

Mentoring in Education: An Effective Implementation in a Special Education School

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Abstract: Mentoring is applied in a wide range of scientific fields, including education, and has been institutionalized since 2021. In Greek, it is referred to as “advisory guidance” and is based on the knowledge and experiences of a mentor, who can guide and positively influence others in the workplace, leading them to organization and professional development. In education, mentoring enhances the learning process by providing multiple benefits to students, educators, and the quality of the work provided. It significantly improves learning outcomes and leads to professional satisfaction and development for both the mentor and the mentee. This paper will present the theoretical foundations and characteristics of mentoring through a literature review. It will then describe a mentoring program successfully implemented in a special education school for students with cerebral palsy. The description will cover the necessity for implementation, the central goal, the process of implementation, the methodology followed, and finally, the results of its application in the school setting.

Key words: mentoring, professional development, special education

1. Introduction

Mentoring, or advisory guidance, is based on the knowledge and experiences of a mentor who can guide and positively influence others in the workplace, leading them to organization and professional development. Mentoring has positive outcomes as it inspires and empowers employees, leading to greater organizational commitment, increased efficiency and productivity, and ultimately, organizational success (Portner, 2005). One of the most complex functions in school management is human resource management, as its various aspects require constant vigilance, updates, and complex decision-making to achieve the best possible outcome (Hussey L. & Campbell-Meier J., 2021). Therefore, the successful management of staff in educational institutions requires the use of mentoring, which becomes a significant challenge when applied in educational organizations (Bourantas, 2015). In the field of education, the role of the pedagogical mentor-counselor is officially established by Law 4823/2021.

This paper describes the application of a mentoring relationship between experienced and new educators at a special education school. The particularities of the students at this school make the educational task particularly complex due to the students’ profiles. The case of mentoring implementation at the 2nd Special Elementary School of Thessaloniki is presented, highlighting the necessity of applying counseling guidance and the benefits

that emerge from the process.

2. Theoretical Aspects

The concept of mentoring has its roots in Greek mythology, as the Homeric epic *Odyssey* references a mentoring relationship between Telemachus (Telemachos) and Mentor (Mentoras), the goal was to help the young man grow up with values, supported by the older man (Makropoulou & Iordanidis, 2016). In this relationship, respect, trust, and love emerge, which maximizes mutual commitment. Mentoring began in the 1980s as a supportive strategy for educators (Ghosh, 2013). In its classic form, it refers mainly to a dual relationship based on hierarchy, involving a more experienced, wise, and knowledgeable mentor and a protégée, usually younger with much less experience (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). In traditional mentoring, the mentor and their mentee share a long-term learning experience, during which the less experienced one benefits from the mentor's knowledge and wisdom. Mentors and their mentees learn together, utilizing technology, and the alternative form of mentoring is based on transforming power dynamics into healthier relationships (Mullen, 2016).

Mentoring has three main characteristics that differentiate it from other types of relationships in the workplace: mutuality, developmental benefits, and regular, consistent interaction over a period of time. Compared to those who do not receive mentoring, mentored individuals experience greater professional satisfaction, higher promotion rates, and increased effectiveness. Likewise, the benefits of mentoring for mentors themselves include organizational commitment and work performance (Jeong & Park, 2020). Participants in mentoring manage work challenges and organizational changes more effectively. They are encouraged to participate in the school unit, feel appreciated by the organization, as their knowledge and experience are recognized by their subordinates and superiors, while mentees feel that the organization is ready to invest in them and their future (Carmel & Paul, 2015). In the field of education, mentoring can contribute to the professional development of teachers, improve their teaching practices, and consequently help elevate the quality of education provided, enhancing the overall effectiveness of the educational organization (Boutskou & Chatzipanagiotou, 2014).

Mentoring is divided into two types: formal and informal, and depending on the goals set by mentoring programs, they are categorized into three approaches: the humanistic approach, the scaffolded apprenticeship perspective, and the critical constructive approach (Martin, 1994). Three models of guidance are applied in education: the apprenticeship model (cooperative teaching), the skill model (training with control over acquired skills), and the reflective model (systematic approach integrating the broader school framework aiming at transitioning from competency to critical focus) (Pappas & Iordanidis, 2017; Martin, 1994). Regarding the qualitative characteristics of the mentoring relationship, Young, Bullough, Draper, Smith, & Erickson (2005) identify three types: a) representative guidance, where mentees set the requirements, and mentors act as advisors; b) interactive guidance, where both define the field of action together; and c) directive guidance, where the mentor sets the agenda and the mentee follows (Achinstein & Davis, 2014). The Greek Ministry of Education, in its 2010 Public Consultation Report, mentioned the advantages of mentoring and the specific characteristics required from the person assuming the role. It emphasized in experience in the interdisciplinary programs, in flexibility, in knowledge of ICT in education, high scientific knowledge, and deep knowledge of the school culture and the work of each educator within the school unit.

In August 2022, with the Circular 102919/ General Court-4, the role of the Pedagogical Mentor-Counselor was officially introduced. According to Article 1, "The role of the mentor is to inspire, guide, and support every

newly appointed or recently placed permanent, substitute, or hourly teacher with up to five years of experience, aiming at improving the quality of their teaching and the educational work they provide.” The mentor’s training is crucial, as counseling work is not a closed process but one that can be renewed. The mentor has a positive attitude, empathy, and provides encouragement and support (Rippon & Martin, 2006), using his own experience, knowledge, and skills. This leads to self-awareness, professional development, and creative, productive action (Kram, 1988). The mentee becomes familiar with the school environment, gains professional empowerment, and contributes to the improvement of the educational work.

