

Exploring the Gap between Theory, Practice, and Expectation in School Mentoring

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ABSTRACT

Mentoring is a crucial aspect of teachers' professional development, yet there is considerable debate among educators about its efficacy and some notable resistance against it. Thus, it is beneficial to examine teachers' perceptions regarding mentoring in order to gain insight into potential discrepancies between mentoring theoretical background, practical experiences, and expectations. An originally made questionnaire was employed as the instrument for gathering data, thereby establishing a quantitative research design. The findings revealed that teachers hold disparate views on mentoring at three distinct levels: the theoretical level, the practice level and the expectation level. More specifically, the teachers' perceptions assessed these three levels, with the practice level ranking the lowest, followed by the theoretical level, and the expectation level ranking the highest. These findings demonstrate that teachers generally agree and align with the theoretical aspirations of mentoring, yet they also indicate that this promise can fall short in practice. Furthermore, teachers propose an expectation-based approach to mentoring that could enhance both the theoretical and practical aspects.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mentoring has long been acknowledged as a crucial element of professional teachers' development within the field of education. It is regarded as a mechanism through which teachers can attain valuable new insights, enhance their instructional practices, and build a supportive network of colleagues. Nevertheless, the actual impact of mentoring programs is regularly the subject of controversy, giving rise to considerable reluctance among teachers and prompting doubts about mentoring genuine efficacy. Although mentoring is based on robust theoretical foundations that prioritize collaboration, guidance, and professional growth, there seems to be a discrepancy between these theoretical concepts and their practical implementation. This discrepancy between theoretical principles and practical applications is a crucial factor in understanding why some educators may not fully recognize mentoring programs as an essential educational tool.

In order to gain deeper insight into this topic, it is important to recognize that teachers' perceptions of mentoring might vary significantly. With this stated, it is evident that, while there is a general consensus regarding the theoretical

value of mentoring, the practical applications frequently fall short of that theoretical standards. It is also noteworthy that teachers maintain high expectations from mentoring, meaning that they accept its theoretical advantages.

Mentoring in schools can promote teachers' professional development and improve school culture and school climate (Fernández-Rouco *et al.*, 2022). Mentoring is tightly connected with the creation of professional learning communities. Thus, collaborative groups of teachers focused on improving teaching practices and student learning through shared experiences and mutual support. Professional learning communities are strong mechanisms that enable educators to join forces to promote ongoing growth and improvement for themselves and their students. These learning communities are based on the premise that learning outcomes result from the varied perspectives and experiences that teachers share with one another as they work toward common educational goals. In addition, teachers' learning communities depend on the effective development of a collaborative culture characterized by shared values and a vision that is overarching across all members of a school. In this sense, mentoring strongly connects with professional development since it



emphasizes content improvement, opportunities for active learning, bigger coherence between each school's goals and official curriculum goals, and the cultivation of conditions that lead to collective participation (Hornýák, 2020). Mentoring also, by nature, enhances teachers' ability to observe, reflect upon and refine their own instructional methodology. Since each teacher brings to class personal styles, beliefs, and assumptions on instructional methodology, mentoring allows for the exchange of best practices, the comparison of educational approaches, and the development of a collaborative, better set of teaching tools (Abdellatif, 2014).

While mentored, teachers are encouraged to reflect on their teaching successes and failures but also to revise, retry, and learn. In this sense, mentoring allows professional improvement activities that are co-developed for the teacher by the teacher (Jones, 2007). Within this frame, both the mentor and the mentored teachers are expected to be reflective, self-evaluated teachers, which is a mutually beneficial process (P'Rayan, 2013). Mentoring has also been found to help teachers decrease professional burnout, reduce days off due to disease, and strengthen their working identity (Akhlaq et al., 2015). Thus, schools in which teachers are becoming effective potential leaders have structures in place that provide opportunities for broad participation, active learning teachers' communities, and action research teams. Active and continuous learning, which is the core of mentoring, involves regular, action-focused, peer-discussion groups that address teaching issues and try to solve problems together. Mentoring also builds trust among teachers, therefore improving distributed problem-solving and conflict management (Haith & Whittingham, 2012). Therefore, mentoring has an impact even in school leadership, not just teaching practices. Within this frame, Searby and Shaddix (2008) stated that it is imperative that schools invest in the leadership capacity of the teaching staff. Within this frame, mentors can prepare the next generation of school leaders using focused learning communities.

