

ON-LINE MENTORING PROGRAM FOR BEGINNING TEACHERS: PHASES IN A PROCESS

ALINE M. DE M. R. REALI

Professor in the Department of Teaching Methodology and on the Graduate Program in Education at the Education and Human Sciences Center of the Federal University of São Carlos
darr@ufscar.br

REGINA M. S. P. TANCREDI

Professor on the Graduate Program in Education, Art and the History of Culture of the Mackenzie Presbyterian University and Collaborator and Professor on the Graduate Program in Education at the Education and Human Sciences Center of the
Federal University of São Carlos
drpt@ufscar.br

MARIA DA GRAÇA N. MIZUKAMI

Professor on the Graduate Program in Education, Art and the History of Culture of the Mackenzie Presbyterian University Collaborator and Professor on the Graduate Program in Education at the Education and Human Sciences Center of the
Federal University of São Carlos
gramizuka@gmail.com

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The following projects are the basis of this article: Mentoring Program for Teachers of Initial Grades [elementary school]: Implementing and Assessing a Continuum of Teacher Learning (UFSCar-Fapesp/Public Education, Research Reports, 2005-2008); Participation in a Research Group as a Professional Teacher Learning Tool for Experienced Teachers: the Case of the UFSCar Mentoring Program (UFSCar-CNPq/Research Project and Report 2005-2006).

RESUMO

Neste artigo analisamos as fases evidenciadas no desenvolvimento do Programa de Mentoria do Portal dos Professores da Universidade Federal de São Carlos (SP). O programa se caracteriza por ser online e é dirigido para professores dos anos iniciais do ensino fundamental com até cinco anos de experiência. Foi conduzido por três pesquisadoras e dez mentoras (professoras experientes) que acompanham individualmente, a distância e por meio de correspondências eletrônicas, 56 professoras iniciantes durante períodos entre seis meses a dois anos e meio. Do ponto de vista teórico consideramos a literatura relativa à aprendizagem e desenvolvimento profissional da docência; início da carreira docente; processos de mentoria e educação a distância. Metodologicamente desenvolvemos uma pesquisa-ação a partir de estratégias construtivo-colaborativas. As principais fontes de dados foram as correspondências trocadas entre mentoras e professoras iniciantes; diários reflexivos de mentoras e professoras iniciantes; redação de casos de ensino pelas professoras iniciantes; registros de observação das reuniões semanais ocorridos entre pesquisadoras e mentoras. Os resultados apontam que os processos de mentoria investigados ocorrem segundo fases distintas (fase inicial ou de aproximação; fase de desenvolvimento ou aprofundamento; fase de desligamento) com características, objetivos e procedimentos próprios.

ENSINO A DISTÂNCIA – EDUCAÇÃO CONTINUADA – FORMAÇÃO DE PROFESSORES – PROGRAMA DE MENTORIA DO PORTAL DOS PROFESSORES DA UFSCAR

ABSTRACT

ONLINE MENTORING PROGRAM FOR BEGINNING TEACHERS: PHASES IN A PROCESS. This article analyzes the development phases of the Online Mentoring Program of the Teachers Portal of the Federal University of São Carlos. This is an online program aimed at elementary school teachers in their initial years, who have up to five years experience. It was carried out by three researchers and ten mentors (experienced teachers) who provided individual, distance coaching by e-mail for 56 beginning teachers for periods of time ranging between six months and two and a half years. The article's theoretical framework considers literature on teacher learning

and professional development, the first years of the teaching career, mentoring processes and distance education. The research method adopted in this investigation can be characterized as action-research, based on constructive-collaborative strategies. Its chief sources of information were the emails exchanged between mentors and beginning teachers, the mentors' and beginning teachers' reflective journals, the teaching cases drafted by the beginning teachers and the observation reports of the weekly meetings between mentors and researchers. Results indicate that the mentoring processes investigated take place in distinct phases (the initial or approximation phase; the development or deepening phase; the disengagement phase) that have their own intrinsic characteristics, objectives and procedures.

*DISTANCE TEACHING – CONTINUING EDUCATION – TEACHER TRAINING – UFSCAR
TEACHER MENTORING PROGRAM WEB PORTAL*

SOME INITIAL THOUGHTS

In this article we identify, describe and analyze the phases that are evident in the development of the Mentoring Program (MP) of the Web Portal for Teachers of the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar), characterized by the training demands of beginning teachers and by the support provided by the participating mentors. The MP studied is available online and focuses on teachers in the early years of elementary school, who have up to five years teaching experience. The research was carried out by three researchers and ten mentors who provided distance coaching by e-mail for 56 beginning teachers for periods of between six months and two and a half years.

To develop the MP we used as its context the Teachers' Web Portal (www.portaldosprofessores.ufscar.br), the objective of which is to foster the professional development of elementary school teachers. With the help of experienced professionals from the public school system and from the university itself, it also aims to meet the needs of teachers at different stages in their teaching careers and at different teaching levels, and of other educational agents. The web portal seeks to make it possible for teachers to access a wide range of information and for the establishment of a professional learning community, predominantly via the Internet, through the several programs and activities developed thereon.

In the MP proposal we take into account how important qualified teacher training is in the light of the numerous educational problems in the country, although we know the difficulties of explaining such an influence on student performance, and we are betting heavily on the relationship between good professional training and competent performance.

We believe that the knowledge derived from this investigation serves as input for the induction programs, i.e. the coaching of beginning teachers, for developing mentor training programs and for outlining actions aimed at broadening the knowledge base of teachers at different phases in their careers, as well as for using the web as a space for professional training.

