

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Mentoring and teachers' professional development in Albania

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Abstract

The role of teachers is becoming increasingly important in advancing student learning outcomes. This article discusses one area that is still in need of significant reform in Albania: the induction and mentoring of new teacher-candidates. Based on a mixed-method study involving 275 Albanian teachers and mentors, it provides insights into the benefits and challenges of current practices. The study identifies a number of key areas in need of improvement, including: the selection of mentors; professional training for mentors; communication among different stakeholders; and overall planning and coordination of mentoring services. These issues are discussed within a wider European policy context that situates mentoring as an important component of teachers' ongoing professional development.

1 | INTRODUCTION

This article analyses the initial implementation of mentoring services in Albania. Prior to 1990, Albania was a Communist country that suffered extreme isolation from Western Europe and, indeed, the rest of the world. However, in the last two decades, it has experienced significant reforms in all sectors of society, including education after it signed the Bologna Declaration in 2003. In June 2009, the Albanian Parliament passed Law no. 10171 requiring teachers to apply for a licence to practise after one initial year as a candidate-teacher. It was implemented in the academic year 2011–2012. Teacher-candidates' professional practice took place in schools that had been officially designated by the Ministry of Education and Sport (MoES) as Professional Practice Educational Institutions (PPEI) (Albanian Ministry of Education and Sport, 2011). The analysis presented in this article draws on data collected following the initial implementation of mentoring in specific schools in 2011–2012. Because they are the first to model professional teaching practices in curriculum areas for teacher-candidates, mentors can potentially have a strong impact on new teachers. This article provides insights on good mentoring practice and recommendations for its improvement in the crucial period between teachers' candidacy and licensure. With these goals in mind, two central questions are examined:

1. What are the current strengths and weaknesses of the mentoring service from the perspective of mentors and teacher-candidates?
2. How can mentoring serve to strengthen the teaching profession in Albania within a European context?

This article argues that a number of stakeholders stand to gain from the successful implementation of mentoring services. With a more professionalised and systematically regulated mentoring service, new teacher-candidates will be better prepared to succeed in the licensing examination. Furthermore, this will strengthen the education system as a whole and support wider educational reforms.

2 | REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Studies have shown that mentoring and induction programmes have been an important aspect of teacher education in many countries worldwide, particularly since the 1980s (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009; Musset, 2010). According to Livingston (2016, p. 2), 'Mentoring conversations are gaining increasing attention as a way to enable students and experienced teachers to reflect on, challenge and develop their practice'. Mentoring has been found to increase teacher retention (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004), improve new teacher job satisfaction and self-efficacy (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Schleicher, 2015), enhance teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (Achinstein & Fogo, 2015), reduce new teachers' feelings of isolation (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) and promote teachers' ongoing professional development and lifelong learning (Caena, 2014; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Livingston, 2016; Mena et al., 2016). These findings support the wider contention that it furthers the professional development of new teachers (Achinstein & Barrett, 2004; Cochran-Smith, 2001; Hargreaves & Dawe, 2010).

Although few studies focus on the relationship between mentoring and student achievement, (Wang, Odell, & Schwille, 2008, p. 146), Ingersoll and Strong (2011) have shown that student achievement would benefit from teachers who had received some form of mentoring for a period of 6 months to 2 years in their early years of teaching. These benefits, however, are mediated by school settings, contexts and the economic situation of the educational communities (Hobson et al., 2009; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). For instance, if schools were autocratic, studies suggested that there were negative effects of the apprentice-mentor relationship, whilst those with a more collaborative culture had a positive influence on this relationship. This supports the suggestion that teaching and learning to teach are influenced by the school culture (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Stigler & Hiebert, 2009; Zuljan & Požarnik, 2014). Furthermore, researchers have argued that mentoring could contribute to broader changes in the system. For instance, Hargreaves and Fullan (2000, p. 55) assert that 'mentoring is a means to a larger end: that of creating a strong, improvement-oriented profession in schools, professional associations, and teacher unions'. Furthermore, in a recent report on the findings from the 2013 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), Schleicher (2015, p. 53) reported strong links between teacher collaboration, self-efficacy, and student learning:

Specifically, the following indicators for collaborative practices were used: teaching jointly in the same class; observing and providing feedback on other teachers' classes; engaging in joint activities across different classes and age groups; and taking part in collaborative professional learning. [...] In almost all countries, teachers who reported that they engage in these kinds of collaborative activities five times a year or more also reported greater self-efficacy [...] and greater job satisfaction.

As discussed below, many of these collaborative practices align with components of the mentoring service in Albania. Yet, as Livingston argues, the role of partnerships may be somewhat 'hidden' or unacknowledged. She asserts that 'increased attention needs to be given to providing systematic training and ongoing professional learning for in-school mentors to enable them to gain a deeper understanding of their role and be recognized and valued as teacher educators' (Livingston, 2016, p. 229).

Despite the acknowledged benefits of mentoring for new teachers, there are still many gaps in the empirical literature. For example, Hobson et al. (2009) identified a number of important areas where additional research was needed. They include the cost-effectiveness of mentoring compared to other forms of early teacher professional development, evidence showing which specific mentoring activities and approaches yield the most benefits for new teachers and the

range of roles that mentors play, particularly that of assessor. Furthermore, additional research is needed to elaborate the conditions in which mentoring will have the greatest impact on new teachers. In a handbook for policymakers, the European Commission (EC) (2010) described five. Zuljan and Požarnik (2014, p. 201) summarise these as follows:

1. Financial support in terms of reduced workload for participants;
2. Clarity about roles and responsibilities of the various actors involved;
3. Cooperation between different parts of the system and among teachers at different stages of their career;
4. Quality management in terms of supporting the development of teachers' key competences and the monitoring and evaluation of induction policies; and
5. A culture focused on school as a learning community in which all the participants can benefit from mutual professional development.