For a successful mentoring process, a mentor must build a trusting relationship with the teachers and must provide the support and guidance a teacher needs in creating a classroom environment that is supportive of learning (Sowell, 2017). Through this lens, mentoring becomes a frame of shared responsibility among teachers, and new teachers can gain access to experienced teachers' experiences in a supervised partnership (Hagger et al., 1995). Also, a successful mentor demonstrates flexibility, experimentation, and reasonable risk-taking that allows adaptive and tailored teaching methods rather than rigid adherence to the prescribed educational approaches. In addition, an effective mentor is expected to focus on both teacher and student performance, but most crucially, a good mentor is expected to increase teachers' self-efficacy efforts by boosting their confidence and belief in their ability to succeed in teaching (Silver & Harris, 2012).

2. METHOD

This study explores the distinct perceptions teachers have regarding mentoring at the theoretical, practical and

expectation levels. By examining these perspectives, we aim to identify possible gaps and propose useful insights that could bridge the gap between mentoring's promise and its practical outcomes. Understanding these nuances will help shape future mentoring programs to better meet teachers' needs, aligning practical implementation with theoretical objectives and professional expectations. The research questions of the study are the following:

1. What are the discrepancies between teachers' expectations of mentoring and their actual experiences with it? (Expectation vs. Practice)
2. What are the discrepancies between teachers' expectations of mentoring and the theoretical framework of mentoring? (Expectation vs. Theory)
3. What are the discrepancies between the theoretical framework of mentoring and teachers' actual experiences? (Theory vs. Practice)
4. How do these discrepancies vary by gender?
5. How do these discrepancies vary by employment status?

The sample consists of 320 Greek primary school teachers who work in the region of Dodecanese, Greece. Data collection was conducted using a questionnaire specifically developed for this study and based on the literature review. The questionnaire was designed to capture primary school teachers' perceptions across varied dimensions of mentoring, including actual Practice, theoretical frame, and expectation improvements. Items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = totally disagree and 5 = totally agree.

Statistical analyses included means and standard deviations to summarize the responses on different aspects of mentoring. Principal components factorial analysis was used to confirm the questionnaire's underlying structure and reduce items into composite variables. Paired correlation analysis was employed to examine relationships between the study's levels.

3. RESULTS

A principal components analysis (PCA) was used to investigate whether the questionnaire's items indeed measure the intended dimensions. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was 0.945, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the study's data set is indeed factorizable (Table I).

PCA extracted nine components with Eigenvalues > 1 , which explained 38.9% to 1.83% of the total variance, respectively. However, given the Varimax rotation, only four components should be retained since the rest of the factors had items with low loading values. The four-component solution explained 50.75% of the total variance (Table II).

TABLE I: KMO AND BARTLETT'S TEST

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy		0.945
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	14906.715
	Df	1485
	Sig.	<0.001

TABLE II: TOTAL VARIANCE EXPLAINED

Component	Initial eigenvalues			Extraction sums of squared loadings			Rotation sums of squared loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	21.406	38.920	38.920	21.406	38.920	38.920	9.056	16.465	16.465
2	4.882	8.876	47.796	4.882	8.876	47.796	7.271	13.221	29.686
3	3.228	5.870	53.665	3.228	5.870	53.665	7.139	12.980	42.666
4	2.316	4.210	57.876	2.316	4.210	57.876	4.450	8.091	50.757
5	1.992	3.622	61.498	1.992	3.622	61.498	2.994	5.443	56.199
6	1.662	3.022	64.520	1.662	3.022	64.520	2.961	5.383	61.582
7	1.241	2.257	66.777	1.241	2.257	66.777	2.102	3.823	65.405
8	1.067	1.941	68.717	1.067	1.941	68.717	1.594	2.898	68.303
9	1.010	1.836	70.553	1.010	1.836	70.553	1.237	2.250	70.553
10	0.939	1.707	72.260						
55	0.067	0.122	100.000						

Note: Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

The interpretation of the data according to a three-variable approach was consistent with the theoretical background of the questionnaire, which was designed to measure what mentoring means in theory (items in Component 1), what mentoring is in Practice (items in Component 2), what mentoring should ideally be (items on Component 3) and what are the basic obstacles of mentoring (items on Component 4). Items with loading values < 0.05 were omitted. Component loadings and communalities of the rotated solution are presented in Table III.