As the conceptual basis for its development we considered: ideas relating to the procedural and social character of learning to teach and to be a teacher; that teachers, depending on the phase in their career in which they find themselves, demand specific training actions and that social interactions no longer need to be confined to a specific geographical or limited area, since people can interact with each other anywhere and at any time, as happens on the Internet.

There are strong indications of the need to turn our attention to a critical period in the professional development of teachers - the beginning of the teaching career. In general terms, this is a phase in which young professionals apparently suffer from a kind of "myopia" (Grossman, Thompson, Valencia, 2001), since they focus primarily on their competences as a teacher and on managing the most immediate demands of the classroom. For some time they fix their sights on the closest action contexts. They struggle at this time to develop a repertoire of professional behavior related to teaching, to being a teacher, to the specific content they should teach and to representing it in such a way that is suitable for students to learn from.

Although there are existing studies of this nature, we noticed a gap in Brazilian literature on the initial phase in the teaching career, on mentoring programs, and on experienced teachers who teach other teachers to teach. We also identified an absence of public policies that take into account these aspects in the different teaching systems and levels.

In turn, the contexts of professional action rarely have resources for minimizing the difficulties that are characteristic of the initial career phase, because, in addition to the lack of understanding of the peculiarities of this period, there is no tradition in Brazil of the school constituting an environment of professional development and systematic monitoring of the

professional embedding of beginning teachers. In this paper our attention focuses on these aspects.

We have argued that the processes of professional teaching development be school-centered. In the specific case of the MP, despite its online characteristic, the focus remains on the school. We sought to establish a virtual dialogue network between beginning teachers and mentors, the development of which considered the characteristics of the activity contexts of the beginning teachers. In the MP we also aimed to prepare mentors for acting, via the Internet, with the beginning teachers, by investigating the processes involved and their contribution to the exercise of mentoring activities. This focus allowed us to understand how the knowledge base of experienced teachers can be configured and developed when they act as mentors in distance situations.

In our investigation we adopted perspectives that help us understand the complexity of the processes involved in school life and the unique characteristics of its participants. These research and intervention models involve knowing the reality under which teachers work, what they think, what they do and why they do it, so that, collaboratively, we can reflect with them on the situations they experience and, if necessary, build ways of helping them cope that consider the specificities of each teacher, the schools and the community. To do so it is necessary to establish with the teachers, and indirectly with the schools, procedural work that is characterized as being a “two-way street”, avoiding seeing them only as suppliers of information for the research activity. This means considering that those involved assume roles of a collaborative nature, in which each one has something to learn from the other and that the relationship established is multifaceted and not hierarchical. From this perspective those situations that were considered to cause dilemmas or be problematic required that decisions be taken and solutions built, jointly (Cole, Knowles, 1993).

With the advent of computer technology, the Internet has become a tool that is conducive to the development of training processes and, as such, was adopted by the MP. Programs developed using this media are often called “virtual mentoring” or “telementoring” (Knapczyk et al., 2005) and the use of e-mails or teleconferencing offers support when face to face relations between mentor and mentee are unfeasible or unnecessary.

When considering mentoring programs as such, there are some advantages in this system: a beginning teacher can receive guidance from an experienced teacher who is geographically far away; mentors and beginning teachers can interact with a frequency and at times/periods that are not always possible with face-to-face meetings; asynchronous contact allows for an exchange of messages, whose content is better pondered and oriented to the central objective of the process; it allows for more privacy and so delicate and personal issues can be addressed, which is not always easy with face to face communication.

Given the previous considerations, in planning, developing and evaluating the UFSCar MP, we found answers that can help with teaching support projects, based on cooperation, which should be included as part of the organization of school work (cycles, multidisciplinary procedures and other forms of collective action) from the perspective indicated by Thurler and Perrenoud (2006), although in the case in question, the cooperation takes place outside the school environment.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL BASES OF UFSCAR'S MENTORING PROGRAM

In recent decades research into teaching and teaching processes has undergone a period of conceptual and methodological change. Approaches are being increasingly adopted that aim to understand the complexity of the processes involved in school life and the unique features of those who take part in it. These alternatives are important when it is understood that teacher training and professional socialization are founded on the experiences of teachers and the way they have acquired their knowledge and that they suffer from the influence of cognitive, ethical and performance factors. This learning process begins with the first school experiences and accompanies teachers throughout their professional careers (Cole, Knowles, 1993), given the dynamic and complex nature of the context in which teaching practice occurs: the classroom.

To operate in these contexts teachers need to acquire and develop a knowledge-base comprising understanding, knowledge, skills and the willingness necessary to act effectively in specific teaching and learning situations; this knowledge-base supports decision-making processes (Shulman, 1986, 1987). Other professional knowledge may be considered in this base –

personal, practical knowledge of the profession, of cases, of educational fundamentals, of metaphors, etc – that is equally important to the professional development process in teaching (Schoenfeld,1998).

Research in the area of teacher training points to the fact that teaching practices are strongly determined by a teacher's knowledge, beliefs, goals and hypotheses, as well as by the concepts he or she has of the subject they teach, the syllabus, the students and learning. For this reason continuous training programs must be adapted to suit the specific needs of the teachers and the contexts in which they operate and must consider the following aspects: a) adult learning is more directly aimed at practical rather than theoretical aspects (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Garcia, 1999; Calderhead, 1996; Schoenfeld, 1998); b) reflection about teaching is a powerful strategy for the continuous training of teachers and this should come from their own experiences; c) teachers need time and mental space, which public education policies must guarantee them institutionally, so they develop professionally (Mc Diarmid, 1995).

