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Mentoring Novice Teachers in a Norwegian Context of Inclusive Education

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ABSTRACT

There is global agreement that schools should be inclusive, however both experienced and inexperienced teachers find this challenging. In this study we explore how experienced teachers working as local mentors for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) address the challenges they face in an inclusive school. The study is designed as a qualitative study consisting of three different focus group discussions with three samples of mentors, and two surveys with one sample of mentors and one of NQTs. Data was collected in 2021, and descriptive analysis of the survey-data and thematic analysis of focus group discussions were conducted in 2022. Key findings indicate that the topics dominating NQTs supervision also challenge their mentors' practices concerning 1) pupil behaviour and inclusive-adapted education, 2) inclusive classroom management and relationship building, and 3) inclusive parent-teacher cooperation. Furthermore, although the mentors acknowledge lack of expert knowledge, their self-efficacy is maintained due to professional mentoring-collaboration. An implication of the study is the need for recognising the mentoring process as a joint responsibility between all members of the professional community in schools, and not only a task for the assigned mentor.

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Inclusive Education; Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT); Mentoring; Induction

Introduction

Mentoring is a commonly used mediating tool supporting newly qualified teachers/NQTs in their professional development in their induction years (Burger et al., 2021; Shanks et al., 2020). Hence, many NQTs find their role as professionals to be demanding (Caspersen & Raaen, 2014; Lindqvist et al., 2021; Pillen et al., 2013; Voss et al., 2017). Although the literature on mentoring is substantial (e.g. Aspfors & Fransson, 2015; Kutsyruba et al., 2019; Long et al., 2012), we seek to extend this knowledge by taking a Norwegian perspective while discussing how local mentors cope with the problems that arise from working in an inclusive school. The concept 'local mentor' is used to visualise that the mentors in this study are working as teachers at the same schools as the NQTs.

There is global agreement that schools should be inclusive, however both experienced and inexperienced teachers find this challenging (Cameron, 2017; Chu et al., 2020;

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Florian, 2019). Access to support is consequently necessary if teachers are to feel competent in the inclusive classroom (Ainscow, 2020; Dyssegaard et al., 2013; Mitchell, 2015). Local mentorship focusing on equitable learning opportunities for all pupils is furthermore said to be essential if NQTs are to develop their pedagogy in an inclusive setting (Angelides & Mylordou, 2011; Lisenbee & Tan, 2019; Martínez-Álvarez & Chiang, 2020).

Norway is a small nation with a long tradition of universal schooling and inclusion (Johnsen, 2020; Nes et al., 2018; Nilsen, 2010), aiming towards what is generally regarded as best practice by the OECD (2020). Knowledge derived from the Norwegian context may therefore be of global interest. Within our frame of reference both local mentors and NQTs are working in a profession ‘that seek to identify the hallmarks of good teaching’ (Sullivan et al., 2021, p. 388), which is both inclusive and equitable (United Nations, 2015, p. 19). The relation between ‘good teaching’ and inclusive education is rooted in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), an international agreement which identifies inclusive regular schools as the best place to learn for all pupils (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015).

Experienced teachers tend to base their practice on their perceptions of the pupils’ individual needs and their own classroom experience when faced with challenging situations (Herzog-Punzenberger et al., 2020). Novice teachers cannot rely on their own classroom experience but speaking to a colleague is a commonly used coping strategy when novices face stressful situations (Hyrý-Beihammer et al., 2019; Pillen et al., 2013). By seeking knowledge and skills related to working with different behavioural problems among pupils, the novices can handle these situations based on collegial advice or their own ideas (Antonsen et al., 2020; Çakmak et al., 2019). Therefore, the research question asked is: What challenges do local mentors for NQTs face in an inclusive school?

We define local mentoring as a relationship between NQTs and a professional mentor who is an experienced teacher and colleague aiming ‘to support the mentee’s learning, development and well-being, and their integration into the cultures of both the organisation in which they are employed and the wider profession’ (Hobson, 2009 as cited in Golding, 2020, p. 3). We have a particular interest in the local mentors’ belief in their ability to adequately address the challenges they face. Hence, we have chosen to emphasise the *mentors’ self-efficacy*, a term developed from Bandura’s (1977) theory, and which refers to the mentors’ feelings of confidence regarding their mentoring and how this are linked to their behaviour (Bandura, 1977; Golding, 2020).

