

Mentoring in the process of teachers' professional advancement as perceived by mentors

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Success in the teaching profession is largely determined by adequate preparation for the profession. Mentoring is one of the most effective tools for building and empowering educators' competence profile. The main aim of the article is to explore the opinions of Polish teacher-to-teacher mentors on the mentoring they provide to their less experienced colleagues. The first section provides a brief overview of how mentoring is presently understood in international scholarly discourse. Afterwards, the results of the empirical study are presented. The empirical research addresses three main issues: the qualities and skills a mentor should possess, the values important in mentoring and the implementation of the mentoring role. The final section presents research conclusions.

KEYWORDS: teacher education, (teacher) mentoring, mentor

Sukces w zawodzie nauczyciela zależy w dużej mierze od odpowiedniego przygotowania do zawodu. Mentoring jest jednym z najskuteczniejszych narzędzi budowania i wzmacniania profilu kompetencji nauczycieli. Głównym celem artykułu jest zbadanie opinii polskich mentorów-nauczycieli na temat mentoringu, który zapewniają swoim mniej doświadczonym kolegom i koleżankom. Pierwsza część zawiera krótki przegląd tego, jak mentoring jest obecnie rozumiany w międzynarodowym dyskursie naukowym. Następnie przedstawiono wyniki badania empirycznego. Badania empiryczne dotyczą trzech głównych kwestii: cech i umiejętności, które powinien posiadać mentor, wartości ważnych w mentoringu oraz realizacji roli mentorskiej. Ostatnia sekcja przedstawia wnioski z badań.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: kształcenie nauczycieli, mentoring nauczycieli, mentor

Introduction

Teachers are one of the most important vehicles of an educational policy. The quality of their work, conditioned by professional preparation and commitment, influences the

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developmental changes of individual students, but also of the school, culture and social life. The teaching profession is assigned a "special social position" (Karta Nauczyciela, the main regulatory act for teacher careers in public schools in Poland; henceforth as Poland's Teachers' Charter or PTC, 2021). In order to do their job successfully, teachers need not only didactic competences, but also social and moral ones. The latter belong to the realm of professional ethics, understood as the ethical attitude that a person takes towards their professional work and towards the specific tasks and duties of their profession. Hence, this group of competences is of utmost importance in education (Brezinka, 1992).

Despite various systemic pressures in recent years aimed to delimit the autonomy of the teaching profession (Żytko, Nowakowska, Sobierańska and Szyller, 2018), teachers still have a certain amount of professional autonomy. The classroom provides a space where teachers, students and parents can cooperate and where teachers can make decisions on how to support children's development, relying on innovative pedagogical activities, authoring their programmes or other types of intervention. The education process engages teachers' personality, knowledge, language skills, experience, ability to influence others and their way of being. Teachers act as models for students to follow. Teachers' work is difficult to control from outside the classroom. The teaching profession is inherently creative and characterised by a high degree of autonomy and responsibility for the students (Szewczak, 2021). It is a profession that involves continuous self-improvement and reflective practice.

The multiplicity and multidimensionality of viewpoints concerning the teaching profession cannot be surprising. The model teacher, the condition of the teaching profession and contemporary social expectations of the profession are widely covered topics in education studies, teacher education, psychology, sociology, philosophy and other sciences. Efforts to explore these issues is further justified by the changing, highly dynamic socio-cultural context in which the contemporary school functions. In view of the high demands that today's teachers face, pre-service teacher education, but also in-service teacher training appears to have a strategic value. Properly implemented workplace training contributes to eliminating the shocks of the profession, minimising the risk of dropping out, and helps retain the most promising candidates in the teaching profession (Piwowarski, 2016).

One method of effective learning that can be successfully employed to strengthen teachers' competences is mentoring. It is recognised as one of the most effective developmental methods available to individuals and organisations (Clutterbuck, 1991, after: Parsloe and Wray, 2002). It constitutes a strongly supportive and empowering form of partnership between two persons that allows for authentic skill development (Kornas-Biela, 2021).