In studying the current phenomena in schools, in classrooms and in the work of teachers, researchers have more recently entered classrooms and schools to observe, participate and discuss teaching and learning with their main protagonists: teachers and their students. Such investigations are characterized by a more prolonged insertion in the school of the so-called university "partners". In such cases, the research and intervention model implies knowing the reality in which the teachers operate, what they think, what they do and why they do it, in order to reflect in a collaborative way with them on the situations they have experienced and, if necessary, to construct ways of coping that consider the specificities of the schools and the community. In the light of this investigative paradigm (called by many, constructive-collaborative or action research) it is essential that the parties involved assume collaborative roles, in which each one has something to learn from the other.

Mizukami et al. (2002) emphasize that by assuming this particular research model there is a tendency to carry out a detailed inquiry, the objective of which is to generate new knowledge by considering day-to-day school problems. This reflective attitude demands dialogue, conversation, exchange and reciprocal professional development between teachers and researchers. When such processes are followed there is a collaboration between them that allows for the development of a mutual and consensual understanding, the promotion of democratic

decision-taking and common action (Clark et al., 1996, 1998). Collaborative actions involve the interpretation of data and of the context to which they refer (Wasser, Bresler, 1996) and make it possible to take into account multiple viewpoints in the process of attributing meaning to the problems identified and constructing solutions for them.

In the case of MP, which is intervention research, the ideas arising are basic, because of its procedural and collaborative nature, although we did not become involved in any specific school context. As the intention was to promote the professional learning of teachers at different phases in their careers and foster professionalism among them the following aspects were considered: the current scenario of educational reforms and the role of distance education within this context; the limitations of the existing, initial and continuing training processes; the pressing need for teachers (at different teaching levels and from different modalities) to develop a solid knowledge-base that is compatible with society's demands as far as its schools are concerned.

We consistently adopted constructive and collaborative research and intervention strategies, which meant that many of the actions were defined over time, because of what happened and because of the analysis of what happened. As our data sources we used the e-mails that were exchanged between mentors and their beginning teachers, between mentors themselves and with the researchers (which were stored in a specific area on the teachers' web portal); the reflective diaries of the mentors and the beginning teachers, and the transcriptions of the weekly meetings which mentors and researchers attended. We believe that the data obtained form a set of narratives about the processes and for this reason it was necessary to establish some routines for analyzing them.

Every week we read the narratives and tried to establish their focus and the themes they dealt with. This information was then organized into a sequential timeline so that we could accompany what each beginning teacher was "talking about" with her mentor. These data were complemented with information from the mentors on the mentoring processes being carried out, the teaching and learning¹ experiences and the difficulties and dilemmas faced, which were

¹ Teaching and learning experiences - TaLEs: "structured teaching and learning situations, planned by the researchers and by the school's teachers and implemented by the teachers from themes defined by them as being of individual or group interest and discussed collectively. These experiences constitute circumscribed processes – that

submitted in a weekly report written by each one of them. Information relating to the beginning teachers and their interaction with the mentors was then compiled into a summary table that served as the initial agenda for the weekly meeting between mentors and researchers. In these meetings we were able to define the characteristics of the MP and its developments, as well as helping with the professional development of the mentors. The data relating to the meetings were also compiled into another timeline that helped the researchers monitor how things were progressing. The two data sets, therefore, helped us define the intervention steps, as well as to construct the replies to the research questions.

In the first stage, from October 2003 to June 2004, experienced teachers, via weekly meetings with the researchers, prepared the bases of the MP, its curriculum and its characteristics. This was just one stage in the mentor training process, since a series of activities (case and text studies, discussions, written reports and discussion about themes common to the development and implementation of the MP) was developed with the aim of constructing the group's identity and a repertoire of professional behavior that related to the mentoring of beginning teachers. In this process with the mentors we considered their perceptions about teaching, learning, knowledge, students, teachers, schools, the syllabus, etc., as well as what they considered to be necessary for performing their role as mentors. The general characteristics were also outlined and the assumptions, the "curriculum", the activities and the length of the Mentoring Program were defined.

In the second stage, from July 2004 to June 2005, the mentors were trained in the use of computers and the Internet. The third and most important stage started in March 2005 and lasted until December 2007, when 13 mentors (3 gave up during the process) worked with 56 beginning teachers. All but one of the beginning teachers were female.

Formally, the MP was conceived of to be developed over a period of 120 hours, spread throughout the year. Considering the manifestation of some of the beginning teachers who concluded this first phase and the mentors' assessment of the progress of the program, it was agreed to introduce a supplementary module that had specific characteristics. This decision

may imply actions with small groups of teachers or in the classroom, involving both the teacher and students – generally arising from practical difficulties relating to understanding curricular components or the challenges posed by the day-to-day life of the school and by public policies", (Mizukami et al., 2002, p.11).

implied developing the MP in two distinct modules. Module 1 involved an exchange of correspondence and the carrying out of teaching and learning experiences by the beginning teachers under the strict supervision of their mentors. It ended with the preparation of a teaching case study about their professional development, bearing in mind their participation in the MP. A second module (Module 2) was carried out with some of the beginning teachers, because of their interest in continuing to have contact with their mentors; in this case at least one teaching and learning experience that was more independent of the mentor was developed. In this second module each beginning teacher received a certificate relating to an extra 60 hours of mentoring.