Most of the existing research relies on qualitative case studies and/or personal accounts of mentors and teachers. Furthermore, with some notable exceptions (Wang, Strong, & Odell, 2004; Zuljan & Vogrinc, 2007, 2011), most of the literature analyses mentoring in advanced economies and established democratic countries. However, Albania presents an interesting comparative context as a middle-income European country that continues to enrich its democracy. To address the gap in the literature, we believe that more studies conducted in middle-income, democratising and post-Communist societies would be a valuable contribution to the knowledge base on mentoring and teachers' professional development in a European context.

The case of Estonia was perhaps the closest to this study in terms of national context (Löfström & Eisenschmidt, 2009). Like in Estonia, the primary goal of mentoring as it is initiated in Albania is to facilitate the development of new teachers' professional competencies for successful practice (Löfström & Eisenschmidt, 2009). With the increasing emphasis on competence-based frameworks in European teacher education policies (Caena, 2014; Halász & Michel, 2011; European Commission, 2013), we believe that more research is needed on the relationship between mentoring as part of teachers' induction and competence-based frameworks for teacher education in Europe.

3 | AN OVERVIEW OF TEACHER INDUCTION AND MENTORING IN ALBANIA

Albanian teachers have faced many changes and new demands in the last two decades of post-Communist educational reform. According to the 2012 Pre-university draft curriculum framework, 'The teacher is the main actor of teaching success. His [or her] continued professional development remains a necessary condition for achieving the intended results. Therefore, the curriculum, in particular basic education, requires changing initial teacher training, curriculum renewal through high school, university, and the teacher training system' (22). As echoed in this document, the need for an effective national system for teacher training is crucial for any successful educational system. Yet according to a 2005 National Report on Albanian education, 'The lack of standardised criteria for teachers, the absence of legal acts on training programmes and remuneration systems, the lack of an evaluation and self-evaluation system and the absence of competent people to do training in the regions are some of the biggest issues for the improvement of the status and quality of pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development' (Musai, Dhamo, Muka, & Rapti, 2005, p. 102). Although many of these challenges are currently being addressed by the Ministry of Education and Sport (MoES), reforms at the policy level take time to implement, monitor and evaluate.

One recent initiative of the MoES is a draft provision on the *Organization and Conduct of Professional Practice for Teaching as a Regulated Profession*. Article 3 states that professional practice aims to ensure: the quality of teaching and learning for young teachers and high performance in the teaching profession, the delivery of professional theoretical knowledge and acquisition of practical, ethical and behavioural skills and building the capacities of prospective teachers for optimal adaptation to the curricula, teaching and learning changes (Abdurrahmani & Boce, 2011, p. 218). This is in line with experts in the field of teacher induction and professional development who assert that teachers benefit from

continuous professional development throughout their careers (Livingston, 2014). Furthermore, teachers' learning needs throughout their career could include aspects such as 'specific subject knowledge; curriculum and assessment understanding; pedagogical content knowledge; knowledge and/or pedagogy to embed technology or cooperative learning approaches; classroom management; cultural diversity; and relationships with parents' (Livingston, 2014, p. 221).

In Albania, for every field of study, teachers obtain their qualification in higher education institutions after 3 years of bachelor studies. Following the completion of their undergraduate studies, students pursue a professional or a scientific master's programme. Thus, the total length of university studies is between 4 and 5 years. After obtaining a diploma (professional or scientific master's degree) to teach in basic and secondary education, teacher-candidates begin their professional training by a compulsory year of practice in kindergartens or grade schools. Whilst there is currently no official legal cooperation between universities and Regional Education Directorates (REDs), they usually work together to support the teachers' practical training both during their time as students and in their initial practice placements. The coordination of teacher-candidate placements is thus organised and managed by the REDs after graduates from teacher education programmes register at their local RED office. The REDs maintain networks of local mentors who work in the kindergartens and grade schools and are therefore in a good position to arrange for the mentoring of teacher-candidates in the schools. After completing their year of professional practice, teacher-candidates are evaluated in writing by their mentors who also complete a professional development portfolio for them.

Following new legislation passed by the Ministry of Education and Sport (MoES), teacher-candidates must pass a state examination which is held at the national level and administered by the National Agency of Examinations and Qualifications in order to obtain their official teaching license. However, the 'results of the *Qualifications Exam* for teachers in 2012 show that junior teachers perform less well than senior teachers and the fault for this must be tracked simultaneously in the initial training, induction and in-service training schemes' (Abdurrahmani, 2013, p. 12). Along similar lines, Rapti and Janaqi (2016, p. 31) assert that 'new teachers who have few years of work in education, who have not yet gained levels of qualification and have unsatisfactory results, are recommended to be supported by experienced teachers in schools, but also by professional networks'. After they successfully pass the qualifying exam, teacher-candidates can be officially placed in pre-university educational institutions. In terms of continuous professional development, after receiving their initial training, teachers are ranked as highly qualified teacher, teacher specialist and master teacher. Each represents a promotion that includes an additional qualification and a better salary. This is based on the professional competences outlined in the 'General Standards of Professional Teachers' policy that was approved by the Ministry of Education in 2010. The National Institute for the Development of Education is responsible for qualifying and certifying in-service teachers.