Teachers were found to agree with all proposed items regarding expectation level, ranked from the lowest mean to the highest in the table that follows. More specifically, teachers agree that mentors should care for them ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.06$), should be generous towards their colleagues ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.99$), should be careful and considerate ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.87$), should act as role models ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.91$), should recognize teachers' potential ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.84$), should advocate for teachers' needs and interests ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.78$), should put trust in teachers ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.80$), should give them a sense of security ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.81$), should accept teachers as equals ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.74$) and should have a positive attitude towards teachers ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.69$) (Table IV).

Teachers neither agree nor disagree that mentoring indeed led them to gain new knowledge about teaching their courses ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 0.94$), collect new teaching resources ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.97$), acquire an improved attitude towards teaching ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.04$), into improved personal skills ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.01$), into bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and work practice ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.01$) or into learning how to respect intellectual property rights ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.04$). On the contrary, teachers agreed that mentoring led them to receive advice on teaching methods from colleagues and experts ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 0.93$), to receive help regarding teaching strategies, content, and resources ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.96$), to involve them in the opportunity to discuss and exchange plans and ideas on teaching methods ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.95$) and to inspire them through example and consistency ($M = \text{Not provided}$, $SD = \text{Not provided}$) (Table V).

Teachers agreed that Mentoring aims to promote the professional development of teachers ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.997$), to enable teachers to effectively manage the classroom ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.94$), to make teachers more effective in their teaching work ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.05$), to promote the use of new teaching practices and methods ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.00$), to strengthen teachers' professional knowledge ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.98$), to improve the operation of a school ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.99$), to facilitate the link between teachers' theoretical knowledge and its practical application ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.96$), to allow teachers to reflect and discuss their teaching practices with colleagues ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.95$), to strengthen teachers' collaborative skills ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.97$), to make it particularly easy for new teachers to integrate into the school environment ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.01$) (Table VI).

3.1. Mentoring Obstacles

Teachers neither disagree or agree that one of the obstacles that mentoring faces is teachers' lack of willingness to collaborate with a mentor ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.02$) or teachers' lack of willingness to attend training courses on mentoring ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.07$), or teachers' lack of willingness to share their teaching practices with another teacher who took the role of mentor ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.10$). On the contrary, teachers agree that an obstacle against mentoring is teachers' fear that mentoring creates hierarchies and evaluation within the school ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.08$) (Table VII).

Regarding the composite variables, it appeared that teachers agree (although in the limit) that the actual practice of mentoring is positive ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.85$). They also agree that what mentoring theoretically aims to do is really positive ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.88$). Most teachers agree that mentoring should deliver more than what it actually does ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.63$) (Table VIII).

3.2. Theory–Practice

Teachers maintain more positive perceptions regarding what mentoring theoretically aims for ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.88$) than what mentoring really managed to deliver ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.85$), a statistically significant mean increase of 0.208, 95% CI [0.136, 0.280], $t(319) = 5.702$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.32$.