Of the 56 beginning teachers involved in the program, 19 desisted (33.9%). Of the total, 37 beginning teachers concluded the first module and of these, 10 also concluded the second module. The group of mentors was the same the whole time, with a total of ten teachers with varying experiences, each having worked for more than 15 years, although three of them, for various reasons, had to leave the program. These teachers were considered by the school communities as successful; only four of them had had any previous experience as trainers and none had worked with distance programs.

During participation in the MP the beginning teachers and mentors developed, among other activities, a set of teaching and learning experiences (Mizukami et al., 2002), which are structured situations planned jointly by mentors and beginning teachers, developed by the beginning teachers in their classes and aimed at minimizing the specific difficulties indicated by the beginning teachers. The teaching and learning experiences could be related to teaching practices in the classroom, to the teaching of a specific subject matter or involve activities such as the interaction of beginning teachers with the parents of their students. These experiences were fundamental to the beginning teachers learning how to teach and to the learning process of the mentors and will be the object of a more detailed examination, because they made it possible to perceive the vital cycles in the mentoring process that was developed.

VITAL CYCLE OF THE MENTORING PROCESS

Throughout the time of the Mentoring Project we were able to identify the different stages of experience in the professional development of participants - especially the development of the beginning teachers - which allowed us to describe how these periods were configured. Based on the data obtained the mentoring processes we investigated can be said to have occurred in distinct stages (the initial or approximation phase; the development or deepening phase; the disengagement phase), each of which has its own characteristics, objectives and procedures, although the themes dealt with could be repeated.

Each of the phases implied discussing certain topics between beginning teachers and their mentors and required specific support from the latter, considering the training demands as evidenced by the beginning teachers. Furthermore, these different stages were critical moments or periods, in which we were able to clearly observe changes in the participants: either a new position adopted or new skills learned.

In the mentoring processes conducted by the different dyads (mentor-beginning teacher), we observed that problems relating to the choice of class and class management and those connected with the knowledge of school culture occur more frequently at the beginning of the school year. Difficulties associated with developing and maintaining a positive attitude to teaching activities, the teaching role and meeting the specific needs of students occur more in the second semester.

When we look at the seasonality of the topics discussed and the support demanded, we see evidence that the mentoring process flows better during the first semester of the school year, because beginning teachers are more available to meet the requests and suggestions of their mentors. The second semester seems to be "heavier" and it appears to be difficult to adopt new attitudes or even undertake the tasks proposed by the mentors.

The seasonality seen in the manifestation of the difficulties of the beginning teachers on the Mentoring Program finds support in the description of the experiences and attitudes of teachers in their first year of activity, as reported by Moir, cited by Villani (2002). The recurrence of the problems observed in the different teaching semesters is justified by the poor working

relationships that are established between beginning teachers and the schools – such as working with temporary employment contracts - which makes the same teacher work in very different school contexts, teach several grades and adapt to particular school communities over their early years in teaching.

The seasonal characteristic of the problems faced by beginning teachers also sets a seasonal tone to the dynamics of support offered by their mentors. However, we identified the occurrence of more or less limited sequential phases, which last for varied periods of time; an initial or approach phase, one related to development and a third to closure.

Initial phase

This phase, also called the approximation phase, can be described as a period of “presentation, initial contacts, looking for knowledge and a search for affinities” (Erika²) and “includes presentation of the mentor, the program and the beginning teacher” (Rose). It is a period of searching for information: “the identification of the needs of the teacher, characterization of the school” –“the physical structure, teaching team, description of the students and characteristics of the classroom” (Mônica). This is a phase of “discovery, gathering together initial knowledge, characterization of the students and of the difficulties experienced by the beginning teacher, discoveries by both parties of what is going to be interesting and/or relevant to establish as the focus of interactions” (Daniela). It is a phase in which the image of the beginning teacher is outlined by the mentor from first impressions (we assume that the image of the mentor is similarly built up by the beginning teacher). This is a critical moment or period, since the way in which the first words are used can generate a type of posture that affects later interaction.

Mentors generally send warm and kind welcoming messages and look for more detailed information about the practices of the beginning teachers, their difficulties, the students and the school. At the beginning of the MP the mentor group carefully analyzed the initial messages. As they gained more experience they gradually acquired more autonomy when interacting in this initial phase.

² In brackets, name of the mentor.

When analyzing my contacts with beginning teachers I observe that the initiation phase occurred practically in the same way with all three: a welcome message, identification of the needs of the teacher, characterization of the school – physical structure, teaching team, description of the students and characteristics of the classroom. But, with each beginning teacher, there was an improvement in my interaction with them in line with the experience I gained (Mônica).

This phase ends when the mentor, together with the beginning teacher, outlines the problems that will be dealt with in the subsequent phase.

Development phase

The development or deepening phase implies the consolidation of the interactions of the mentors and the beginning teachers through a focused and in-depth discussion on one or more of the themes that relate to the difficulties faced by the new teachers. Under the supervision of the mentors it involves the beginning teachers carrying out practical or experimental activities, during which time they are monitored and evaluated “by means of reports: doubts, observations, difficulties, restarts, changes and adjustments. Systematizing these moments does not mean that they should be considered in all teaching and learning experiences that are developed” (Maria Ines). This period is “marked by more substantial and one-off messages that relate to real and concrete situations” (Daniela), since

... they focus on a specific topic to be discussed; they are full of questions. This is where there is bibliographic research and an exchange of experiences between mentor and the beginning teacher is frequently requested. Other situations may arise throughout the process from this phase if the work produces positive effects, if a situation occurs that diverts the earlier focus, or if the beginning teacher does not respond satisfactorily to what was proposed. In this phase, too, results begin to appear, as revealed in the teaching and learning experiences, and the beginning teacher may initiate a process of greater independence from her mentor. (Cristina)

It is, therefore, a period of intensive learning for both the beginning teachers as well as for the mentors: “then comes the learning development phase; this learning occurs on both sides. I learned a lot in my interactions with my beginning teachers and they certainly learned something from me, too” (Regina).