Mentoring as a research concept has been subject to multiple studies in the social sciences for over the past five decades (Roberts 2000), which provides us with a broad theoretical background on the issue. Although teacher mentoring may seem an indispensable component of the professional educational environment, it is only in recent years that it is receiving scholarly recognition (Domagała-Zyśk, 2021). An overview of the main concepts of this type of mentoring is available in Kaplan et al. (2020). In Poland, teacher-to-teacher mentoring has been in place for a long time (although it is not often referred to as "mentoring"). The advantages of this method of teacher education are recognised, tools for mentoring work are promoted, and the benefits of mentoring for educators, students and parents are repeatedly highlighted (Karkowska et al., 2015, Sarnat-Ciastko, 2015, Domagała-Zyśk, 2021, Kornas-Biela, 2021). However, there are few publications that address the issue of teacher mentoring in a scholarly manner.

The aim of this article is to explore the views of mentoring as reported by teachers who act as mentors to younger, less experienced colleagues.

The impetus for the research comes from the authors' participation in the international project "Promoting Mentors' Work in Education", implemented under the Erasmus+ Programme. Operating between 2020–2023, the project aims to improve the quality of teacher education in Israel by building an effective and sustainable mentoring system based on EU best practices. Built on selected conceptions of mentoring (e.g., from Finland, Poland or the UK), researchers from Talpiot Academic College of Education (the project leader) want to develop a new mentor training model to be introduced in Israeli academic teachers' education colleges (Szudra-Barszcz, 2020).

The following section of the article discusses the theoretical underpinnings of the research, and the empirical findings are presented afterwards.

1. Mentoring: Basic terminology

Mentoring is a comprehensive tool for inspiring change and development, a method of work and collaborative engagement in education, professional development, widely applied in labour market institutions and learning organisations. The aim of mentoring is to help people learn so that they can maximise their potential, activate their resources, improve their skills, fulfil their plans and develop as autonomous individuals (Parsloe and Wray, 2008). Mentoring represents an educational format that goes further than the individualisation of education. In fact, it represents the stage of personalisation, since it relies on interaction between two persons, and is based on their mutual knowledge, trust, respect for the other's freedom and subjectivity, openness and dialogue (Czekierda, 2015). It is worth noting that although mentoring is traditionally understood as a form of individual support, new group-based approaches have been emerging in recent years: e.g., group mentoring, peer mentoring, mentoring circles, peer group mentoring, etc. (Pennanen, Heikkinen, and Tynjälä, 2020).

Mentoring involves the provision of assistance and support by an experienced professional who shares their knowledge with a younger and less experienced colleague. The process not only involves professional knowledge, but also emotional support (Świdrak and Badora, 2021). Paramount in the mentoring processes are the mentor's biography, competence, skills, achievements, prestige, contact network, as well as the relevant formation and life experience leading to success (Piorunek, 2016). A mentor is a counsellor, guide, consultant, advocate and promoter of a mentee: a person who influences the lives of others from a position of authority (Żyngiel, 2018). They possess both practical knowledge and life wisdom (Fingas and Szala, 2018), with a mentor's professional achievements in the field far exceeding those of a mentee (Sidor-Rządkowska, 2014). A mentor's task is to give advice, provide guidance, answer questions (Kornas-Biela, 2021), motivate and encourage mentees to be proactive, creating a sincere, friendly atmosphere of cooperation (Piorunek, 2016). A mentor's role defined this way unveils their responsibilities. It seems that a person who is unsure of their competences should not take on the task of mentoring another person.

It is extremely important that a mentor be properly motivated. A mentoring relationship will only be effective if the reason for undertaking this role is a desire to share. It should be a voluntary and unselfish relationship, and being open to the needs of mentees should be a key attitude displayed by a mentor.

Another important mentoring skill is ease in establishing and maintaining relationships, including the ability to have inspiring conversations, to listen dialogically. A mentor should

have a sense of self-esteem and respect for the Other (Sidor-Rządkowska, 2014), and be genuinely committed to the job.

Mentoring is based on inspiration, stimulation and leadership. It is predominantly about a mentee getting to know themselves and developing an intention for self-realisation (Karwala, 2007) by taking a chosen path of professional and/or personal development, following the mentor. The aim of mentoring is the holistic development of the person (Fingas and Szala, 2018). A mentor does not apply a one-size-fits-all development plan to a mentee, but getting to know each individual, they adjust the intensity of the relationship, the amount of time and a working methodology in such a way that a mentee can maximise growth. In mentoring, the basic tools for inspiring change are knowledge, experience and developed modes of action (Sidor-Rządkowska, 2014). Mentoring is a long-term relationship. It requires time to provide a vital context for building a relationship of trust and understanding in an atmosphere of security and a certain elementary regularity of mutual contacts (Piorunek, 2016).