As from the academic year 2011–2012, a service of formal mentoring has been offered to teacher-candidates to guide them in the first year of their teaching practice and coach them prior to the state licensing examination. Though newly-formalised in law, the mentoring service builds on a longstanding educational tradition in Albania. Viewed in comparison with other countries in the region it is an important source of teachers' professional development and induction. For example, in Finland and other highly-ranked national education systems, new teachers participate in mentoring programmes, classroom supervision, collaborative teaching, in-service training and ongoing professional development (Ripley, 2013; Sahlberg, 2011; Schleicher, 2015). Albanian teachers have benefited from a range of professional development activities in the last two decades. Both local and international organisations such as the Council of Europe, UNICEF, the Soros Foundation and non-governmental organisations have offered teacher training opportunities. However, many were not systematic and researchers have found that 'in some instances, the adoption of international educational standards, curriculum, and innovations through teacher in-service training has led education authorities to think that teaching and teachers in schools have also changed accordingly when this is clearly not the case' (Sahlberg & Boce, 2010, pp. 35–36). Similarly, some Albanian teachers adopted a hybrid approach when implementing new curricula and instruction models. One researcher found that they retained familiar teacher-centred pedagogical practice while selectively incorporating new curricular themes such as democratic citizenship and human rights education (Gardinier, 2012). In light of this evidence, a systematic approach to teachers' professional development,

together with a systematic mentoring programme for teacher-candidates will provide services that can benefit Albanian teachers, schools and students alike.

From a policy perspective, educational reforms in Albania are placing increasing demands upon teachers. According to a recent report published by the Working Group on Reforming Pre-university Education (2014, p. 25): 'Teachers should be, increasingly, directors and creators of learning situations. They will be free to develop their own programs and lesson plans for the classroom, within a certain range of the curriculum, and will select resources and learning environments. The conception of curriculum-based competencies would make them more creative and responsive to their profession'. Using technology in the classroom is also a key component of these reforms and an important new responsibility for teachers (Abdurrahmani, Boce, Hamza, Sina, & Xhomara, 2012). Hence, with the growing expectations and demands placed on teachers in Albania, the mentoring service provides an important and ongoing relationship whereby teacher-candidates can directly benefit from the experiential knowledge and professional expertise of well-established educators as they pursue the qualifications and licensing they need to teach.

4 | METHODOLOGY

The data presented in the figures and analysis are based on a mixed methodology incorporating questionnaires, a focus group and classroom observation of mentors and teachers. Questionnaires were completed by 137 mentors who offered a service to new teacher-candidates during a school year. Additionally, another 138 non-mentor teachers participated in the questionnaire. The mentors and non-mentor teachers belonged to primary and secondary schools from 18 regions of the country. The questionnaires included 15 questions in which mentors and non-mentor teachers were asked to identify the problems, risks, strengths and weaknesses of their work, as well as recommendations and suggestions for the improvement of various aspects of the mentoring service. The results of the surveys were statistically analysed and interpreted.

Classroom observation took place in seven classrooms in 9-year primary schools in the cities of Shkoder, Korca, Gjirokastra, Kukës and Bulqizë. The observers made notes on the following: (1) presentation of the class objectives; (2) explanation of the concepts; (3) the use of teaching tools; (4) the pedagogical method of organising students to work in groups and individually; and (5) the assessment of pupils.

The focus group consisted of 15 teacher-candidates from Shkoder, the city which claims the highest number of practitioners in the country. It discussed questions designed to elicit positive and negative feedback on the quality of the mentoring service, various aspects of the process, the practical skills acquired through mentoring and suggestions for improvements. After these various data were statistically analysed, the authors interpreted the findings through the theoretical lens provided by recent literature in the field in order to determine the relative strengths of mentoring for Albanian teachers' professional development.

5 | RESEARCH RESULTS

5.1 | Selection, recruitment, training and institutional support

66% of the Albanian mentors were selected by the Regional Educational Offices (REOs) and the other 34% by the schools. 41% responded that mentors should be chosen by the RED/EO offices through a competitive process and 33% indicated that selection should take place at the school level. Only a small percentage (5%) responded that they felt that mentors should be selected directly by the teacher-candidate. This contradicts the response from teacher-candidates who participated in the focus group who indicated that they would like to be part of the decision-making process in the selection of their mentors because they wanted to have the most skilled teachers as mentors.

Respondents in the teacher-candidate focus group also noted that, although they found it easy to register in order to participate in the mentoring practice, many had heard from colleagues in other communities that they did not always have access to mentoring or did not know how to register to participate.

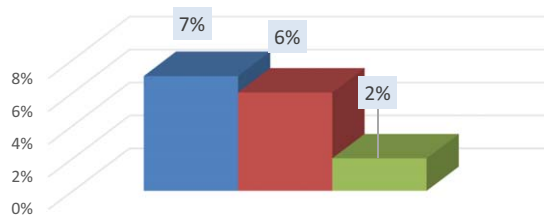


FIGURE 1 Professional elements of mentoring [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Concerning the flow of information to prospective mentors, 68% said that they were informed by the school directorate. The other 32% were informed by the Internet page of the respective RED/EOs. Once informed about the service, 77% responded that they had the necessary professional skills to train new teachers, whilst 9% abstained. Yet despite their confidence in possessing the knowledge to train novice teachers, only 5% of the mentors indicated that they received formal training to perform their duties. Related to this, the researchers found no data that REDs and EOs provided training in the practice of mentoring. This may have an impact on quality management, as discussed by the EC (2010) and Zuljan and Požernik (2014).