3. Problem Presentation

The 2nd Special Elementary School of Thessaloniki is a special education unit with 50 students, including children with cerebral palsy and severe accompanying pathological issues. Due to the complex profile of the students, newly hired teachers, both permanent and substitute, face significant difficulties in educational practice, managing students with severe intellectual, behavioral, and emotional problems, as well as in their care both inside and outside the classroom. The school’s Principal, recognizing these challenges, is tasked with making decisions to help guide and support the inexperienced teachers. The goal is to implement a mentoring program to enhance the development of the teachers through the provision of tools, methodology, and practical support. This way, the principal ensures the quality of the educational services, student care, and staff empowerment. The aim is also to create a positive environment that encourages mutual assistance and cooperation among the school members, which is essential due to the demanding profile of this school.

4. Context Presentation

The school unit is characterized by heterogeneity in the educational profile of the student population. The 50 students have a range of serious, heterogeneous health conditions, severe special education needs, and health problems. These are students with cerebral palsy-spastic quadriplegia, serious mental problems and syndromes. These students require assistance with daily activities such as with mobility, eating, and personal hygiene. Often, due to high comorbidity, teachers must be trained in first aid, especially during crises (E) and individualized management. The teaching staff consists of both permanent and substitute teachers, with the majority being substitutes. Most of them are new to working in Special Education Units. Lastly, the parents of these students are fatigued by the frequent changes in teaching staff and are seeking immediacy and effectiveness.

5. Implementation of the Program — Process implementation

The mentoring program began with the assignment of roles and responsibilities to mentors and candidate mentees who wished to engage in the mentoring process. Mentors were chosen based on their experience at the school unit, the achievements they made, while working with the students, their ability to handle crises in the school unit, and their problem-solving skills. The school’s principal, as the most competent authority, played a key role in selecting and assigning mentors to the new teachers, ensuring that they would gain satisfaction, dedicate time, thought, and commitment to the mentoring process (Nasser-Abu & Fresko, 2014). On the other hand, the mentees were selected due to their inexperience in working with students with cerebral palsy and, after their consent, entered the mentoring process.

The mentoring program lasted six months, starting at the beginning of the school day and continuing throughout. Mentors provided continuous guidance throughout the day, utilizing the school's infrastructure and techniques for individualized management to address each student's needs.

In terms of cognitive reinforcement for students, mentors supported colleagues by using alternative methods of knowledge transmission and applying innovative teaching practices. They utilized peer observation and guidance techniques and enhanced the educational work through the use of digital technologies, particularly ICT (specially tailored software for students with cerebral palsy). They also incorporated creative, multisensory educational and therapeutic activities, completely individualized to meet the students' needs.

Additionally, mentors with experience in the Erasmus KA-1 European program encouraged their mentees to learn through play, movement, and multisensory stimuli. Their approach, inspired by motor activities of mindfulness, encouraging multimodal learning, integrating visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles, tailored for students with motor disabilities.

Finally, the candidate mentees received guidance on practical but essential student issues such as personal hygiene and care, feeding and management in times of E crisis (epileptic seizures), listlessness, malaise, etc.

6. Results: Benefits

Mentees significantly enhanced their social skills, with their motivation being to ensure the quality of their individual work, familiarize themselves with the students, and understand the unique needs of each one. They also became acquainted with the complex school environment and gained hands-on experience in special education. Mentors, in turn, successfully highlighted their experience and the wealth of knowledge they had acquired, proving useful to a new group of colleagues. This brought them great professional satisfaction, further development, and enhanced their CVs.

The mentoring program contributed significantly to the professional development of the educators and the achievement of their career goals. Candidate mentees acquired new skills and knowledge, developed as individuals, and gained significant confidence in their workplace. They also had many learning opportunities, connecting theory with practice (Salleh & Tan, 2013). Additionally, the school benefited from the increased performance and productivity of its teachers as well as from the enhancement of the positive environment and mutual support. This was reflected in the collaboration between the teachers and the parents of students, as well as in the cooperation between the school and the community through initiatives developed by the school. The collaboration between parents and the school improved significantly, and there was an observable increase in parental involvement. Parents began to behave differently both in the school environment and at home with the goal being the fostering of the children's development through skill-building. They became more active, participated in activities, and the parents' association became more engaged, focusing on problem-solving.

7. Challenges and Solutions

During the implementation of the mentoring program, certain challenges arose. The main challenges were selecting the right mentors and providing proper guidance and training for the candidate mentees. These challenges were addressed by organizing educational programs and seminars for the mentors, enabling them to cope with the multifaceted nature of their work while at the same time they received special help from experts of external organizations. That way, the mentors were supported and gained greater expertise in the type of

mentoring and in ensuring the effectiveness of the process. The conditions of mentorship were not always easy for the mentees due to the demanding process, increased stress, and insecurity caused by inexperience. The use of reinforcement methods was widespread, and positive feedback was a key pillar of success.

8. Conclusions

The implementation of the mentoring program at the 2nd Special Elementary School proved to be successful. Staff development and the achievement of their professional goals improved significantly, while the positive environment and mutual assistance were strengthened. At the same time, the challenges encountered during the implementation of the program, both within the classrooms and during breaks and school activities, were successfully addressed. Based on these successes, the teaching staff standardized a broad range of activities by establishing working protocols and also decided to continue the program in the next school year, expanding its goals and aspects.

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