TABLE III: FACTOR LOADINGS

Items	Factors			
	Theory level	Practice level	Expectation level	Obstacles
<i>Mentoring aims to:</i>				
Allows teachers to manage the classroom more effectively	0.824			
Helps to improve the way the school unit operates	0.822			
It can make teachers more effective in their educational work	0.811			
It can strengthen teachers' collaborative skills	0.811			
It can strengthen teachers' professional knowledge	0.804			
Promotes the use of new teaching practices and methods	0.804			
Facilitates the link between teachers' theoretical knowledge and its practical application	0.793			
Facilitates in particular the integration of new teachers into the school environment	0.790			
Promotes the professional development of teachers	0.788			
Allows teachers to reflect and discuss their teaching practices with a colleague	0.734			
<i>Mentoring helped me to:</i>				
Helps me with teaching strategies, the subject matter and the search for resources		0.792		
Helps me to improve my personal skills		0.780		
Helps me to improve my attitude towards the teaching profession		0.780		
Enables me to discuss and exchange plans and ideas on teaching programmes and methods		0.767		
Guides me to respect the intellectual property rights of others		0.754		
Gives me sound advice on teaching methods from colleagues and experts		0.739		
Helps me gain increased knowledge about teaching the subjects in primary education		0.727		
Helps me collect resources that I could use when teaching		0.722		
Helps me bridge the gap between academic (theoretical) knowledge and practice in the workplace		0.713		
Inspires me by example (and consistency)		0.406		
<i>Mentors should:</i>				
Show me trust			0.790	
Accept me as an equal (albeit new) colleague			0.780	
Generally try to be careful and considerate			0.775	
Defend my needs and interests			0.707	
Have a positive attitude			0.706	
Recognize my potential			0.678	
Be possessed of 'generosity' for my colleagues in the school			0.628	
Care for me			0.583	
Give me a sense of security			0.567	
Act as a role model			0.267	
<i>Mentoring's obstacle:</i>				
Teachers' lack of willingness to attend training courses on mentoring				0.858
Teachers' lack of willingness to share their teaching practices with another teacher who took the role of mentor				0.842
Teachers' lack of willingness to collaborate with a mentor				0.816
Teachers' fear that mentoring creates hierarchies and evaluations within the school				0.744

Note: Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in 12 iterations.

3.3. Expectation Level-Theory

Teachers expect from mentoring more ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.63$) than mentoring aims to deliver ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.88$), a statistically significant mean increase of 0.526, 95% CI [0.433, 0.620], $t(319) = 11.070$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.61$.

3.4. Expectation Level-Practice

Teachers expect from mentoring more ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.63$) than what mentoring actually delivers ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.85$), a statistically significant mean increase of 0.735, 95% CI [0.642, 0.828], $t(319) = 15.620$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.87$ (Table IX).

TABLE IV: EXPECTATION LEVEL

<i>Mentors should:</i>	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Care for me	320	3.72	1.06
Be generous towards my colleagues	320	3.98	0.99
Be careful and considerate	320	4.01	0.87
Act as a role model	320	4.15	0.91
Recognize my potential	320	4.23	0.84
Advocate for my needs and interests	320	4.27	0.78
Put trust in me	320	4.33	0.80
Give me a sense of security	320	4.34	0.81
Accept me as an equal (albeit new) colleague	320	4.45	0.74
Have a positive attitude	320	4.50	0.69

TABLE V: PRACTICE LEVEL

<i>Mentoring helped me to:</i>	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Gain new knowledge about teaching my course	320	3.37	0.94
Collect new teaching resources	320	3.42	0.97
Acquire an improved attitude towards teaching	320	3.43	1.04
Improve my personal skills	320	3.46	1.01
Bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and work practice	320	3.46	1.01
Respect intellectual property rights	320	3.49	1.04
Receive advice on teaching methods from colleagues and experts	320	3.59	0.93
Receive help regarding teaching strategies, content and resources	320	3.65	0.96
Have the opportunity to discuss and exchange plans and ideas on teaching methods	320	3.72	0.95
Inspire me by his example (his consistency)			

TABLE VI: THEORY LEVEL

<i>Mentoring aims to:</i>	N	Mean	SD
Promote the professional development of teachers	320	3.56	0.997
Enable teachers to effectively manage the classroom	320	3.67	0.94
Make teachers more effective in their teaching work	320	3.67	1.05
Promote the use of new teaching practices and methods	320	3.69	1.00
Strengthen teachers' professional knowledge	320	3.69	0.98
Improve the operation of a school	320	3.74	0.99
Facilitate the link between teachers' theoretical knowledge and its practical application	320	3.74	0.96
Allow teachers to reflect and discuss their teaching practices with colleagues	320	3.76	0.95
Strengthen teachers' collaborative skills	320	3.79	0.97
Make it particularly easy for new teachers to integrate into the school environment	320	3.96	1.01

