

# 13 Promoting professional identity development

## Teachers as mentors on campus

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### Introduction

In this chapter, we examine a voluntary profession-oriented mentoring program for student teachers participating in a five-year integrated teacher education (TE) program, based at the University of Oslo (UiO) campus and a part of the Centre for Professional Learning in Teacher Education (ProTed). In the following sections, we will outline the characteristics of the mentoring program and examine how it can accommodate some of the challenges student teachers often face.

Previous research shows that student teachers' experience of social and academic integration and belonging to a study community is a significant factor for their study engagement, learning, well-being, and completion of their education (Kuh et al., 2014). As mentioned in Chapter 3, first-year student teachers at UiO do not have joint teaching among the entire cohort. Instead, they start their studies by taking academic subject studies at other departments, and many student teachers experience problems in identifying which other students are also student teachers.

Another challenge student teachers may face is related to the development of a teacher identity. Identifying oneself as a future professional practitioner is a key part of the qualification process (Heggen, 2010). Previous research indicates that developing a sense of professional identity is related to teachers' self-efficacy, motivation, commitment, and job satisfaction—and thus is essential in becoming and being an effective teacher (Flores & Day, 2006). Even though no consensus exists among researchers on the precise definition of teachers' professional identity, researchers agree that teacher identity is not a fixed personal attribute but rather a relational phenomenon and an ongoing dynamic process that develops over time (Beijaard et al., 2004). Beijaard et al. (2004) note that student teachers need to be made aware of and reflect critically on deficiencies in their own preconceptions of what characterizes a professional teacher. The development of a professional teacher identity is thus a vital component in the process of learning to become a teacher. Previous research also highlights the need to address teacher identity effectively as a component in TE (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

A third challenge identified in the research literature on professional education, especially as it concerns TE, is related to perceived coherence (Canrinus et al., 2017; Hammerness, 2013; Hatlevik & Smeby, 2015). Many student teachers experience difficulties in seeing the connection between what they learn on campus and what they learn at the various schools during practicum. Some student teachers also find TE to be somewhat irrelevant to their later professional practice (Grossman et al., 2008).

The profession-oriented mentoring program is a quality innovation that is designed to address these challenges. The purpose of the mentoring program is to enhance the quality of the TE program by promoting student teachers' social and academic integration, helping them to develop a teacher identity, and creating a sense of coherence between the content in TE and professional practice. A longer-term goal is to prevent student dropout. The development of the mentoring program is an example of "quality work" (Elken & Stensaker, 2018) in TE, where the intention is to find solutions to specific problems together with representatives of "university schools" (see Chapter 11 for more on this concept). In this chapter, we describe the development, design, and content of the mentoring program. We also present the primary findings from a longitudinal study on the mentoring program's enhancement of the quality of TE programs at UiO and its outlining of transferable value to other professional programs.

### **Development, design, and content of the mentoring program**

The mentoring program, which was developed and is operated in collaboration with university schools, is based on experience from a 2014 pilot program. In spring 2016, a project group that included representatives from the teaching management of UiO's five-year integrated TE, university schools, and administrative and academic staff (the authors of this chapter) developed the main ideas and organization of the mentoring program, which is offered as a supplement to the ordinary study provided at UiO. The mentoring program is offered as an addition to traditional teaching on the campus (which is led by teaching staff at the university) and placement learning in practice schools mentored by schoolteachers.

The mentoring program was specifically designed to accommodate the challenges faced by student teachers at a large university in which, after the opening week of the first semester, almost no communal teaching takes place during the first academic year. The mentoring program is offered to over 1,000 student teachers, divided into 5 study cohorts and 48 combinations of subjects. The student teachers take 180 credits in one academic subject and 60 credits in another, for instance, English and Norwegian. The teaching-profession subjects (pedagogy, subject didactics, and teaching practice in schools) account for only 60 ECTS (referring to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) out of the 300 ECTS that make up the master's programs and are taught in the third, sixth, and seventh semesters (see Table 3.4 in Chapter 3 for details). The student teachers' first year in the mentoring program thus constitutes a structured relation to the TE program.