In the following, we give a thorough explanation of the characteristics of Norwegian inclusive educational policy as well as the induction and mentoring-scheme for NQTs. Furthermore, we explain how the data construction and analyses were performed and present the findings. We end this article with a discussion where the results are linked to research related to the development of an inclusive school and mentors’ self-efficacy.

The Norwegian context of inclusion

In Norway, inclusion has been a guiding principle for almost 20 years (Johnsen, 2020; Nilsen, 2020). National special schools for children with special educational needs was closed down years ago (M. H. Olsen, 2021), and today all pupils, irrespective of their

background or individual abilities, has a legal right to education in the regular local school (Nes et al., 2018). When talking about ‘inclusive education’ and ‘inclusive schools’ we therefore refer to local schools which provide for all pupils, ‘regardless of any perceived social, emotional, cultural, intellectual difference or disability’ (Florian et al., 2010, p. 709).

Due to the Norwegian educational policy, teachers are told that the education shall be adapted to the individual pupil (Educational Act, 1998 § 1–3). Pupils who are unable to benefit satisfactorily from ordinary teaching have an individual right to special education (Educational Act, 1998 §5–1), but most children in need of special education receive this within the framework of the regular class or in small groups in the regular local school (UDIR, 2021). The proportion of children with an immigrant background has also increased in recent years. In 2021, 6% of all pupils were given some additional support to learn Norwegian, but only 8% of those received full time language support in special classes (UDIR, 2021). The regular classroom can therefore be described as a meeting place for individual pupils with different abilities as well as different religious and ethnic backgrounds (Andresen, 2020; Nes et al., 2018). Although, most Norwegian teachers agree that all pupils belong (Demo et al., 2021), this diversity is demanding. Regardless of which subject Norwegian teachers teach, they have a collective as well as an individual responsibility to adjust their professional practice in line with the enacted policy of inclusion and adapted education (Bjørnsrud & Nilsen, 2019). Especially novice teachers experience difficulties in meeting pupils’ needs (Hyry-Beihammer et al., 2019; Lindqvist et al., 2021). One third of NQTs in Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) report the need for professional support regarding pupils’ behaviour problems (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). International studies have also shown that for novice teachers ‘diversity produces significant fear, and they see themselves as needing to acquire highly specific and narrow skills in order to address the perceived deficits among their pupils and manage diversity in their classrooms’ (Allan, 2012, p. 15).

The Norwegian induction and mentoring-scheme

Becoming a professional teacher in Norway involves five years of Teacher Education, which integrates master’s programmes with a master thesis. When the NQTs receive their diplomas, this is an assurance that they are qualified for professional practice (Hvalby, 2022; Sullivan et al., 2021). However, although their knowledge base is cross-disciplinary (K. R. Olsen et al., 2020), neither special education competence, nor migration pedagogy are mandatory parts of the teacher education programme. Consequently, relatively few regular teachers possess expert knowledge regarding adaptation of education for pupils who need extra support (M. H. Olsen, 2021).

In Norway there is general agreement that NQTs should have a designated local mentor in their induction years. The purpose of the Norwegian mentoring-schemes is to contribute to teachers’ continuous professional development (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Smith, 2016). Teachers’ professional development as a continuum also appears in the core curriculum (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017).

The core of the teachers’ work is didactics (Mausethagen & Mølsted, 2015), and research claims that the topics frequently discussed in mentoring with NQTs are

classroom management, assessment, and routines (Engvik, 2014; Føinnum, 2018). Special educational procedures are also often discussed (Antonsen et al., 2020).

The standard of local Norwegian mentors for NQTs includes formal qualifications in mentoring, and participation in professional mentoring networks is common (Halmrast et al., 2021). Local *professional mentoring* involves ‘institutional activities where the profession’s values and knowledge base are central’ (Bjerkholt, 2017, p. 88). Furthermore, when mentoring, critical reflection on pedagogical choices is essential (Colognesi et al., 2020; Harrison et al., 2005; Tonna et al., 2017). Previous research claim that Norwegian mentors primarily have been inspired to encourage reflection rather than offering advice (Lejonberg et al., 2019). Nevertheless, if teachers shall meet the educational needs of all children, they need specific expert knowledge (Florian, 2019). Consequently, it is of interest to explore how local mentors, who lack expertise related to special education and migration pedagogy, face the challenges associated to pupil diversity and how this affects their self-efficacy.