The definition of mentoring proposed by a team of researchers at the Catholic University of Lublin (including the authors of this article) emphasises openness to the outcome of the mentoring relationship. It is a valid assumption that those involved in mentoring in its initial phase are unable to determine the course or the conclusion of the process. This is due to the subjective nature of the relationship in question, in which both mentees and mentors, characterised by awareness and freedom, are/should be open to development, improvement and growth. The mentoring situation is dynamic, and the mutual respect of those involved implies openness to *discovery*: to lifelong, permanent learning. The subjectivity of the relationship also includes the bidirectionality of influences (Kukołowicz and Całka, 1993), which implies reciprocal influences of a mentor and a mentee. While a mentor's influence on a mentee is more obvious, a mentee's influence on a mentor should not be ignored. Moreover, in a properly understood mentoring relationship this influence is desirable. This understanding fits into the participatory model of mentoring, in which, in contrast to hierarchical approaches, a mentor does not impose knowledge on a mentee, but helps them discover it, building on a mentee's experience and ability to reflect (Domagała-Zyśk, 2021). The literature highlights that intermentoring or reverse mentoring, which abandons the model of unidirectional transfer of knowledge and experience, is used, for example, in organisations by mentoring pairs of employees with similar seniority, but representing different departments; or to foster the intergenerational exchange of knowledge and expertise by creating pairs with significant age differences (Fingas and Szala, 2018). It is worth emphasising that reciprocal influences should be deliberately assumed for any mentoring relationship.

2. Research methodology

The primary aim of the research conducted was to explore the opinions of mentoring teachers acting as mentors (in-service internship supervisors) to their fellow teachers. This study focuses on formal mentoring only. The role of a mentor – in-service internship supervisor – is embedded in the Polish system of the professional promotion of teachers. The system allows graduating to successive ranks, i.e., a trainee, contractual, appointed and chartered teacher (in force for the 2000/2001 school year and continued until 2021/2022, that is, when the empirical research was conducted, see: Act amending the PTC 2000) and then an appointed and a chartered teacher (under current regulations, as of the 2022/2023 school year onwards, see PTC 2021). Under PTC 2000, the traineeship for a contract teacher lasted nine months,

while for an appointed and a chartered teacher – two years and nine months each. A trainee teacher and a contract teacher under an in-service internship were assigned an internship supervisor (mentor) (Poland Teachers' Charter Amendment Act, 2000). Current provisions state that a mentor is assigned to a teacher undergoing professional teacher pre-training taking three years and nine months to complete (PTC 2021).

The research conducted employed a diagnostic survey method, using the survey questionnaire technique (online survey). It consisted of 22 items: 10 closed questions, 9 closed questions with an optional open response and 3 open questions. This article only discusses the results obtained in the responses to questions no. 6–9 and 11. The survey was conducted on a group of $N = 782$ teachers in different types of schools (primary, secondary), who admitted having mentoring experience, working in schools in Poland, mainly in the Lubelskie and Podkarpackie voivodeships. The research was hugely streamlined thanks to a communication channel made available to the researchers at the Institute for the Development of Local Self-Government of the Lublin Voivodeship¹. The research was conducted online between October and December 2021. The study did not use random sampling and the research is not representative (Frankfort-Nachmias, Nachmias 2001). Consequently, the results cannot be extrapolated to the whole community of teacher mentors. Due to the lack of representativeness, the statistics (correlations) only show trends in the surveyed group of over 780 teachers. The study was conducted adopting a statistical significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$.

The following independent variables are set for the study: gender of the respondent, teaching experience, professional advancement level, school size (number of teachers employed in the institution) and frequency of mentoring practices (mentoring experience).

3. The research sample profile

A total of 782 teachers were questioned, who admitted having mentoring experience (internship supervisors) in the professional promotion of other teachers in the past or at the time of the survey. A total of 685 women and 97 men took part in the study. The extensive disproportion between groups in terms of gender is a consequence of the high feminisation of the teaching profession in Poland.

Respondents' teaching experience data are presented in Table 1. Teachers with more than 20 years' experience constitute the largest subgroup, reflecting a great amount of mentoring experience.