The experiences of this period are a natural context for the mentoring process to assist the beginning teachers confront their difficulties and for facilitating their engagement in building up their repertoires of the most competent professional behavior.

In the MP this context was established on completion of a set of activities related to the planning and development of teaching and learning experiences. This strategy was adopted by mentors and researchers in the early months of the program, because it was seen that a lot of the work with new teachers lacked a direction that had been defined in conjunction with the mentors, and that many of the proposals submitted to the beginning teachers were not developed by them.

At the time we noticed that many mentors experienced difficulties in conducting the guidance process for beginning teachers and had to make a big effort to answer all their doubts and help them overcome their difficulties. E-mails were very frequent, were broad in terms of content and involved many kinds of problems; at the same time that mentors were asking for information, they were also demanding that “tasks” should be carried out and the beginning teachers were presenting new difficulties. Our assessment indicated that, because they were beginners, the mentors wanted to help their mentees with all their difficulties, but at the same time they were struggling to handle the requests they received and evaluate the results obtained.

In the MP, teaching and learning experiences were understood to be structured situations, planned by the mentors jointly with the beginning teachers and implemented by them, based on the themes that were indicated as being of interest to them. These experiences were defined as follows by the mentors and researchers:

The main objectives of developing a teaching and learning experience are to promote learning, the construction of new knowledge and the autonomy of the beginning teacher so she can cope with the different situations that occur in the dynamic of the classroom and the school. Within the scope of the MP, a teaching and learning experience arises from a need expressed by the new teacher and derives from a problem that is, of necessity, related to the teaching task (teaching practice, everyday life of the school or learning a concept/procedure). In collaboration, the beginning teacher and her mentor define the theme to be developed and the steps that can be reconstructed/extended/modified over time, depending on what occurs during the process. Situations need to be faced up to in an organized manner, involving the carrying out of activities, preparing descriptive/reflective reports, questions, inquiries, experiments, applications and restarts. There is no predetermined timescale, but there is a beginning, middle and an end. The objectives of the teaching and learning experience, though they may be clear to the mentor, may be constituted, for the

new teacher, over the course of the interactions and as activities develop and are reported by her. (Meeting of researchers and mentors, August/2007)

Teaching and learning experiences functioned both as an intervention and a research tool, because they made it possible to establish relationships between theory and practice, the configuration and detailing of professional development processes and of the reflective processes of beginning teachers and mentors, and the production of concepts on such procedures. Various teaching and learning experiences were developed throughout the MP. Some beginning teachers worked more intensively with a single experience and others used more than one, some with the class as a whole and others with some specific students.

Until the focus of a teaching and learning experience had been defined we saw a period of negotiation between mentors and beginning teachers when the theme to be developed was being defined. It was a tense phase for the mentors, because they invested, often unsuccessfully, in promoting the independence of the beginning teachers rather than offering them emotional support. Gradually the mentors “discovered” the importance of the TaLE as the articulator of the process and the interactions; they perceived that it was essential to develop planned activities and also to record them. In the case of those beginning teachers who joined some time after the program had started the development of teaching and learning experiences was already flagged up in the first few e-mails, although implementing them would involve prior planning that required that certain tasks or stages be complied with beforehand.

To develop the teaching and learning experiences mentors generally oriented the beginning teachers to define one or more topics from characterization of their difficulties and then together they tried to establish priorities that would subsequently be discussed and worked on in more depth. After defining a focus, further discussions were conducted so the mentor could better understand the difficulties being faced by the beginning teacher and so they could, through detailed descriptions of their daily lives, their students, the school and the activities undertaken, learn to analyze their own actions and what occurred in the classroom and the school, with the objective of building relevant responses to the dilemmas and difficulties they faced. These discussions were accompanied by guidance so the beginning teachers could draft their reflective

diaries about their experiences in a process similar to the one we, as researchers, conducted with the mentors.

We note that the development of teaching and learning experiences systematically created an interaction context between the mentor and the beginning teacher; carrying out the activities outlined in their scope became a type of action project that basically followed the stages or steps shown in Table 1. The messages coming out of this stage expressed how projects were developing and were in line with the type of interaction that existed between the mentor and mentee.

After the priority topics to be discussed had been established, the mentors conducted the interactions in the sense of planning with the beginning teacher what intervention was needed to minimize/resolve the problems they reported. Several themes were developed with the different beginning teachers, but two were addressed in all cases: the reflective record and the description of the students in the class. After the intervention plan had been prepared it was implemented. As the following stages or steps occurred the intervention plan was assessed and redefined, as necessary, based on procedural analyses of its relevance and adjustment of the actions planned and implemented. Development of these steps is a complete teaching and learning experience.

The mentors, in the different steps, offered support, help and suggestions to the beginning teachers; they submitted questions and evaluations and gave feedback. This is the same as we did in our weekly meetings with the mentors.

As a theoretical basis for the development of teaching and learning experiences, we assumed that in the analysis processes - called reflection or inquiry processes - we can encourage the non-passive and subservient performance of the role of the teacher in the face of the situations experienced. In reflecting on this, we can assume a position on ways of controlling our practices to ensure that the activities developed support, on the one hand, student learning and on the other, our own learning. We understand that in this way we are promoting the building up of the professionalism of beginning teachers and mentors, since the latter were also subjected to the same processes.