Concerning institutional support, teacher-candidates in the focus group noted the need for a direct connection between the faculties of education and the teaching practice centres in schools. They also expressed the wish to have access to the state examination training programme at an earlier stage and throughout their practical training as candidate-teachers. Some proposed adding an additional financial incentive for new teachers in order to attract more young people. In sum, the candidate-teachers who participated in this focus group approved the mentoring service, whilst highlighting the need for greater support from the RED/EOs, as well as for the wider professional recruitment and education of future teachers. These recommendations are in line with the elements advocated by the EC (2010).

5.2 | The mentor's roles and responsibilities

Most mentors saw their roles and responsibilities as multifaceted. As illustrated in Figure 1, 69% indicated that they performed well in classroom observation of the candidate's teaching practice, discussion of ideas about teaching with the candidate and practical teaching demonstration in the classroom. Only 7% indicated that they observed the class without discussion or demonstration, whilst 6% stated that they discussed and shared ideas with the practitioner without demonstration. Only 2% supported the idea of demonstration in the candidate's classroom as the only ways of mentoring.

Classroom observations of mentors and teacher-candidates focused on the presentation of lesson objectives, the candidate's use of teaching equipment, the teaching methodology and the candidate's assessment of students. From the observed classes, seven candidates presented the lesson objectives clearly and in accordance with programme objectives defined by class levels. Some candidates, mostly in the elementary schools, had prepared tools such as tables, model-drawings and worksheets. In terms of methodology in the elementary grades, there were attempts to develop student-focused inter-active methods, such as working in groups or pairs and teacher-guided lessons.

Concerning assessment, the teacher-candidates implemented what was planned in the lesson's daily plan. In the primary school, students were assessed with motivational words, whilst the upper class students obtained several marks, depending on their participation and contribution. In some instances, the observers noted that this process lacked justification of evaluation. Based on these observations, there is a clear need to advise teacher-candidates in the practice of student assessment. Mentors should include more practical hours in their annual and monthly plan in order to help the teacher-candidates to develop their practical skills and achieve a sense of competence and self-efficacy in their role as teachers. Concerning assessment of their teaching activities, focus group participants generally agreed with their mentors' assessments, but felt that mentors should use more variety in the forms of assessment and the aspects of their teaching practice. For example, they suggested that they should provide feedback not only on the prepared lessons and materials, but also on in-class discussions and presentations. The teacher-candidates suggested that assessments should use a consistent system of scoring and feedback.

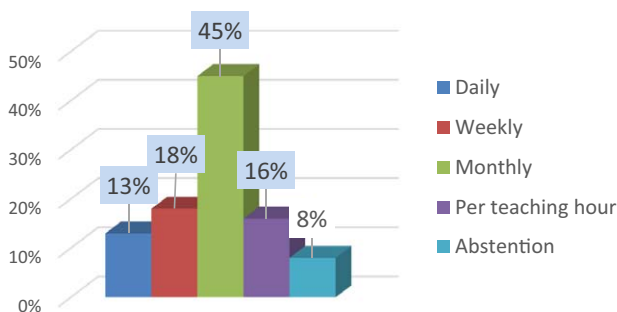


FIGURE 2 Plan of the mentor for the practitioner [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

When asked about how mentors planned their work, 76% of respondents replied that they planned their mentoring activities. While there were no negative responses, a fairly high number (24%) abstained from responding. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 2, 45% indicated that they made a monthly plan for the service they provided. 18% planned on a weekly basis; 16% on daily basis and 13% on an hourly basis. The variety of answers shows that there is no common practice in terms of the methodology and schedule for planning mentoring activities.

As shown in Figure 3, in most cases (67%), the ratio of teacher-candidate to mentor was 1:1. However, 22% of respondents indicated a ratio of 2:1, whilst 3% indicated that each mentor was assigned 3 teacher-candidate mentees. Because managing the workload of mentors and teacher-candidates is a challenge for the success of mentoring, this area needs greater attention.

Figure 4 shows respondents' ranking of the importance (from 1-lowest to 10-highest) given to the elements of mentoring during teaching hours. They are believed to affect the level of the professional training and are ranked as follows:

1. Scientific performance of the subject;
2. Planning of teaching and learning process;
3. Development of the class lesson;
4. Teaching methodology;
5. Motivation and assessment techniques;
6. Communication;
7. Didactic tools and equipment used in the classroom;
8. Teaching objectives based on pupils' level;
9. Collaboration with other stakeholders in the teaching and learning process (colleagues, parents, etc.);
10. Completion of educational records and school documentation.

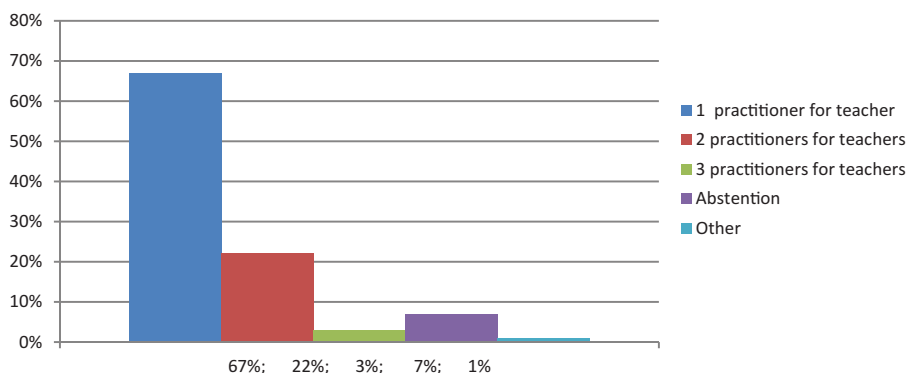


FIGURE 3 Number of practitioners per mentor teacher [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