Table 1
Teaching experience

Teaching experience (years)	N	%
6-10	39	5
11-20	217	28
over 20	526	67
Total	782	100

¹ An association of local government units whose aim is to support and coordinate cooperation among units, local communities and non-governmental organisations in the Lubelskie Voivodeship [irst.lubelskie.pl, accessed: 15 November 2022]

Information on the share of professional advancement level is provided in Table 2. It is noteworthy that the sample did not have trainee or contract teachers. Under Polish law, they could not act as mentors.

Table 2
Professional advancement level of teachers (mentors)

Level of professional advancement	N	%
appointed teacher	164	21
chartered teacher	618	79
Total	782	100

The size of the school in which the respondents worked was measured in terms of the number of teachers employed. The data are presented in Table 3. Half of the mentors work in large institutions with more than 40 teachers.

Table 3
Size of the school where the mentors work (measured by the number of teachers employed)

Size of the school (number of teachers employed)	N	%
1–10	29	4
11–20	147	19
21–30	100	13
31–40	111	14
over 40	395	50
Total	782	100

Data on respondents' mentoring experience is presented in Table 4. By far the largest group are teachers who have mentored between 1 and 3 mentees. Only 15 mentors had more than 10 mentees.

Table 4
Mentoring experience (measured by frequency of mentoring, i.e., number of teachers mentored)

Frequency of mentoring	N	%
1–3	594	76
4–6	154	20
7–10	19	2
over 10	15	2
Total	782	100

The dependent variables addressed the following four main issues: mentor qualities and skills, key values and activities in mentoring, frequency of meetings with mentees, activities undertaken when performing as a mentor.

Two questions were included in the research plan: Is there a relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variables? Do the independent variables significantly differentiate the dependent variables? Due to the nominal scale of measurement, the ϕ Yule's correlation statistics/Cramer's V was used for the responses to research question 1, while the chi-square test was used for the responses to research question 2 (with the Bonferroni correction).

The following research problems were formulated:

1. What qualities and/or competences do respondents think a mentor should have?
2. What is the most important thing about being a mentor according to the respondents?
3. How is teacher mentoring implemented?

4. Teacher mentoring – results of an empirical study

As a result of the research, the stated aim of finding out the opinions of mentors (teachers) on mentoring was achieved.

The first research problem concerned the qualities and/or skills that a mentor should have. Respondents answered a closed question with a conjunctive cafeteria, and they could indicate 3 or 4 of the proposed qualities/skills.

The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Mentor qualities and skills

No.						
1.	Communication skills					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	124	16	16	15.9
		indicated	658	84	84	100.0
Total	782	100	100			
2.	Emotional intelligence					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	573	73	73	73.3
		indicated	209	27	27	100.0
Total	782	100	100			

No.						
3.	Relationship skills					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	336	43	43	43.0
		indicated	446	57	57	100.0
Total	782	100.0	100			
4.	Time management skills					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	596	76	76	76.2
		indicated	186	24	24	100.0
Total	782	100	100			
5.	Openness (to others, to new solutions)					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	183	23	23	23.4
		indicated	599	77	77	100.0
Total	782	100	100			
6.	Willingness to share own experience					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	58	7	7	7.4
		indicated	724	93	93	100.0
Total	782	100	100			
7.	Assertiveness					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	576	74	74	73.7
		indicated	206	26	26	100.0
Total	782	100	100			
8.	Stress management skills					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	673	86	86	86.1
		indicated	109	14	14	100.0
Total	782	100	100			

The most important qualities and skills of a mentor, according to the respondents, are the willingness to share their own experience (93%), communication skills (84%) and openness (77%). The least important are stress management skills (14%). The responses indicate an adequate understanding of the role of a mentor by the respondents.

An examination of the correlation between the dependent variable – mentor characteristics and skills – and the independent variables detected a correlation only for gender (Table 6).

Table 6
Correlation: gender – willingness to share own experience

Cross-tabulation						
			Gender		Total	
			female	male		
Willingness to share own experience	not indicated	Number	42 _a	16 _b	58	
		% with Gender	6.1%	16.5%	7.4%	
	indicated	Number	643 _a	81 _b	724	
		% with Gender	93.9%	83.5%	92.6%	
	Total	Number	685	97	782	
		% with Gender	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	A letter in the subscript denotes a subset of the Gender category, whose column proportions do not differ significantly at the level of 0.05.					