The mentors are assumed to possess favorable attributes to assist student teachers as they navigate among different learning arenas. The mentors primarily work as teachers in lower- or upper-secondary schools and have undergone mentor education (Lejonberg et al., 2015) at the university level—15 or 30 ECTS—and are paid by the university for the hours they work in the program. When student teachers begin their five-year TE program, they are divided into groups of 10–20, based on subject specialty, and are matched with a mentor who teaches the same subjects at the same level that the student teachers are studying. Such matching based on grade level and subject area is in accordance with research findings that indicate that a fit of mentor–student teacher similarities can affect the mentoring relationship and, eventually, teacher outcomes (Kwok et al., 2021). Previous research indicates that quality mentor relationships can contribute to preservice teachers’ well-being and professional development (Burns et al., 2016; Sørensen & Bjørndal, 2021). Dreer (2021) argues that mentor–student teacher relationships should be established early and nurtured over time by continuously working on stable student teacher–mentor pairings over time. Each mentoring group (and the relationship with the mentor) should remain stable throughout the entire five-year TE program.

The mentoring program is offered during the entire study period, and a course plan for each semester is developed by the project group. The mentoring program consists of ten courses—one per semester—with content that aligns with where the student teachers are in the regular TE program (see Table 13.1).

Each course has a course plan and a web page, and the student teachers sign up for the mentoring course online in the same way as other courses. Schedules are generated so that student teachers have the times of the mentoring sessions

*Table 13.1* List of topics in focus in the various mentoring courses

<i>Semester</i>	<i>Short focal topic description</i>
1	Perspective change—from pupil perspective to teacher perspective; core practices, the classroom environment, relationship building
2	Teacher professionalism, professional development, the teacher’s role and tasks
3	The many faces of the classroom: different ways pupils learn
4	Academic versus educational: how the academic subject translates into curriculum
5	Challenges and opportunities with academic subjects and school teaching: different learning arenas
6	Being an active mentee: the use of assessment criteria in practicum
7	Self-assessment and professional learning goals
8	Teacher leadership—what kind of teacher do I want to become?
9	Newly qualified teachers as resources: my professional interests
10	Job employment: showing my competence

registered in their study calendar, along with teaching in other study courses. Because the mentoring courses are organized in the same way as other course operations at UiO, it is easy for the student teachers to inform themselves and for the study program administrators to run the mentoring program.

Each mentoring course consists of 2–3 three-hour sessions. During the beginning of every semester, the mentors, with support from the project group, continuously devise plans for the sessions with the student teachers. The mentors then use these plans as the basis for their detailed scheduling and running of the sessions. Most of the learning activities physically take place on campus, although they also involve school visits. While mentoring courses do not yield study credits, there is no exam, and participation is voluntary, student teachers who participate in at least two of the three meetings for each course receive a certificate upon graduation that describes which mentoring courses they have participated in.

### **Research on the mentoring program**

Hatlevik and Lejonberg conducted a longitudinal study on the mentoring program from 2016 to 2022 (Hatlevik & Lejonberg, 2019; Lejonberg & Hatlevik, 2022). The study was approved by the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees. In this chapter, we report on the main findings from our research, based on data from both focus-group interviews and surveys among student teachers and mentors. The stated goals of our study were to determine whether the mentoring program had fulfilled its intentions and to identify potential areas for improvement.

The interviews were conducted in the spring of 2017 with a group of four mentors and four groups of first-year student teachers who had attended courses in semesters 1 and 2. The interviews were what Maxwell (2013) would describe as “semi-structured,” that is, thematically structured but open in form. “Open in form” means that the interviewer followed up interviewee responses to reveal underlying explanations. The four key issues raised during the interviews were (1) challenges the student teachers perceived in their first year in that role, (2) the content of the mentoring program, (3) the way in which courses were run, and (4) mentor characteristics. Both authors of this chapter participated in the interviews. Recordings of the interviews were transcribed to extract word-for-word quotes from the interviews. The quotes in this chapter have been lightly edited for clarity in English. Participants were informed that their statements would be anonymized in the publications to follow. The surveys were conducted among student teachers at the end of each semester from 2016 to 2021 and among mentors in January 2022. The surveys contained both checkbox and open-ended questions.

This chapter uses data and quotes (from both student teachers and mentors) that are illustrative of how a mentoring program on campus can enhance student teachers’ social and academic integration, help them to develop their teacher identity, and facilitate a sense of coherence between the content in TE

and professional practice. In addition, we have included information about the administrative running of the mentoring courses, reported by representatives from the study administrators. Our analyses are based on comparisons across various sources and may be described as “horizontal” and “vertical” analyses (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### **Presentation of relevant data and analysis**

In the following, we report on the primary findings from the research on the mentoring program related to the enhancement of quality in the five-year integrated teacher education at UiO. These findings may have transferable value to other teacher- and professional-based programs.