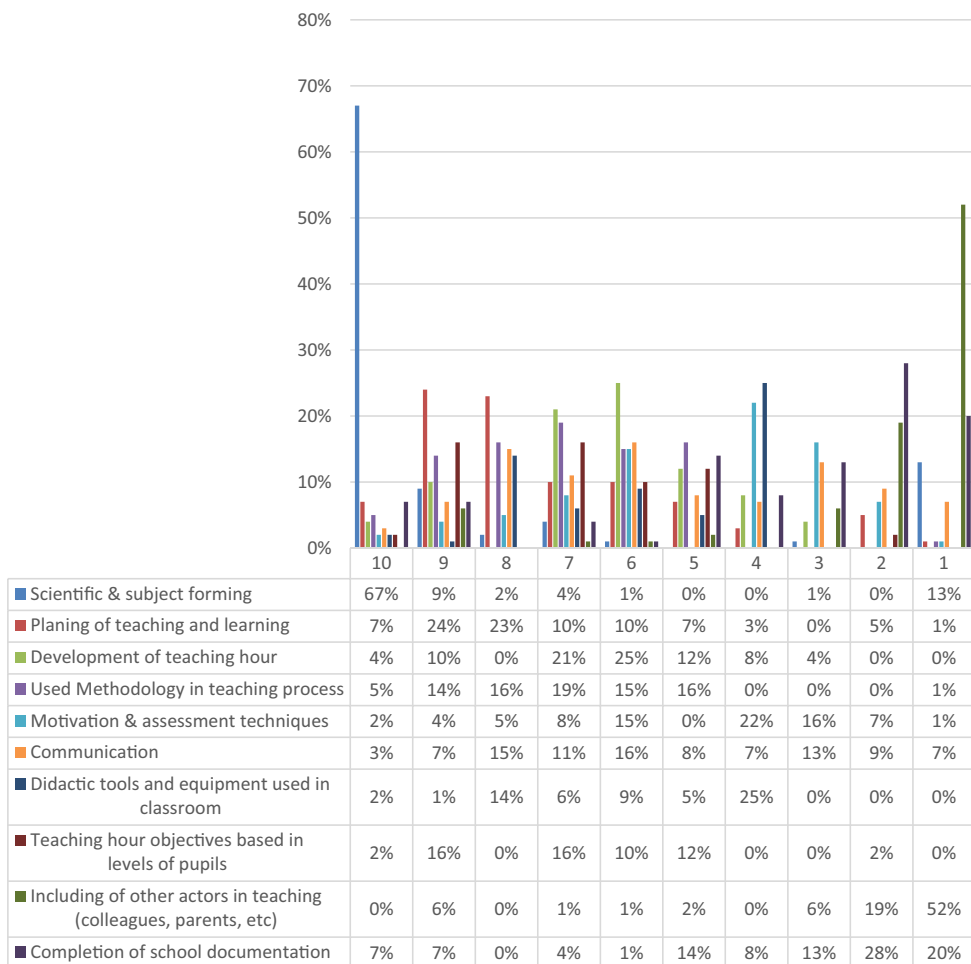


FIGURE 4 Ranking of the professional elements of the mentor's service, according to importance [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Figure 4 indicates that *scientific performance in the subject* is the most important element considered by the mentors (67%) This echoes the perspectives of the teacher-candidate focus group which noted that one of the most valuable aspects of mentoring was that it helped them to link their theoretical training to their teaching practice. Participants felt that this was a positive step in the development of their professional skills and noted that their relationship with the mentors was generally very good. However, this indicates not only the importance placed on the teacher's scientific training, but also the mentors' general dissatisfaction with the state of teacher training in Albania, particularly in the area of subject matter competence. Alongside the concern of mentors regarding new teachers' insufficient knowledge base, many pre-university school directors have informally criticised the methodological preparation of their newer teachers. Thus, the challenge of teacher preparation cannot be addressed through mentoring alone.

5.3 | Responses on the improvement and further development of mentoring

Survey results also provided important data on the relative strengths and weaknesses of the current practice of mentoring in Albania. They indicate that mentors and teacher-candidates believe that mentoring is not very costly (52% response of mentors and 53% of teacher-candidates). Mentors and new teachers who consider mentoring as desirable account for 24%, which may indicate teachers' desire to have a reduced regular teaching load in order to provide

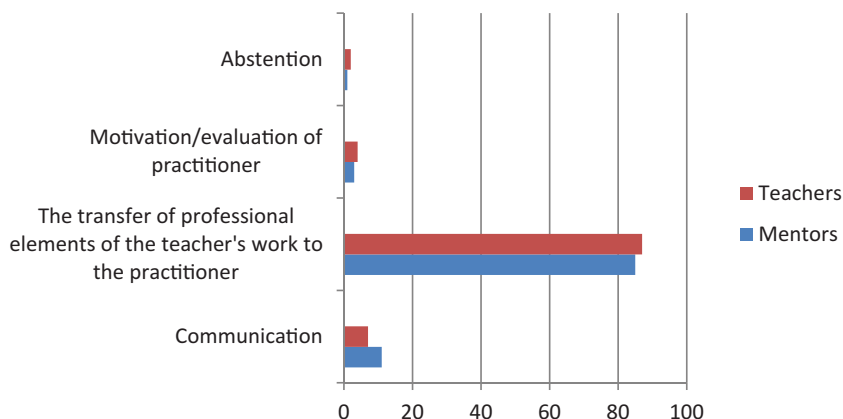


FIGURE 5 Strengths of mentoring [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

mentoring services. The responses overall show that mentors and non-mentor teachers recognise that the mentoring service requires a significant level of knowledge about teaching.