Yule's $\Phi = 0.13$; $p < 0.001$
 $\chi^2(1, 782) = 13.29$; $p < 0.001$

The analysis shows that for the item “willingness to share own experience”, women (93.9%), compared to men (83.5%), are significantly more likely to respond positively. The difference is due to gender specificity. Men are more reticent to talk about their own lives (personal and professional), tending to keep distance and limit communication. Women display a stronger orientation towards social relationships, have a greater degree of listening and empathy skills, sensitivity and understanding. (Jaworowska and Matczak, 2008, Cebula, 2011)

The second research problem that the study aimed to address concerned the most important values in the role of a mentor. The mentors were asked (closed question with a conjunctive cafeteria; possibility to indicate 3–4 values) about the value priorities in mentoring. The responses are presented in Table 7.

Table 7
Key values in mentoring

No.						
1.	Good mentee relationship (trust, respect)					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	92	12	12	11.8
		indicated	690	88	88	100.0
Total	782	100	100			

No.						
2.	Being available to mentees					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	386	49	49	49.4
		indicated	396	51	51	100.0
Total	782	100	100			
3.	Assisting mentees in solving professional problems					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	139	18	18	17.8
		indicated	643	82	82	100.0
Total	782	100	100			
4.	Assisting mentees in solving personal problems					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	750	96	96	95.9
		indicated	32	4	4	100.0
Total	782	100	100			
5.	Being a role model/inspiration for mentees					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	458	59	59	58.6
		indicated	324	41	41	100.0
Total	782	100	100			
6.	Sharing knowledge and teaching know-how					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	166	21	21	21.2
		indicated	616	79	79	100.0
Total	782	100	100			
7.	Arranging demonstration classes					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	512	65	65	65.5
		indicated	270	35	35	100.0
Total	782	100	100			

Noteworthy are the 3 highest frequencies recorded: a good relationship with a mentee, based on trust and respect (88%), assistance in solving professional problems (82%) and the transfer of factual knowledge and teaching know-how (79%). Support in dealing with personal problems was indicated by only 4% of the respondents. A correlation analysis showed that

men had a significantly higher representation in the latter group than women: men (11.3%) compared to women (3.1%) (Table 8). The result may come as a surprise, given that women are more willing to talk about their personal lives, while men are more reserved. It may well be that men are becoming more aware of a need for a holistic approach to mentees. A teacher's personal problems impinge on their professional performance. Hence, authentic professional support should also include assistance with personal issues.

The dependent variable "assisting mentees in solving personal problems" also correlates with the independent variable – mentoring experience. The respondents who mentored 4–6 times were significantly more likely (8.4%) to indicate assisting a mentee with personal problems as an important value of mentoring, compared to those who mentored 1–3 teachers (3%) (Table 9). It can be assumed that the more experienced respondents understand that personal problems affect professional performance, and it is only a holistic approach to a mentee that can ensure mentoring success.

Table 8

Correlation: gender – assisting mentees in solving personal problems

Cross-tabulation						
			Gender		Total	
			female	male		
Assisting mentees in solving personal problems	not indicated	Number	664 _a	86 _b	750	
		% with Gender	96.9%	88.7%	95.9%	
	indicated	Number	21 _a	11 _b	32	
		% with Gender	3.1%	11.3%	4.1%	
	Total	Number	685	97	782	
		% with Gender	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	A letter in the subscript denotes a subset of the Gender categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly at the level of 0.05.					

Yule's $\Phi = 0.14$; $p < 0.001$

$\chi^2(1, 782) = 14.82$; $p < 0.001$

Table 9
Correlation: mentoring experience – assisting mentees in solving personal problems

Cross-tabulation							
			How many times have you acted as an internship supervisor/teacher-to-teacher mentor?				Total
			1–3	4–6	7–10	over 10	
Assisting mentees in solving personal problems	not indicated	Number	576 _a	141 _b	18 _{a,b}	15 _{a,b}	750
		% with: How many times have you acted as a mentor?	97.0%	91.6%	94.7%	100.0%	95.9%
	indicated	Number	18 _a	13 _b	1 _{a,b}	0 _{a,b}	32
		% with: How many times have you acted as a mentor?	3.0%	8.4%	5.3%	0.0%	4.1%
Total		Number	594	154	19	15	782
% with: How many times have you acted as a mentor?		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

A letter in the subscript denotes a subset of the category: How many times have you acted as a mentor? whose column proportions do not differ significantly at the level of 0.05.