#### *Learning activities with professionally relevant content facilitating social integration*

The findings indicate that the content of the sessions accommodated the first-year student teachers’ need to both become part of a community of student teachers and to learn more about the teaching profession, and that this combination had a positive effect on the student teachers’ social and academic integration, as well as their agency and study engagement. A representative quote for this finding is expressed by Lise:

The mentoring program was especially important to me at the start of the education course, because that’s where I got to know my fellow student teachers who were taking the same combination of subjects as me. I’ve enjoyed following many of the student teachers I got to know through the first mentoring course, both socially and professionally.

In the mentoring program, the mentors model student active-learning activities that the student teachers themselves can use later. The student teachers were able to observe and discuss the meaning of being a teacher and what implications this meaning had for what they needed to develop to achieve professional competence. The findings suggest that the link between meeting both a social need and the need to gain more in-depth knowledge of what characterizes the teaching profession was an important reason that the student teachers who participated in our study were very satisfied with the mentoring program. The program had helped them get to know others who were enrolled in the same course of study and to feel connected to the teacher program; the program had also helped them to identify themselves as prospective teachers.

Trine described how the program’s learning activities had helped her become more confident in her choice of profession:

The mentor initiated several different activities, which both allowed us to get to know our fellow student teachers better and to reflect on and talk together about what it means to be a teacher and what the teaching

profession might look like. I was a little unsure about whether the teaching profession was really for me, but after participating in the first year of the mentoring program, I've become more sure! Now, I really think it'll be nice [to be a teacher].

*Student-active and transformative learning activities promoting teacher identity development*

The student teachers especially highlighted the school visits and discussions with peers and their mentors as inspiring eye-openers that had given them a new understanding of a teacher's tasks, role, and competence needs. The school visits included observing lessons from a teacher's perspective and having subsequent discussions about the observations among the student teachers and with the mentor. During the on-campus mentoring sessions, the student teachers were given several discussion-based tasks; for example, they were asked to discuss the characteristics of a good teacher, the nature of teacher professionalism, and what qualities indicate skilled professional practice. This type of learning activity may be described as "transformative" (Mezirow, 2009) and helps to promote teacher identity development among student teachers (Beijaard et al., 2004; Illeris, 2014).

The findings from interviews with first-year student teachers indicate that through their participation in the mentoring program, they had become more aware of what a teacher's role involves, the teaching profession's complexity, and what is required in terms of various types of professional knowledge and skills. The findings also suggest that the student teachers had embarked on a change in perspective by moving from observing and assessing teaching through a student's eyes toward viewing the profession from a teacher's perspective. Mentoring thus can start student teachers on the process of gaining an expanded and partially new view of what being a professional teacher means. Peter had the following comment on his experiences of the mentoring program.

I really liked the opportunity to meet a teacher and see her in action. It was interesting to observe [her at work] in a classroom. In addition, we reviewed what it takes to become a good teacher, both as a person and educationally. I've learned a lot. The program has also made our minds buzz about what it's like to be a teacher, in a completely unique way compared to before.

The findings further indicate that through the use of transformative learning activities, the mentoring may increase student teachers' study motivation and engagement by making them aware of the relevance of the TE program's subject-related and pedagogical content toward their future professional practice as schoolteachers. Experiencing the content as relevant and meaningful for later professional practice reflected an experience of coherence among professional programs. Andres stated the following:

What's helped a lot with the mentoring program, for me at least, is that you get a lot more motivation when you see what...you're working toward. You may have a clear thought in your head about what you're working toward, but you get that reminder throughout the year in meetings, where you talk about what expectations you have of being a teacher, what expectations the school has about how you should be as a newly trained teacher, and how to develop teacher identity. It's been very motivating for me, even though I have a few years left.

In addition, Nina pointed out how the mentoring program had motivated her to study various academic subjects:

With the mentoring program, I've come to understand that if I want to be a really good teacher, I have to have good insights and a lot of knowledge about the subject I'm teaching—preferably beyond the curriculum in upper-secondary school. This [understanding] has motivated me to work harder with the academic subjects... This isn't the kind of thing I do just to pass exams. This is knowledge I need to be able to teach in five years... And so, I think it gives me confidence as a teacher to have good knowledge of the teaching subject.