According to Figure 5, 85% of mentors and 87% of non-mentor teachers perceived that the greatest strength of mentoring was the transfer of the professional elements of the work of teachers to the teacher-candidates. 11% of the mentors and 7% of the non-mentor teachers considered communication to be the greatest strength of the mentoring process. A much smaller share (3% of mentors and 4% of non-mentor teachers) ranked motivation and assessment of the teacher-candidate as its greatest strength. These findings show the importance that has been given to the professional dimension during the mentoring process, with less emphasis placed on the interpersonal and social dimensions. This varies from the approach of the Institute for the Development of Education (IDE) which considered the social dimensions of practice to be of equal importance as scientific elements in the training of new teachers (Figure 6).

Concerning the weaknesses of the practice, mentors and non-mentor teachers also gave somewhat similar responses. According to the survey, the weaknesses were identified as follows:

1. Evaluation of the practitioner (teacher-candidate) by the mentor (42% of mentor respondents and 35% of non-mentor teacher respondents);
2. Planning and documentation (26% of mentor respondents and 35% of non-mentor teacher respondents);

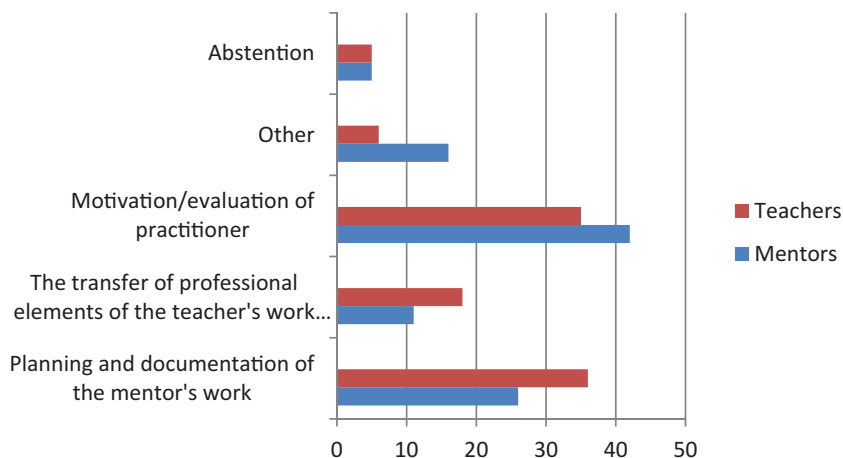


FIGURE 6 Weak points of mentoring [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

3. Transfer of the professional elements of teaching to the new teacher (11% of mentor respondents and 18% of non-mentor teacher respondents).

In addition, through their open-ended responses, 15% of the mentors presented other ideas to improve mentoring, such as:

- Including more professional and active cooperation with the teacher-candidate;
- The need for more information about the local network of mentors;
- A higher financial incentive for the mentor;
- Daily load reduction as regards teaching classes; and
- Involvement of other key stakeholders (e.g., parents, colleagues, teachers, etc.) in the professional development process.

As evident from these suggestions, mentors' open-ended responses focused more on what they required from others than on their own roles and responsibilities in professional practice. The responses of non-mentor teachers also identified several weaknesses, including the heavy daily load of the mentor, occasional difficulties in communication between the mentor and the teacher-candidate and insufficient observation and training opportunities to support the teacher-candidate's independent professional development.

Regarding the professional elements and related challenges that are specific to mentoring, the following responses indicated several key areas that were identified for further investigation and development:

1. Evaluation of teacher practitioners (36% of mentors and 30% of non-mentor teachers);
2. Communication between mentor and teacher-candidate (27% of mentors and 24% of non-mentor teachers);
3. The effective planning of work (20% of mentors and 28% of non-mentor teachers); and
4. Counselling and support for new apprentice teachers (14% of mentors and 15% of non-mentor teachers).

Most mentors (74%) responded positively to the question of whether mentoring was a beneficial service for both mentors and mentees. When asked for their personal and professional reasons for participating in mentoring, the main motivations were possessing the professional knowledge needed to train new teachers (57%); mentoring as a valuable step in their professional careers (29%); and a knowledge of the professional standards for mentoring (11%). Teachers who were not interested in becoming a mentor mainly attributed this to the fact that they felt overburdened by their workload as a teacher and thus not inclined to take on additional obligations. On the other hand, 59% of the non-mentor teachers indicated their readiness to become mentors. They attributed their interest to the following:

- Recognition and appreciation by the RED/EOs;
- Professional growth and development, including skills of effective planning;
- Improvement of the quality of service and increased knowledge and capability;
- Promoting dialogue between mentors and teacher-candidates through mutual cooperation;
- Making a contribution to the future of Albanian education;
- Enjoyment; and
- Financial motivations.