Cramer's V = 0.11; $p < 0.05$
 $\chi^2(3, 782) = 9.84; p < 0.05$

A statistically significant correlation was also detected between mentor experience and being a role model/inspiration for a mentee. The analysis of the results presented in Table 10 shows that those who performed as mentors for more than 10 teachers were more likely to opt for the value of mentoring as being a role model/inspiration for a mentee (73.3%) than teachers who mentored 1–3 mentees (38.2%). Teachers with more mentoring experience are aware of the importance of their role. They understand that their attitude towards their professional responsibilities can influence the perception of the teaching profession by less experienced colleagues.

Table 10

Correlation: mentoring experience – being a role model/inspiration for a mentee

Cross-tabulation							
			How many times have you acted as an internship supervisor/teacher-to-teacher mentor?				Total
			1–3	4–6	7–10	over 10	
Being a role model/inspiration for mentees	not indicated	Number	367 _a	80 _{a,b}	7 _{a,b}	4 _b	458
		% with How many times have you acted as a mentor?	61.8%	51.9%	36.8%	26.7%	58.6%
	indicated	Number	227 _a	74 _{a,b}	12 _{a,b}	11 _b	324
		% with How many times have you acted as a mentor?	38.2%	48.1%	63.2%	73.3%	41.4%
Total		Number	594	154	19	15	782
% with How many times have you acted as a mentor?		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

A letter in the subscript indicates a subset of the category: How many times have you served as a mentor? whose column proportions do not differ significantly at the level of 0.05.

Cramer's $V = 0.14; p < 0.01$

$\chi^2(3, 782) = 15.30; p < 0.01$

In addition, in response to a further (open-ended) question, the mentors were given an opportunity to indicate what they find important (in addition to the values marked earlier) in being a mentor. An optional response was chosen by 102 respondents. The most frequent choices were as follows: preparing to work with students' parents (18), teaching the same or a related subject (14), introduction to organisational, non-educational activities (11), awakening a passion for the teaching profession in a mentee (9). The additional areas indicated by the teachers largely relate to practical problems that are part of school life. According to the respondents, mentor's assistance in these problems could help younger, less experienced teachers to meet the demands of the profession.

The final research problem in the article concerns the praxeological dimension of mentoring, that is, the ways in which the role is performed. The respondents were asked about the activities they undertake as part of mentoring. The results are presented in Table 11.

Table 11
 Mentoring activities

No.						
1.	Identifying practical solutions for the teaching profession					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	61	8	8	7.8
		indicated	721	92	92	100.0
	Total	782	100	100		
2.	Building a trusting relationship with the mentee					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	463	59	59	59.2
		indicated	319	41	41	100.0
	Total	782	100	100		
3.	On-site (vis-a-vis) meetings with mentees					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	147	19	19	18.8
		indicated	635	81	81	100.0
	Total	782	100	100		
4.	Remote contact with mentees					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	638	82	82	81.6
		indicated	144	18	18	100.0
	Total	782	100	100		
5.	Assisting mentees with internship documentation					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	190	24	24	24.3
		indicated	592	76	76	100.0
	Total	782	100	100		
6.	Development of a draft evaluation of a trainee teacher's performance during the internship period					
	Important		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
		not indicated	239	31	31	30.6
		indicated	543	69	69	100.0
	Total	782	100	100		

Properly implemented mentoring is based on a respectful and empathetic mentor-mentee relationship. In order to build it, systematic meetings are indispensable. Table 12 shows the frequency of meetings between the surveyed mentors and their mentees.

Table 12
Frequency of meetings with mentees

		Frequency	Percentage	Percentage of valid resp.	Cumulative percentage
Important	several times a day	48	6	6.1	6.1
	once a day	53	7	6.8	12.9
	2–3 times a week	264	34	33.8	46.7
	less than twice a week	59	8	7.5	54.2
	at the request of the mentee	358	46	45.8	100.0
	Total	782	100	100.0	

It is noteworthy that almost half of the mentors (46%) meet with mentees whenever they are requested to do so. In the vast majority of cases, meetings are regular (several times a week), which provides an opportunity for building an effective mentoring relationship, marked as important by 41% of the respondents (Table 11).