TABLE VII: OBSTACLES

<i>Mentoring's obstacle</i>	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Teachers' lack of willingness to collaborate with a mentor	320	3.48	1.026
Teachers' lack of willingness to attend training courses on mentoring	320	3.48	1.071
Teachers' lack of willingness to share their teaching practices with another teacher who took the role of mentor	320	3.28	1.100
Teachers' fear that mentoring creates hierarchies and evaluation within school	320	3.78	1.087

TABLE VIII: PAIRED CORRELATIONS

		M	N	SD
Pair 1	Theory	3.73	320	0.881
	Practice	3.52	320	0.856
Pair 2	Theory	3.73	320	0.881
	Expectation	4.25	320	0.635
Pair 3	Practice	3.52	320	0.856
	Expectation	4.25	320	0.635

TABLE IX: PAIRED DIFFERENCES

Pairs		Paired differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		M	SD	S.E. mean	95% Confidence interval of the difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Theory-Practice	0.208	0.654	0.036	0.136	0.280	5.702	319	<0.001
Pair 2	Expectation-theory	0.526	0.850	0.047	0.433	0.620	11.076	319	<0.001
Pair 3	Expectation-Practice	0.735	0.842	0.047	0.642	0.828	15.625	319	<0.001

4. CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research offer additional information regarding the diverse views that teachers possess about the concept of mentoring. It is through the analysis of teachers' perceptions of practice, theory and expectation levels that the truth of the matter comes out: even though the basics of mentoring are generally seen as very positive, the real-life practice environment is the one where the specific implementation of mentoring is found to be sometimes weaker than expected. The discussion at hand is contextual in nature, which means it will provide the necessary framework for understanding these findings in relation to the literature already existing in this field, with the purpose of going beyond the surface and presenting strategies for the improvement of mentoring practices. The current relevant literature shows that mentoring is not only a strong instrument for teachers' professional development (Walters et al., 2020) but also for the building of a collaborative environment, the transfer of knowledge to the new generation of teachers, the spiritual transformation of both the mentors and the mentored teachers (Zanchetta et al., 2017) the improvement of teaching, and finally, the students' better performance. One of the ways mentoring could help in the context of schools is by creating teacher-to-teacher learning communities based on the principles of trust and care (de Lange & Wittek, 2020). Mentoring definitions consider mentoring to be a method for developing supportive relationships that motivate new teachers, help them to become conscious of their professional identity, and create a continuous learning environment (Cipollone et al., 2018). These factors are in agreement with the current study teachers' points of view, which show that teachers do comprehend and appreciate the fundamental elements of mentoring.

Besides the literature that studies the positive aspects of mentoring, there are the ones that have been indicating the obstacles and challenges causing mentoring to be occasionally poorly executed. The insufficiency of mentor training, free time limitations, the absence of a shared understanding about the purpose of mentoring and finding

mentors whose area of research aligns with the mentee are some of the obstacles to this (Spooner-Lane, 2016; Talbert et al., 2021). Therefore, mentoring doesn't often live up to expectations when it is seen as a compliance-based task rather than a genuine professional partnership.

The gap between high theoretical expectations about what mentoring can deliver and what it delivers in reality indicates that there is still room for improvement and, indeed, a great deal to be gained by doing so. The literature, for example, underscores the importance of specialized training for mentors to help them meet the expectations that a new teacher may have (Pfund et al., 2016). Mentoring itself has to be flexible so that the mentor and teacher can engage in conversations which are both reflexive and formative. However, ideal mentoring has to adjust not only to educational goals but also to teachers' emotional needs. Thus, the ideal mentor has to demonstrate increased skills of understanding, relational effectiveness, emotional intelligence and role modelling and not just focus on the teaching practices (Opengart & Bierema, 2015). Last, Sundli (2007) recommended the introduction of feedback mechanisms to ensure that mentoring will meet teacher demands for continuous change and improvement. Moreover, fostering a culture where mentoring is considered a shared responsibility can enable more effective implementations and high expectations to be achieved. In this sense, effective mentoring cannot be seen as a unilateral process but as an agreed relationship, as a bidirectional interaction between the mentor and the mentored teacher (Pfund et al., 2016).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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