The responses of the mentors and non-mentor teachers presented in Figure 7 show that the greatest benefit was positive change, mainly manifested in the teaching skills of the teacher-candidates (39% of mentors and 48% of non-mentor teachers). This was followed by the ability to transfer professional information (33% of mentors and 29% of non-mentor teachers). Additional responses indicated that mentors acquired the following knowledge and experience through their participation in the practice:

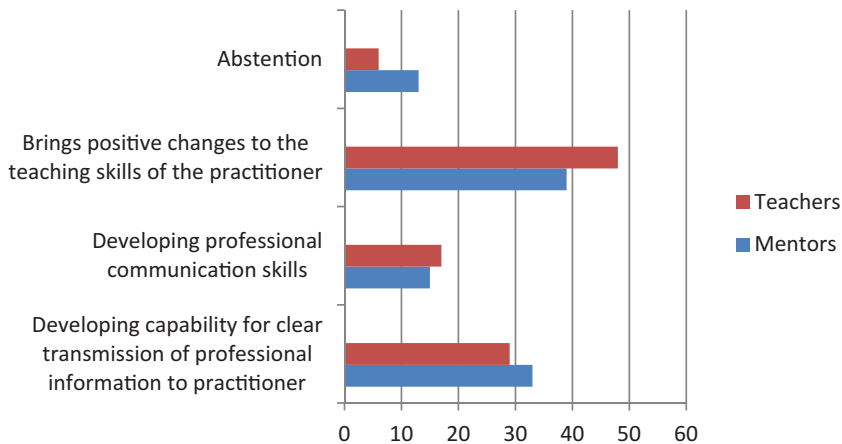


FIGURE 7 What does the mentor gain professionally? [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

- Implementation of normative provisions, regulations, guidelines of the Ministry of Education and Sport (MoES) and RED/EOs;
- Improvement of their professional skills in terms of patience, persistence, research, cooperation, motivation, relationship in dialogue and debate and openness to advisory communication between professionals;
- Additional practice with their evaluation of subject curricula, lesson objectives, planning, didactic resources, tools, methodology and skills in teaching evaluation; and
- Learning from their experience through training and collaboration with other mentors.

In addition to their responses on the multiple-choice survey questions, mentors also shared reflections and suggestions in the open-ended parts of the survey. Representative comments included the following:

- The scientific and methodological level of the mentor should be high;
- There should be preliminary planning on how to cooperate with the teacher-candidates, accompanied by the setting of expectations;
- Mentors should create a positive climate through open, clear, collaborative, consultative and motivational communication; this can be achieved by being patient, persistent and promoting dialogue among equals;
- Mentors should be fair in the final evaluation of the teacher-candidates and the teacher-candidates should feel free in their work;
- Every teacher should be part of this process to benefit their professional development.

6 | ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH RESULTS

The mentoring of new teacher-candidates is an important area of educational research that has attracted international attention. With the increasing demand for evidence-based practice in schools and a policy emphasis on teaching as a primary factor for improving students' learning outcomes, mentoring in the early years of a teacher's career can help teacher-candidates to establish effective teaching practices that will serve them throughout their career. In addition, with the new legal requirement of teacher licensing in Albania, the provision of effective mentoring in the first year of teaching takes on added significance for the profession. Mentoring can strengthen the teaching profession as a whole as Albania moves toward EU membership.

Though mentoring has been practised informally for a number of years and is a firm tradition in Albanian education, its formalisation is relatively recent. With the first implementation of Law no. 10171 in 2011–2012, the data

presented in this article provide researchers, policy-makers and practitioners with valuable insights into the relative strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improving the existing mentoring practice in Albania. Feedback from active mentors, teacher-candidates and teachers who have chosen not to participate in mentoring also provide a holistic perspective on issues such as the selection of mentors, communication between mentors and teacher-candidates and the evaluation of teacher-candidate's methods.

In the analysis of the survey, observation and focus group data from mentors and teacher-candidates, we found that there was a strong alignment with the areas identified by the EC (2010) and highlighted by Zuljan and Požarnik (2014) as necessary for success in the induction process for early career teachers. Perhaps the greatest overlap was in the need for clarity about the specific roles and corresponding responsibilities of the key actors, including mentors, teacher-candidates and administrators in the regional education offices. In Albania, the main emphasis was placed on the role of the mentor in helping teacher-candidates to develop and strengthen their pedagogical competences. As highlighted in Figure 5, both mentors and non-mentor teachers perceived the transfer of the professional elements of teaching to the teacher-candidates as the greatest strength of mentoring. However, there is debate across Europe about this. According to a recent EC report (2012, pp. 46–47):

The research evidence identifies two contrasting approaches to [teachers'] training and development. A **constructivist approach** enables teachers to take responsibility for developing their practices within the framework for teacher education. A **transmission approach** develops these practices on behalf of teachers and offers them to teachers for them to use. There is some research evidence to suggest that, whilst the transmission approach can result in changes in practices that are procedurally consistent with the training and development, the constructivist approach can result in changes that have a stronger conceptual basis. [...]

Furthermore, the constructivist approach appears more consistent with the emphasis on a range of learning contexts emphasised by key competences and therefore more likely to help teachers promote them in and beyond the classroom.

As Albania moves towards a competence-based approach to education, teachers must also acquire new skills to translate these reforms into improved learning in the classroom. In many ways, mentoring provides an opportunity for new teacher-candidates to receive constructive feedback on the new skills and strategies they are using. Enriching this process would also contribute to the fifth condition for success that is advocated by the EC (2010) and Zuljan and Požarnik (2014): creating a culture in which the school becomes a collaborative learning community.

A second point of alignment between the findings in this study and the conditions for success according to the EC (2010) is the need for greater institutional support for the mentoring process. The need for financial support was an issue that was highlighted by many respondents in this study. For example, one main obstacle for teachers who would like to serve as mentors was their heavy workload. Financial support in the form of reduced workload assignments would enable many more teachers to participate in mentoring.