In analysing the activities undertaken when acting as a mentor, as presented in Table 11, identifying practical solutions for the teacher's work appears to be the most important one (91%). These are issues of keen interest to young inexperienced teachers, who are often recent university graduates just about to start their teaching career. While appreciating the high frequencies with the activities of sharing practical solutions (92%), concern for building a respectful relationship with a mentee (41%), systematic meetings with a mentee (81%), some concerns can also be formulated regarding the high frequency of the external manifestations of mentoring in the form of participation in a trainee's preparation of documentation (76%) or the development of a draft evaluation of the trainee teacher's performance during the internship period (69%), without depreciating their importance. However, it seems that preparing documentation is not the essence of the mentoring process.

The analysis revealed statistically significant positive correlations between concern for building a trusting relationship with mentees and gender and mentoring experience. Women (42.2%) compared to men (30.9%) and mentors with more experience, i.e., mentoring 10 or more mentees (86.7%) compared to mentors who mentored 1–3 mentees (38.2%) or 4–6 mentees (44.2%) were significantly more likely to indicate concern for building a trusting relationship with mentees as an important activity in mentoring. The results are presented in Tables 13 and 14.

Table 13

Correlation: gender – concern for building a trusting relationship with the mentee

Cross-tabulation					
			Gender		Total
			female	male	
Concern for building a trusting relationship with mentees	not indicated	Number	396 _a	67 _b	463
		% with Gender	57.8%	69.1%	59.2%
	indicated	Number	289 _a	30 _b	319
		% with Gender	42.2%	30.9%	40.8%
Total		Number	685	97	782
% with Gender		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

A letter in the subscript denotes a subset of the Gender category, whose column proportions do not differ significantly at the level of 0.05.

Yule's $\Phi = 0.08$; $p < 0.05$
 $\chi^2(1, 782) = 4.46$; $p < 0.05$

Table 14

Correlation: mentoring experience – concern for building a trusting relationship with the mentee

Cross-tabulation							
			How many times have you acted as an internship supervisor/teacher-to-teacher mentor?				Total
			1–3	4–6	7–10	over 10	
Concern for building a trusting relationship with mentees	not indicated	Number	367 _a	86 _a	8 _{a,b}	2 _b	463
		% with How many times have you acted as a mentor?	61.8%	55.8%	42.1%	13.3%	59.2%
	indicated	Number	227 _a	68 _a	11 _{a,b}	13 _b	319
		% with How many times have you acted as a mentor?	38.2%	44.2%	57.9%	86.7%	40.8%
Total		Number	594	154	19	15	782
% with How many times have you acted as a mentor?		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

A letter in the subscript denotes a subset of the category: How many times have you acted as a mentor? whose column proportions do not differ significantly at the level of 0.05.

Cramer's $V = 0.15$; $p < 0.001$
 $\chi^2(3, 782) = 17.73$; $p < 0.001$

Arranging a meeting with mentees was marked as an important mentoring activity significantly more often by more experienced teachers (Table 15) – that is those mentoring 4–6 mentees (90.3%) – than those mentoring 1–3 mentees (78.3%). The mentoring experience allows mentors to see the value of the mentor–mentee meetings as a starting point for relationship building and subsequent (mutual) learning.

Table 15

Correlation: mentoring experience – meetings with mentees

Cross-tabulation							
			How many times have you acted as a mentor?				Total
			1–3	4–6	7–10	over 10	
Meetings with mentees	not indicated	Number	129 _a	15 _b	0 _{a,b}	3 _{a,b}	147
		% with How many times have you acted as a mentor?	21.7%	9.7%	0.0%	20.0%	18.8%
	indicated	Number	465 _a	139 _b	19 _{a,b}	12 _{a,b}	635
		% with How many times have you acted as a mentor?	78.3%	90.3%	100.0%	80.0%	81.2%
Total		Number	594	154	19	15	782
% with How many times have you acted as a mentor?		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
A letter in the subscript indicates a subset of the category 'How many times have you acted as a mentor?' whose column proportions do not differ significantly at the level of 0.05.							

Cramer's $V = 0.14$; $p < 0.01$

$\chi^2(3, 782) = 16.01$; $p < 0.01$

Assisting mentees with internship documentation, necessary for mentees' professional advancement process, is declared an important value in mentoring significantly more often by women (78.1%) than men (58.8%), as is the development of a draft evaluation of a trainee teacher's performance during the internship period. Women (72.6%) were significantly more likely to choose this activity compared to men (47.4%). The results are presented in Tables 16 and 17.

