

Chapter 52

Online Mentoring as a Tool for Professional Development and Change of Novice and Experienced Teachers: A Brazilian Experience

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the results of an investigation carried out by the researchers from a Brazilian public institution and experienced teachers (mentors) that aimed to produce knowledge on teacher professional development and learning, investigate educational processes of mentors interacting with novice teachers by e-mail, evaluate the continued education methodology adopted, and contribute to existing knowledge on online continued teacher education. The main sources of data were email communications between mentors and novice teachers, the mentors' and novice teachers' reflective journals, and the researchers' observations from weekly meetings between the mentors and the teachers. The development of the online Mentorship Program has been a much more complex enterprise than a face-to-face equivalent program would have been because it demands entirely new logistics, but it promoted the establishment of professional and affective bonds among the participants, the broadening of professional knowledge, the mastery of online adult education technologies, and the participants' professional growth.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite much investment in basic education in the past years, it is clear that the quality of education imparted to Brazilian children, even in developed urban centers, has been rather dismal. According to Libâneo (2011), there have been contradictions between the number of students who are having access to school and the quality of education received, as well as “among pedagogical and socio-cultural aspects, and between a vision of schools based on knowledge and other in their social missions.” It is evident the “duality of aggravation of the current Brazilian public schools, characterized as a school of knowledge for the rich and the school of social care for the poor. Such dualism... is perverse because it reproduces social inequalities and maintains social inequalities” (p. 3).

In spite of the fact that there is no consensus with respect to how and how much teacher education influences student performance, this work presupposes that there is a strong relation between professional education and proficiency. In Brazil, most of the teacher education programs usually are conceived according to a technical rationality paradigm, and we do not have public policies directed to novice teachers. We observe a lack of integration between theoretical and practical-pedagogic content courses, which compromises the connection between theory and practice.

Bearing in mind that learning to teach and being a teacher are ongoing and lifelong processes, it is important to remark that teaching proficiency is not just derived from pre-service education. On the contrary, proficient teaching is associated with the capacity to understand the other, students, curricular content, pedagogy, curriculum development, and strategies and techniques related to facilitating students’ learning (Mizukami, et al., 2010; Mizukami, Reali, & Tancredi, 2010).

Being a teacher does not encompass characteristics inherent to teaching alone; it goes beyond them. It involves participating in the

school, the locus of the professional community par excellence (Knowles, Cole, & Presswood, 2008; Pérez Gomes, 2010; Mizukami, Reali, & Tancredi, 2010). Hence, taking into consideration the characteristics of teaching and being a teacher as well as those of today’s world, it is vital that teachers be supported in order to be able to evolve professionally during their careers.

Notwithstanding, continuing education programs have traditionally treated teacher education—even when held at the workplace—as an undifferentiated process, thus failing to place proper emphasis on the peculiarities of different career phases. These phases display unique characteristics and problems; future, novice, and experienced teachers show distinct professional competencies and different educational necessities.

To Garcia (2011) it is necessary to pay attention to a critical period in teachers’ professional development: the first years of teaching. This is a phase in which professionals seem to become myopic since they primarily focus on their teaching competencies and the management of immediate classroom demands (Grossman, Hammerness, & MacDonald, 2009). Their thoughts temporarily concentrate on the most pressing practical aspects, and they struggle to develop a repertoire of professional behaviors related to teaching and being a teacher, to their specific teaching contents and adequate representations about the way their students learn.

Brazilian literature on the initial phases of the teaching career and on mentorship programs is rather limited, and it seems that public policies (regarding any educational systems or teaching levels) that take into consideration these aspects are also lacking. Moreover, there are no studies on expert teachers teaching novice teachers how to teach.

Brazilian professional teaching contexts seldom allocate resources to mitigate the difficulties inherent to this or subsequent career phases because, traditionally, schools in this country are

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