Methods

This study was designed as a qualitative study (Tomaszewski et al., 2020) where we examine NQTs supervision in an inclusive context.

The participants

Criterion sampling was performed because researchers seek to explore the participants’ mentoring experiences (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Sample 1 was NQTs recruited via a digital seminar in one Norwegian county in the spring of 2021. All 36 participants, all teachers in their induction years, were invited to participate in the survey. 34 NQTs, mixed in gender and age, accepted.

Sample 2 consisted of 43 experienced mentors for NQTs, who were recruited to the second survey via a digital seminar in the autumn of 2021.

Sample 3, 4, and 5 were constructed by inviting 15 local mentors for NQTs to participate in focus group discussions. 10 mentors accepted and were randomly placed in three separate groups. All were regular teachers and had extensive experience with supervision of NQTs. They also were involved in a professional network that sees mentoring as a mediating tool that promotes NQTs’ continuous professional development (Smith, 2016). In this network, mentoring involves a planned process that is carried out individually or in groups. As a starting point, the NQTs prepare a written note of intent, which also secures the principle that supervision should be on the NQTs’ terms (Goldhammer et al., 1980; Handal & Lauvås, 1987). Thus, both the mentor and the mentee are prepared.

Data collection and analysis

First, we performed an individual digital mapping of the topics the NQTs themselves highlighted that they needed to reflect on in the supervision sessions. This survey had closed categories. Next, we conducted an individual digital survey, with qualitative open-ended questions, where mentors described the issues that dominate when NQTs ask for

supervision. Both surveys were conducted by Mentimeter, a digital tool for anonymous surveys. Finally, in three focus group discussions, mentors were asked to talk about their experiences related to the most frequent topics in supervision, and how they dealt with this in their practices. There was a good conversational flow in all the discussions. Therefore, no follow-up questions were asked. The participants' privacy was further protected, and the study was approved by The Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research.

When dealing with the survey-data, we made a summary of the distribution of responses of the graded questions. The result formed the basis for the following description of the participants. The answers to the open-ended questions were loaded into the computer program Nvivo. The text was analysed using inductive coding and categorisation (Mayring, 2015). In the description of the findings, the result of this analysis is connected to the findings from the analysis of the focus group discussions.

The focus group discussions were transcribed by both authors separately and then compared to ensure the quality of the transcripts. Thematic analysis of the transcriptions had the same approach and was conducted by the authors individually and then compared. The analysis was carried out in three phases: 1) organising the data and finding codes, 2) searching for themes and patterns, and 3) interpreting the results by identifying major themes (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The first phase emphasised the participants' narratives and how they described their own mentoring practices when supervising NQTs. This involved the actual supervision settings, which indicated how the mentors experienced meeting the novices and what facilitated the opening or closing of the conversations. The mentors' utterances were openly coded, and this involved bracketing our own presumptions (Saldaña, 2014).

The second phase of the analysis included an exploration of data from the focus group discussions and systematically searching for patterns and sub-themes describing challenges local mentors face. Grouping of the sub-themes resulted in the development of four overarching major themes. In the final phase, we took a holistic approach, where we dealt with a comprehensive reading of the analysis from the first two phases based on the empirical data and the research question.

The analysis process was circular and moved back and forth between the different steps as our interpretation was checked against the focus group discussions and the responses from the surveys. This produced new understandings and new knowledge.

The analysis indicated coherence among the mentors and the NQTs, and as shown in [Table 1](#) the grouping of findings revealed three dominating topics: 1) Pupil behaviour and inclusive adapted education, 2) Inclusive classroom management and relationship building, and 3) Inclusive parent—teacher cooperation.

Trustworthiness

How to ensure reliability and validity in qualitative studies is a question that is constantly being debated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). In this study, the procedure related to the method selection and analysis process is described in detail. However, being researchers and teacher educators interviewing mentors might have formed a hierarchy. According to Moser and Korstjens (2018) such asymmetry could affect the participants' response and this ethical issue should be

Table 1. Major themes were developed through grouping of findings from the surveys and focus group discussions.