Table 16
Correlation: gender – assisting mentees with internship documentation

Cross-tabulation					
			Gender		Total
			female	male	
Assisting mentees with internship documentation	not indicated	Number	150 _a	40 _b	190
		% with Gender	21.9%	41.2%	24.3%
	indicated	Number	535 _a	57 _b	592
		% with Gender	78.1%	58.8%	75.7%
Total		Number	685	97	782
% with Gender		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

A letter in the subscript denotes a subset of the Gender categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly at the level of 0.05.

Yule's $\Phi = 0.15$; $p < 0.001$
 $\chi^2(1, 782) = 17.28$; $p < 0.001$

Table 17
Correlation: gender – development of a draft evaluation of a trainee teacher's performance during the internship period

Cross-tabulation					
			Gender		Total
			female	male	
Development of a draft evaluation of a trainee teacher's performance during the internship period	not indicated	Number	188 _a	51 _b	239
		% with Gender	27.4%	52.6%	30.6%
	indicated	Number	497 _a	46 _b	543
		% with Gender	72.6%	47.4%	69.4%
Total		Number	685	97	782
% with Gender		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

A letter in the subscript denotes a subset of the Gender category, whose column proportions do not differ significantly at the level of 0.05.

Yule's $\Phi = 0.18$; $p < 0.001$
 $\chi^2(1, 782) = 25.29$; $p < 0.001$

5. Discussion

The empirical research results allowed attaining the stated research objective, which was to find out the opinions of teacher mentors in Polish schools on the practice of mentoring. This opinion correlates with the theoretical underpinnings of mentoring present in the academic discourse.

Teacher mentors have an adequate understanding of the role of a mentor. They know the key aspects of mentoring: willingness to share experience, communication skills and openness (to mentees, to new solutions). They are aware of the dynamics of working with mentees, which requires that they adapt their working methodology to mentees' specific work context and life situation. When performing as mentors, the respondents admitted to being open to the mentee's voice and to the solutions they discover or create. This is only possible when the relationship between mentors and mentees is based on trust and respect. By valuing mentees' opinions, mentors know that their assertiveness is of great importance, and that they are the ones who – due to their greater body of knowledge and richer experience – are supposed to be the role models and sources of inspiration for their younger colleagues. They are aware of the need for a holistic approach to mentees, which manifests itself in their supporting not only professional, but also personal growth. The respondents with greater mentoring experience are particularly aware of the importance of the role of a mentor and of the responsibility for the other person's professional and personal development. In mentoring, experience (the distance between a mentor and a mentee) is fundamental.

The opinions on mentoring reported by the respondents are suggestive of a high likelihood that the mentoring performance by these teachers will be effective. A fundamental prerequisite for effective mentoring is a good relationship with a mentee, based on respect and trust, built up during regular meetings. Mentors share the knowledge and the teaching know-how needed in the profession, and suggest practical solutions. The research helped reveal that a high percentage of mentors co-engage in mentees' efforts to prepare the documentation needed for mentee promotion. It is worth emphasising that the collaborative completion of documents is certainly beyond the essence of mentoring; yet, it constitutes part of the regular practice of the mentoring role. The mentoring process is firmly rooted in the realities of today's education system. The mentoring process allows mentors to address current school issues, recognising a need to reflect on pressing educational issues, such as the relationship between teachers, parents and students. In this way, mentors properly prepare young teachers for the profession.

6. Conclusions

Among the goals of the teaching profession in a changing socio-cultural situation, there is a noticeably growing importance of teachers' participation in collaborative activities in educational institutions. When working together, people can benefit from idea sharing, collaborative solutions, peer problem solving etc. What is more, teachers-colleagues can find ways for personal and professional integration in the context of these activities, which is necessary to foster the benefits for children and build a complex network of support for their developmental potential. In the in-service teacher training process, the mentor-mentee relationship becomes indispensable. A mentor – a senior, experienced colleague is, by definition, a significant person in the workplace, recognised by young inexperienced teachers.

The aim of this article was to present mentors' views on mentoring. It appears that the studied Polish teachers properly understand the role they have been formally assigned. They undertake relevant activities, thus becoming an effective vehicle for enhancing the professional competence of beginners in the teaching profession.

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