Critical analysis of the ideas and practices resulting from the development of the teaching and learning experiences and their reporting are important strategies for promoting professional development because they enable teacher to establish a reference framework for subsequent

continuing learning, bearing in mind the different facets of their work and the roles they perform. It also allows schools, classrooms and other activity contexts to be better configured; knowing who the students are, what and how they learn, what content is to be taught and reconstructing their ideas about themselves as professionals.

With implementation of the teaching and learning experiences and their written recording, we developed a type of narrative inquiry along the lines indicated by Connelly and Clandinin (2006), because the mentors acted emphatically so that the beginning teachers would clearly define their teaching processes or other activities developed over time, the personal and social conditions of those involved, as well as the surrounding forces/factors.

An explanation – in writing – of information and ideas on these aspects in the e-mails and diaries allows for the establishment of a common thread that makes sense and explains meanings throughout the teaching career, thus ensuring a relationship between the different formative stages and the experiences undergone (Mizukami et al., 2002). We believe that inquiring or reflective teachers, who are capable of investigating their own practice, have been frequently capable of influencing and shaping the contexts, environments and decision processes that relate to their various teaching roles. We take into account – and little by little the mentors also did – that a teacher, in inquiring about or reflecting on occurrences in the classroom and outside of it, increases his or her possibilities of taking proactive action in relation to students and their learning, to themselves relative to the teaching they do and to their own professional development. Exposing, analyzing, questioning, examining and exploring what is done and its consequences are actions that promote a greater understanding of the contexts in which they operate, the intervening variables, the students and their own decision-making processes, among other things. It also allows teachers to consciously trigger and use their knowledge.

Such actions imply generating a kind of knowledge that is located, through interpretation and the establishment of explanations (personal theories), in the practice, interpretation and questioning of theories formulated by others. Looking for and constructing responses using the inquiry method are actions that are relevant to the process of becoming a good teacher. These ideas took shape for the mentors as the mentoring process developed and they discussed them with their beginning teachers. Carrying out the teaching and learning experiences revealed the

importance of comparing teaching practice with theoretical knowledge in the process of building up the knowledge of beginning teachers and their mentors.

We noticed that mentors and beginning teachers participated in a reflective cycle (Rodgers, 2002), since the former encouraged the mentees to develop their capacity for observing and thinking critically about students and learning, taking into account the teaching, specific content and the contexts in which all these aspects interact. We, as researchers, promote these same processes with the mentors, by also undertaking a reflective cycle.

The development of teaching and learning experiences stimulated, in turn, the capacity for the beginning teachers or their mentors to adopt intelligent actions based on their emerging understanding. We perceived that, in most cases, actions were based on classroom situations or referred to school situations, and were shaped by strict, reflective and systematic processes that allowed the situation to be evaluated and for the careful outlining of alternative actions in place of ill-considered actions.

We found that Rodgers (2002) defines a reflective cycle as being: learning to see, learning to describe and differentiate, learning to think critically and construct theories and learning to take intelligent action.

Table 1 summarizes the components of the teaching and learning experiences developed in Modules 1 and 2 of the Mentoring Program in the form of stages or steps.

TABLE 1
STEPS AND COMPONENTS OF THE TEACHING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCES (TaLEs)

	Components	Description
1st step	Definition of the intervention theme	Choice of a theme to be developed in the TaLEs (teaching the content of any syllabus component, a specific student's case, a theme related to school life, or to the life of a student, school-family interaction, the specific difficulties of learning or teaching, transversal themes, teaching coordination, relationship with students' parents, etc.).
2nd step	TaLE planning	Negotiation of a TaLE between beginning teacher and mentor: 1. TaLE objectives; 2. Initial choice of activities to be developed; 3. Initial choice of sources/materials to be used; 4. Explanation of 'how' to develop the experience; explanation of the steps of the experience (from the beginning to the end).
3rd step (concomitant with the 2nd step)	Definition of the TaLE recording procedures	Choice of procedures for monitoring and recording the TaLE: 1. Descriptive diary of activities planned and carried out; 2. Reflective diary; record of what students say; 3. Student production; 4. Meeting reports; 5. Critical incident reports; observation record of the class, students, parents; 6. Meetings, recreation, etc.
4th step	Drafting of the TaLE plan	Final drafting of the TaLE plan to be developed, containing information about previous steps.
5th step	Development of the TaLE record	Application of procedures and a detailed description of the occurrences, including observations, ideas, impressions, justifications, expectations, difficulties and progress.
6th step	Assessment and drafting of the descriptive TaLE report	Systematization and assessment of the TaLE, with reflective analyses of the process.
7th step	Preparation of a teaching case on learning and professional development (Module 1) and the process experienced (Module 2)	Final reflection on the TaLE via teaching cases.

Throughout the MP we could see that over and above beginning teachers learning from the teaching and learning experiences the latter increased the knowledge-base for teaching the mentors and their consequent professional development.

Closing stage

This phase refers to the conclusion of the mentoring activities and consisted in one of the most widely discussed and difficult aspects faced by the mentors and researchers during the research: defining what a beginning teacher should know in order to dispense with the guidance of the mentor was a recurring theme in the weekly meetings throughout the development of the MP. To establish just how the knowledge-base of beginning teachers should be shaped so they could act in an autonomous way proved to be no easy task; moreover, given the difficulties also faced by the beginning teachers the mentors demonstrated their willingness to continue with their mentoring.

After various discussions the group arrived at the conclusion that it would be interesting “to close” Module 1 (with the beginning teachers preparing a teaching case) and continue the program with a second, optional module.

