in this area of their professional training.

4. Methodology

This research took place in an academic teachers training college in the North of Israel.

The research population included 54 student teachers in their third year of training who studied for a B. Ed.

degree in education and teaching that aimed to prepare them to be future kindergarten teachers. All the students were female, the average age for the students, 27 years of age.

The research employed a questionnaire, administrated through Google. docs after the end of the end of the first semester in the academic year. The students all had practicum experience in the 3 Years of their training (out of a four-year program).

5. Findings

The research population included 54 student teacher trainees in their third year of studies to be kindergarten teachers. In the first year of studies, the students have no practical experience in the kindergartens, which means that the third year of studies is their second year of experience of practicum.

The average age of the research population was 27 years of age. There is conscription in Israel at the age of eighteen years, to the army or serve time in national service for at least two to three years.

The question put forward to the students: What are your expectations of your mentor kindergarten teacher?

The findings were divided into themes that are shown below in **Table 1**.

After the initial qualitative analysis of the questionnaires, the findings revealed the central themes concerning the student's expectations from their mentor teachers, as illustrated in **Figure 1**.

After the initial data analysis, it was possible to identify two central elements that are basic in the role of mentor teaching, cognitive and emotional (illustrated in **Figure 2** and **Table 2**).

These results are in accordance to the literature review (Boreen, Johnson, Niday, & Potts, 2003) who indicated that the emotional elements are a necessity for new teachers; they need to feel that they belong and are treated as equals by their mentors. This research in addition, found that the student teachers expected to receive specific feedback, which was indicated in the literature (Ambrosetti, 2010) in addition to gain knowledge of skills and appropriate tools, which is also in accordance to the literature (Lai, 2005).

6. Conclusions

The aim of the research was to investigate what were the expectations of preservice kindergarten teachers from their mentor teachers.

The findings showed that for the preservice kindergarten teachers it was most important for them that the mentor teacher provided them with "tools" (27%: mentioned 34 times). This is compliant with the literature according to Lai (2005) in which she indicates that one aspect of the mentors' role was to assure that the mentee's gains, and has an opportunity to practice the necessary skills needed for their profession. The other main factors that were important were "knowledge" (11%: mentioned 14 times). The literature also indicates that the learning needs of the preservice teachers are broader than the technical or practical aspects of teaching (Feiman-Nemser, 2003). The other elements: being attentive (6%: mentioned 7 times) to teach skills (6%: mentioned 6 times) and to give support (6%: mentioned 7 times) were all thought to be less important.

Table 1. Themes that arose from the students responses to the questionnaire: What are your expectations of your mentor kindergarten teacher?

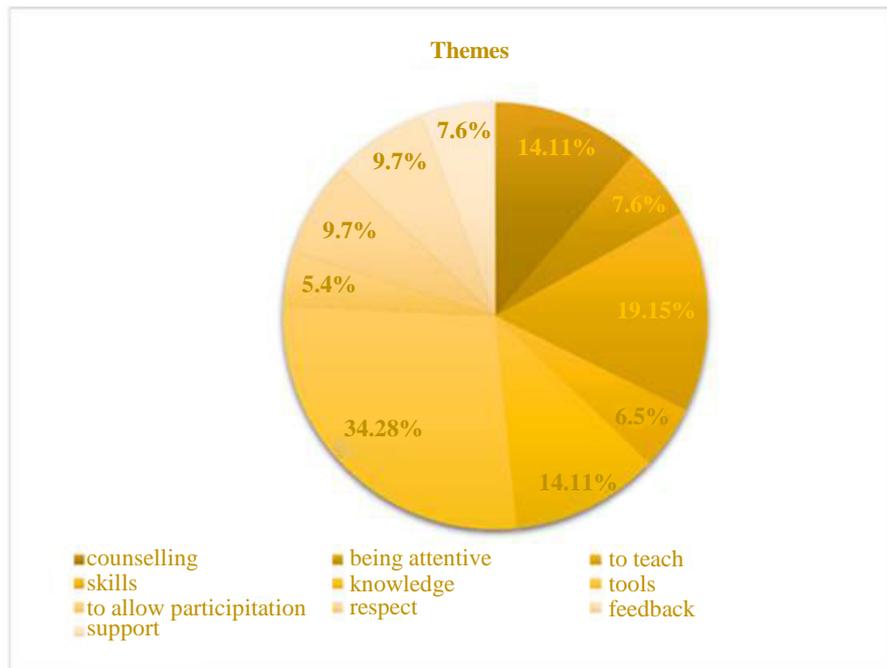| Theme	Student Responses N = 54	Percentage
Counselling	14	11
Being attentive	7	6
To teach	19	5
To teach skills	6	5
Knowledge	14	11
Tools	34	27
To allow participation	5	4
Respect	9	7
Feedback	9	7
Support	7	6

Figure 1. Central themes that arose from the questionnaire concerning the expectations of the students from their mentor kindergarten teachers.
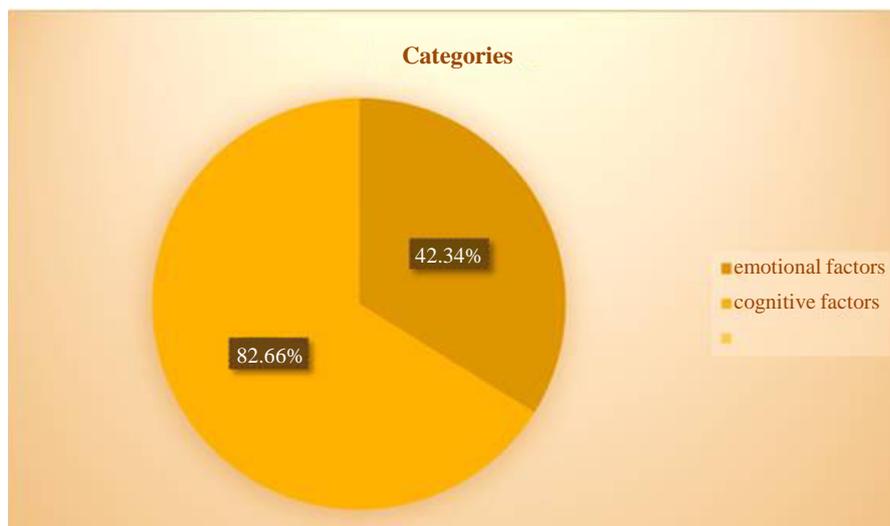

Figure 2. Central themes that appeared in the role of the mentor kindergarten teacher.

Table 2. Results of the central themes that arose from the role of the kindergarten teacher.

Category	Number of answers	Percentage
Emotional	42	34
Cognitive	82	66

Category 1: Emotional elements: Counselling: Being attentive: To allow participation: Respect: Support. Category 2: Cognitive elements: To teach: To teach skills: To teach tools:Feedback.

What's the most interesting is that the general results show an inclination for the students to indicate their need for more cognitive elements (82%) in the mentoring relationship, such as teaching; to teach skills and give

feedback as opposed to emotional elements (34%) such as counselling, being attentive, respect, support, to allow participation. These results are consistent to the literature that indicates the need of preservice teachers for a mentor that is supportive but gives feedback and is someone they can learn from (Ambrosetti, 2010).

The significance of this research can have implications when training mentor teachers for their role. There is no agreed concept of the mentor's role according to the literature, so perhaps the findings from the research can assist and give guidelines in building an acceptable role description for this very important position.

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