Finally, the third point of alignment linked our findings to both the third and the fourth conditions for success that were highlighted by the EC (2010) and Zuljan and Požarnik (2014). It is the area of communication and cooperation among actors in different sectors of the education system. Several mentors and teacher-candidates in this study asserted that information about how to become involved in mentoring varied by region. Similarly, the standards and expectations of the mentor's role was not found to be consistent across the regions.

7 | CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this study conducted to better understand the relative strengths and weaknesses of the Albanian mentoring practice in terms of teachers' ongoing professional development, a number of areas were identified for improvement. Whilst recognising that all actors of the national education system played a role in the improvement and further

development of the teaching profession in Albania, we grouped our recommendations according to what we identified as the key actors.

7.1 | Recommendations for Regional Education Directorates/Educational Offices and schools

With regard to the work of the Regional Education Directorates and Educational Offices (RED/EOs), improvements can be made in three strategic areas: the selection of schools and mentors; professional training; and overall planning and coordination of the mentoring services. In the first area, our findings suggest that the selection of schools and mentors should be coordinated by the individual school directorates and the Regional Educational Offices. Participating schools should be selected on the basis of their effectiveness in fostering quality teaching and learning. Furthermore, the qualification of the teaching staff and the ability to identify teacher mentors should be considered when selecting participating schools. Schools that are involved as centres of community initiative (Janaqi, 2014) could promote mentoring.

Professional development through training is needed both for representatives of the Regional Educational Offices and in schools so as to ensure the successful administration of the mentoring service. Officials, school leaders and teachers should be informed of the provisions of the new laws and procedures of the mentoring service. Furthermore, 'the school leader has the duty to organize the professional development of new teachers and support them with the necessary literature for the development of teaching quality' (Rapti & Janaqi, 2016, p. 31). Regional Educational Officers should also provide information, training and certification for the teachers selected to become mentors.

Finally, reflecting again the conditions for success from the EC (2010) and Zuljan and Požarnik's study (2014), the third area of recommended improvement for the mentoring services entails greater planning and coordination among various participating agencies. In particular, all 9-year schools and secondary schools should coordinate work with teachers' councils and mentoring services should be placed on the school agenda as part of the annual plan. School leadership should also facilitate mentoring and other activities for the professional development and promotion of teacher-candidates. In the Regional Educational Office, the curriculum sector should create and maintain a viable annual plan for the support, monitoring and evaluation of the mentoring services in each school and assist in the establishment of a mentoring network or a community of practice which will inform and promote the mentors' work.

7.2 | Recommendations for mentors

The findings of this study indicate that both mentors and teacher-candidates believe that mentors contribute to teachers' professional development. They suggest, however, that the effectiveness and impact of mentoring would be increased by greater professionalisation and support for the mentors. For example, prospective mentors should obtain training and qualification in order to ensure that they are performing according to the professional standards, particularly in the areas of communication, counselling, design of objectives and evaluation and assessment methodologies. Mentors should also use a clear system of planning and scheduling.

This study suggests that, with the formalisation into law of the mentoring service in Albania, mentors' ongoing professional development will become even more crucial for the success of the service. As schools increasingly adopt new technological tools to assist with instruction, teachers who are also mentors must stay up-to-date in their knowledge of emerging classroom technology so as to better assist teacher-candidates. Mentors should build on their experiential knowledge and ongoing professional development to assist teacher-candidates in setting pedagogical objectives, communicating effectively with students and parents and working successfully with their colleagues. Again, reflecting the fifth condition for success in the EC (2010) handbook referenced in Zuljan and Požarnik (2014), through ongoing professional development, mentors can become an important resource for the wider school community.

7.3 | Recommendations for the Albanian Ministry of Education and Sport, universities, the Institute for the Development of Education and the National Inspectorate of Education

The results of this study also highlight some areas in which other agencies may play an important role in the successful implementation of the mentoring service. In particular, the Ministry of Education and Sport (MoES), the pedagogical programmes of universities, the Institute for the Development of Education (IDE) and the National Inspectorate may all contribute to the success of the mentoring service by increasing accountability and 'quality management' (EC, 2010; Zuljan & Požarnik, 2014, p. 201), as well as acting to integrate facets of the mentoring service. In particular, the MoES should adopt mentoring standards which are in line with European competence-based frameworks and have been proposed by the Institute for the Development of Education. This is emphasised by Abdurrahmani (2013, p. 24) who argues that 'it is necessary to clarify which competences and attitudes prospective teachers should develop during initial teacher education. Initial teacher training standards need to be finalized and approved'. Furthermore, universities (public and private) should work closely with the Regional Education Offices to form bridges between university faculties of education, teacher mentors and teacher-candidates in order to capitalise on the existing skills and expertise in the teaching field.

8 | IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY FOR THE EUROPEAN EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY

In addition to supporting the further development of a national network of mentors in Albania, our goal is to expand these professional networks and communities of practice to connect with the wider European educational community. Comparative studies of mentoring can assist smaller countries such as Albania in identifying best practices in this area and facilitate knowledge sharing. As competence-based frameworks become increasingly used in the European context, it is even more important for key educational stakeholders such as teachers to develop a sense of agency and efficacy within their profession. As shown in this article, mentoring of teacher-candidates in the early years of their career is an important component of local, national and international strategies to strengthen the teaching profession in Albania and beyond.

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How to cite this article: Gjedia R, Gardinier MP. Mentoring and teachers' professional development in Albania. *Eur J Educ.* 2018;00:1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12258>