Module 2 was then introduced, as an extension of the first module for those beginning teachers who wanted to continue interacting with their mentors. This was, in fact, a return to the development phase, with new teaching and learning experiences. This supplementary module was different from the first by the fact that the beginning teacher was encouraged to act in a more independent way and the online interactions were less frequent, although they demanded the development of a full teaching and learning experience and the preparation of a report by way of a teaching case.

Interactions in this disengagement phase were more infrequent and generally speaking centered on the development of teaching cases, although daily events in the beginning teachers’ professional lives were also addressed. Beginning teachers started being seen by some mentors as autonomous professionals.

Teaching cases: an instrument for summarizing the learning generated by the MP

The adoption of teaching cases³ for this purpose is based on the consideration that they can be drafted as a narrative that involves a description of real life and complex situations

³ Some of these ideas have been previously presented by Reali and Reyes (2007).

experienced by teachers during their teaching activities (Mizukami, 2006). They can be used as an important teaching (and learning) tool for teachers (Merseth, 1996), because they allow teacher ideas and knowledge about teaching to become apparent. Cases give examples of how teachers explain their dilemmas and conflicts in their teaching practices and how they overcome their difficulties. By interpreting, analyzing and constructing teaching cases future teachers and those who already are teachers can reflect on countless questions relating to their profession. These are narratives that illustrate events and complex situations experienced by teachers. According to Mizukami

...they provide examples of how it is possible to deal with certain situations, and what is more, explain the dilemmas and conflicts faced by teachers when dealing with teaching and their students. They show how a certain lesson was conducted and what problems arose during the course of the activities. They relate the similar situations faced by teachers in different school situations. They make clear just how complex it is being a teacher. In reading, analyzing, discussing and writing teaching cases, teachers can think about various issues relating to their profession, such as: what knowledge guides the way I practice my profession? How was such knowledge built up and how is it being built up now? What knowledge do I have of all the different content I need to teach my students? How do I use this knowledge when I am planning my lessons? What do I know about my students? How did I learn to be a teacher and how am I learning now? What do I still need to learn about the teaching profession? How do I deal with the different school situations I need to face on a daily basis? The teaching case study allows teachers to stop and think about their professional career, about their relationship with their colleagues and on the need for sharing experiences between teachers, etc. (2006, s/p)

By exploring what they think about what they do and who they are as teachers, beginning teachers engage in understanding the contexts around them and their relationships with their environment and with others; this is, therefore, the way they make themselves the protagonists of their own story and make their ideas visible.

By telling stories it is possible for new teachers to reveal reflections on their teaching experiences, the difficulties they encountered, the strategies they prepared for overcoming them and their results in student learning; it is a way of demonstrating their teaching knowledge and how it was built up over their professional career and from the MP; it is a way of questioning the

work of teaching and the dilemmas and difficulties faced, because it allows for an interpretation, an exchange and discussion with their peers.

The preparation of teaching cases, in the shape of written narratives, helped with the “translation” of the knowledge constructed by the beginning teachers in their own words, in addition to potentially functioning as real joint learning tools along with the others promoted by the MP. After all, when a person reports facts they have experienced they have an opportunity of reconstructing their knowledge and the “path taken, giving it new meaning. So the narrative is not the literal truth of the facts, but rather it is a representation the individual makes of them and in this way it may transform their own reality” (Cunha, 1997). Moreover, in teaching cases, according to Prado and Soligo (2007), there is an opportunity to expose, tell and report by explaining what we think or feel about our experiences and the choices we made. In taking into account such potentiality we assume that cases can offer indicators of the impact of the MP on beginning teachers and about whether they are “ready” to leave the program.

We understand that narratives cause reflections, because they allow for a view of human experience, as considered from the individual or social point of view, about the stories experienced. In fact, people forge their daily lives through the stories they tell about themselves and about others. These stories are a type of portal through which a person enters the world and their experiences are interpreted and given meaning. In this sense the “narrative is the phenomenon investigated in the inquiry” (Connelly, Clandinin, 2006).

According to Nono (2001), the use of the teaching case study strategy with active teachers seems to offer important advantages for professional learning by revealing the complexity of the teaching situations that occur in the classroom, helping teachers become familiar with the need for thinking and acting in complex situations, favoring the development of skills in critical analysis, problem resolution and decision-making, making it possible to explain and develop practical teaching theories and allowing their validity to be examined in the face of the complexity of classroom situations. In analyzing a teaching situation teachers resort to their academic knowledge, their previous experiences, their feelings and their preconceptions.

By writing out teaching cases, teachers can focus their attention on something they already know; they can share this knowledge with other people; they can demonstrate the

complexity of the problems faced by teachers and the need for articulating these problems in the process of constructing a solution.

In short, becoming a reflective teacher by drafting narratives involves more than mastering writing techniques. It involves learning to think reflectively. As reflective tools they help explain tacit knowledge and may reveal thoughts, motives, intentions, conceptions, needs, preconceptions, frustrations and other feelings that are not always evident. From this perspective they may assume an evaluative function, as in the MP, and indicate the learning that comes from experiences arising from the interactions of the beginning teachers with their mentors and the realization of teaching and learning experiences. Considering this to be also one of the objectives of the MP we have yet another argument in favor of the use of the teaching case as a tool for summarizing the experiences of beginning teachers, based on the activities proposed.