Sub-themes	Challenging pupils Pupil behaviour	Engaging the pupils Limit triggers	Demanding parents Prepare for conferences	Assessment Practical issues
	How to address or avoid conflicts Behavioural issues Diversity Individually adapted learning plan Adapted education Educational reports The challenges related to pupil behaviour and inclusive-adapted education	Classroom management Switch activities How to build relationships Instructions in the classroom	How to act professionally with parents Parents' communication Boundaries Parent-teacher cooperation Challenging situations with parents	Schedule Other topics
Major themes		The challenges related to inclusive classroom management and relationship building	The challenges related to inclusive parent-teacher cooperation	

addressed. To balance the power, we stressed that the interview facilitated mutual learning. Nevertheless, because we led the discussions, there might have been imbalance in the power-relations. Another ethical consideration is the dynamic in the focus groups. The mentors appeared to be equals, however we do not have insight into how each individual was affected by the interaction. Therefore, we do not know if group dynamics may have had an impact.

Findings

In this section, we take a closer look at what characterises NQTs' supervision topics and how the dominant topics challenge the mentors' practices. The participants from the focus group discussions are referred to as M1, M2, and M3 from Group 1, 2, or 3.

The challenges related to pupil behaviour and inclusive-adapted education

According to 28 mentors (60%) and 15 NQTs (47%) responding to the surveys, supervision topics often revolve around challenges related to pupil behaviour and inclusion-adapted education. Terms such as: 'pupil behaviour', 'vulnerability', 'adapted education' were mentioned by several of the participants. However, the analysis indicates that NQTs primarily do not want supervision related to reasons why some pupils show behaviour that challenges, but rather how they as teachers should handle the different situations. 'How to deal with the most demanding pupils' and 'How to solve situations where individual pupils are extra challenging' are examples from the survey that illustrated this. The analysis of the focus group discussions confirmed these findings which the following quotes illustrates:

M2 (Gr.1): *I think what newly qualified teachers struggle with the most is dealing with an entire class, all the pupils.*

M1 (Gr.1): *I agree. Adapted education is a repetitive topic. To plan and facilitate for different levels.*

Furthermore, the novices seemed so desperate for solutions that they simply 'shut down', and this, the mentors claimed, affected their own practice because they had to balance between providing answers and getting the NQT to reflect on their own. Although, some mentors pointed out that they lack expert knowledge related to pupil behaviour, they trusted that their own experiences and mentor abilities were sufficient.

M3 (Gr.3) *Most of the time I find that I know something that is useful, even if I don't know everything about a problem.*

All informants expressed that there is a lot of support and resources among the colleagues.

The challenges related to inclusive classroom management and relationship building

As mentioned, pupil diversity was the primary basis for registered supervision topics. NQTs' work was largely linked to the classroom, and 30 of the mentors (63%) mentioned terms such as 'classroom management' and 'relationship work'. Support for these findings were found in the analysis of the focus group discussions and highlighted how classroom management was linked to relationship building.

M1 (Gr.1): *It is about how you can keep calm in class, where there is a lot of disturbance. So, it's about classroom management, relationship work.*

However, only 7 NQTs in the survey mentioned classroom management and relationship building, so there was discrepancy in the mentors' and novices' experiences of the dominance of this topic.

The mentors' competences related to classroom management were highlighted by all the focus group participants. The challenge in the mentors' practices related to classroom management and relationship building was the difficulty in being reticent with their own experiences. Due to the personal confidence that the mentors experienced, it became necessary to be open for the NQTs' different perspectives.

M4 (Gr.2) *I try to emphasise the prerequisites of the NQTs and hope that they dare to get through it. They're going to make mistakes and dealing with resistance is part of their development.*

The challenges related to inclusive parent—teacher cooperation

Challenges related to parent—teacher cooperation was the third dominating topic in NQTs' supervision sessions. The descriptive analysis showed that 16 mentors and 7 NQTs mentioned 'parent—teacher cooperation'. Interaction with parents was also highlighted by the participants in all three focus group discussions. It was common for NQTs to experience uncertainty in meeting 'difficult parents', and the analysis indicated that a lot of supervision time is generally spent on issues related to parent—teacher cooperation. An informant claimed (M2, Gr.1): 'Parent—teacher cooperation is what they think is the most difficult part of the profession.'

Furthermore, the NQTs lacked experience with parental cooperation and expressed that they often got questions from parents that required quick answers.