#### *Experienced and mentor educated teachers serve as role models*

The findings from the interviews and surveys show that most student teachers were incredibly pleased with their mentor and that they appreciated getting to know and have discussions with someone who worked as a teacher in school on a daily basis. Anne shared the following about her experience:

We could ask her about everything. I asked her something I've been wondering a lot about: "Do I have to know the foreign language fluently?" Another student teacher asked our mentor, "What do I do if I can't answer students' questions?"

The teachers who were chosen as mentors had completed 15 or 30 ECTS courses in mentoring and had a strong commitment to their role as mentors. The findings suggest that mentors act as role models with whom student teachers can identify and with whom they can discuss professional topics, thereby helping student teachers in the development of a teacher identity. Academic staff at the university who lack recent teaching experience from the school cannot fulfill this role in the same way.

#### *Mentors' professional development*

The mentors reported that by being mentors, they were able to have a critical look at their own practice; they perceived it as evolving to be able to reflect on

their own experiences from practice with student teachers. They also felt that their own professionalism was increasingly challenged in accordance with how far the student teachers had come in the TE program. By being a mentor, they had gained a greater understanding of the student teachers' learning progression, how they experienced their studies, and what their reflections and development were toward being a teacher.

The mentors emphasized that being a mentor also provided the opportunity to be updated on new research that included the TE curriculum, which contributed to both their own and their school's competence development. In the following quote, Catherine expressed how being a mentor had contributed positively not only to her own teaching but also to that of her colleagues:

We are "forced" to keep ourselves up to date on research didactics as well as on literature and topics taught at UiO in the different academic subjects that student teachers take. Both undoubtedly strengthen our own professionalism and how we relate these ideas to our teacher colleagues.

*Clear dissemination of the mentorship program's contributions beyond the ordinary study program*

The mentoring program requires student teachers to actively choose to participate. The fact that the program is voluntary may provide more room for the student teachers to have conversations on topics they themselves wish to discuss than would be the case in mandatory seminar teaching, as in the regular professional courses taught in the TE program. Voluntary participation can contribute to accountability among the student teachers for their own learning and learning identity development, since they find that participation is something they actively choose for themselves.

The findings do show, however, that voluntary participation can lead to non-binding attendance. Both student teachers and mentors pointed out that, unfortunately, how many people would show up for meetings and other events was unpredictable. How this problem could be solved organizationally remains unknown, beyond informing the student teachers about what the mentoring program offers. The findings show the importance of highlighting the relevance of the program's components and ensuring that the topics of the various mentoring courses are not too similar. Any overlap that occurs between topics in the mentoring program and the regular teaching in the ordinary study program should be clarified by highlighting how mentoring contributes in ways that differ from ordinary teaching. The plan and content of each session should also be presented to the student teachers in advance.

### **Summary and concluding remarks**

This chapter provides knowledge of how mentoring can give student teachers a head start in their teacher education by allowing them to get to know other first-year student teachers who are taking the same subjects, by broadening



their insights into the teaching profession, and by enabling them to begin developing a teacher identity; the program can also help to clarify the relevance of the educational content early on. The findings indicate that student teachers found the mentoring program to be particularly valuable in the initial years of study, when they only had subject studies and had no regular teaching duties in profession-specific subjects. The importance of the mentoring program was especially linked to experiencing belonging to a study community and to the development of student teachers' professional identity during the five-year TE program.

Based on the longitudinal study, we have identified the following six critical factors that have transfer value to other TE programs that plan to have similar mentoring programs:

1. Plan for learning activities that both aim to promote social integration among student teachers and that they will perceive as being professionally relevant.
2. Engage student teachers in various student active- and transformative learning activities that promote professional identity development.
3. Engage dedicated mentors who are teachers in schools that feature mentor education.
4. Communicate clearly to student teachers what the mentorship program contributes beyond the teaching offered in the obligatory subjects in the TE program.
5. Plan thoroughly and conduct regular evaluations of courses and sessions.
6. Provide good administrative solutions for the operation of the mentoring program.

Compared to regular on-campus seminar teaching, a distinguishing feature of the on-campus mentoring program described in this chapter is that sessions are led by mentors who do their primary work in schools. The fact that the mentors are teachers in school provides the student teachers with role models with whom they can identify and who can help the student teachers initiate the process of developing a teacher identity. The mentor program also promotes the mentors' own professional development.

To conclude, the innovative mentoring program has enhanced the quality of the five-year integrated TE program at UiO by promoting student teachers' social and academic integration and their development of a teacher identity, and it has created a sense of coherence between learning on campus and in schools.

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