In operational terms, according to Mizukami (2000), teaching cases have the following characteristics: they are narratives about a story that has a beginning, middle and end, is specified in spatial and temporal terms and reflects the social and cultural features of the contexts in which the events reported occur. Cases may be characterized in different ways (Garcia, 1999): they may have a normative character, since they refer to the practical application of the theoretical principles and results of an investigation (prototypes); they may indicate the problems experienced by teachers and possible solutions (precedents), and they may highlight the rules, values and myths of the profession (parabolas).

In analyzing the process for preparing teaching cases in the two MP modules, we observed that they provide information about the professional choice of beginning teachers, about their entry to the career, their difficulties and dilemmas, contact with and expectations of the program, its development, what is learned, contributions and expectations about the mentoring process itself and doubts about its validity because of the fact of being online: “I started 2005 with a new prospect: receiving guidance from an experienced teacher via the Internet! Even without knowing precisely how the Mentoring Program was going to work I was very happy to be accepted to take part in it” (beginning teacher I).

We were able to learn about the experiences engendered by the mentoring process and those that had the biggest repercussion on the teaching activities of beginning teachers: “With every message I sent or received I got excited [...] With every new contact the work was

already becoming more interesting and more stimulating and little by little I began to see practical results with my students” (beginning teacher A). Within the situations indicated, reflective reports are particularly highlighted:

One of main lessons I learned from my mentor was the use of a line of reasoning for carrying out any activity I thought of; this consists in a series of reflections “What do I do; What do I do it with; How do I do it; Why do I do it; What do I evaluate; and How do I evaluate it”. Initially these reflections were just part of a planning process. I later ended up understanding their importance and the need for using them as initial steps for any work whatsoever. When I plan some activity I start by asking myself these questions. I’m going to carry this treasure with me for the whole of my life. (Beginning teacher A)

...in the MP I learned to organize myself to record my teaching practice, by better evaluating the ideas and difficulties that arose vis-a-vis a particular teaching and learning situation and that, actually, were able to contribute to me experimenting and believing in the importance of the reflective record (beginning teacher L)

Beginning teachers emphasize the different things they learned and, in some cases, the contributions of the MP to the performance of the teaching function, to a better understanding of their social commitment and student learning:

As time went by I learned to put to one side a little my beginning teacher attitudes (individual work, texts outside the reality of the student). [...] I noticed that it was necessary to adapt a particular lesson to suit all students, each at his or her own level. I began to try and apply more appropriate ways of working in my Portuguese language lessons. So I decided to modify my practice in other disciplines, also (beginning teacher A).

In fact I don’t know what happened really; I learned how to study and really give lessons; now I think about things that before didn’t even enter my head, such as, for example, checking what knowledge the children already have, what they’re missing, how to evaluate each student, how to perceive the need of each one; I no longer teach all of them as though they were just one person. The mentoring process was something new for me, because with each message I thought of other things and I carried them out and then I used to send the report; the children also learned (beginning teacher Ad).

The analyses of the beginning teachers about the contribution of the MP are very positive and indicate the results of their efforts to overcome the difficulties that are characteristic of the initial phases of teaching.

At the end of this mentoring program I feel stronger in the way I act within a classroom; my feet are firmly on the ground, because I know that now I have a little more experience, because the difficulties I faced were overcome with the help of my mentor, but that even so obstacles will arise, but I'll have more confidence in myself as a professional (beginning teacher E).

...today, July 2006, giving lessons to the 1st grade in another municipal school where the reality is also difficult, I may not know everything but I'm clear about my weak points and every day that passes strengthens me more in my practice and my mentor, Regina, helped me feel this (beginning teacher N).

A few days later I received a telephone call from a coordinator of the Program. Then I believed it. From that moment on I began to build myself up as a teacher. I soon saw that I had won the lottery. The program was super (beginning teacher I)

The decision to adopt teaching cases as a supplementary tool for evaluating the development of beginning teachers and to know if they were ready to be “disengaged” proved to be appropriate, because from the summary of the process in each case, we were able to compare this production with the procedural evaluations carried out by the mentors during the program. When they were compared the ratings were generally consistent, i.e. the group of researchers and mentors agreed on the progress of the beginning teachers. In discussions consideration was given to the involvement of the beginning teacher in the proposed activities, the advances made, their capacity for facing up to new situations and the progress seen in the reflective records.

In some cases, however, we came up against the resistance of the mentor to “releasing” their beginning teachers, because they considered they still needed help, thereby to some extent increasing the level of requirements needed for “disengagement”. This was possibly the one paradoxical aspect of the MP: the mentors became somewhat dependent on the beginning teachers they were monitoring.

SOME FINAL WORDS

The development and investigation of the MP proved to be a challenging and rich process. From the characteristics defined by the group of researchers and mentors it was possible to understand better the difficulties faced by beginning teachers, as well as the learning processes and professional teaching development.

Although each mentor-beginning teacher dyad built up a singular trajectory within the MP development process, with its own rhythms and patterns, we perceived that this follows a life cycle that comprises distinct phases: the initial or approach phase, the development or deepening phase and the disengagement phase, each of which has its own specific characteristics, objectives and procedures.

Each phase involved the discussion of certain themes between beginning teachers and mentor ; each demanded specific support from the mentors, considering the training demands evidenced by the beginning teachers, and each had moments and periods that were critical, when we observed new learning taking place.

An important aspect in the development of mentoring or induction programs is undoubtedly that the phases identified were influenced by the teaching period (school term). We observed a seasonal pattern in the processes experienced, i.e., in the topics dealt with and in the support demanded by beginning teachers, indicating that mentoring flows better during the first semester of the academic year, which does not mean that, for this reason, such processes should be short or that they should be restricted to this particular period of time.

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