M2, (Gr.3): *They say: "ve got a mail, a phone call, how do I respond?" I intend to answer like this: "what do you think?"*

Issues related to the whole parent group and the expectations the NQTs had for themselves about their own competence in this area were also difficult. Some novices felt that they were expected to answer all questions from the parents, and the mentors addressed this by drawing on theory on the value of teachers' professional judgement. They argued that a professional teacher should be allowed to define certain limits to when and where they should answer the parents.

General reflections related to supervision of newly qualified teachers

This study confirms that the NQTs' encounter with professional practice was overwhelming and demanding. The mentors expressed a need to have knowledge of professional tasks and typical challenges in an inclusive school. Furthermore, all mentors stated that although they sometimes experienced lack of expert knowledge, this did not affect their skills to supervise NQTs nor their perceived capacity, because they were able to consult with colleagues and read academic literature.

Discussion

In this study we ask: What challenges do local mentors for newly qualified teachers face in an inclusive school? The analysis indicates that the context of inclusion created an expectation about mentors supporting NQTs in their challenges related to pupil diversity. This need is in line with the literature on inclusive education that states that when facing challenges due to pupil diversity teachers need support (Dyssegaard et al., 2013; Mitchell, 2015). It is therefore worth noting that even if none of the mentors in this study had formal qualifications in special education or migration pedagogy, the mentors felt confident and were rarely challenged by their lack of expertise. A possible reason for this is the professional knowledge these mentors have concerning both the teacher role and the mentor role. Another reason can be linked to the possibilities for professional collaboration (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017) and networks that strengthen the mentors' professional development (Halmrast et al., 2021), which also is related to mentors' confidence and self-efficacy (Golding, 2020).

Furthermore, the analysis indicate that the mentors use cooperation with others as an active strategy, and it is therefore possible that collaboration has been implemented not only as a general strategy, but also as a way of fostering the principle of inclusion. Ainscow and Hargreaves (2016, p. 169) has earlier argued that teachers who work in an inclusive setting probably would benefit from 'moving knowledge around', both within, between, and beyond the walls of the school buildings. Taking such a perspective, the principle of inclusion should not just be associated with education of pupils but also embrace all actors connected to the school as a community. Hence, the mentoring-scheme fosters inclusion of NQTs into the profession.

Due to Norwegian principles agreed on when it comes to mentoring, supervision should be on the novice teachers' terms (Handal & Lauvås, 1987). However, the mentors in this study experienced this principle as a dilemma. They found that most NQTs are overwhelmed and find it difficult to know what issues to prioritise. Should the mentors set the agenda based on what they see as necessary, or should they wait until the novice teachers themselves bring the themes to the fore? It is difficult for novice teachers to ask for supervision on specific topics if they are unaware of their significance. The mentors therefore found it necessary to make the unknown known to the NQTs by actively sharing their contextual knowledge and organisational insight. Within such a perspective it might be reasonable to take a pragmatic stand towards the principled position that supervision should be on the novices' terms (Handal & Lauvås, 1987).

Taking into account that supervision for NQTs is also about giving professional peer support (Kutsyuruba et al., 2019), all experience and expertise should be shared.

Professional mentoring in a context of inclusion needs to be profession-specific

There is a call for professional mentoring (Bjerkholt, 2017), and the intention of the Norwegian mentoring-scheme is that it is to be conducted by qualified mentors who regard mentoring as a prepared process (Smith, 2015). Nevertheless, an implication of this study is that the supervision sessions also need to be profession-specific. This involves that the didactic support must be provided by a mentor who has inclusive teacher competencies built upon a profession-specific knowledgebase and a culture for sharing and developing knowledge in professional communities. A premise is that the mentor, in addition to mentoring competence, has profession-specific competence in teaching in an inclusive classroom. Inclusive classroom management and relationship building exemplifies this and can be used to address the discrepancy in the experience the NQTs and the mentors had regarding this issue in the supervision sessions. A possible cause is that the novice teachers experienced mastering the strategic classroom management, thus they know how to plan and organise the lessons. Classroom management, rapidly decision-making, poor repertoire of solutions, and losing control, were however challenging. These complex situations are probably linked to pupil behaviour and adapted education instead of relating to their role and the topic of inclusive classroom management and relationship building. The implication is that the mentors' practices are to supervise on the novice's terms and at the same time bring forth different perspectives. Nevertheless, because inclusion and adapted education are complex topics that require expert knowledge (Antonsen et al., 2020; Bjørnsrud & Nilsen, 2019), profession-specific supervision might be difficult for mentors who lack this kind of expertise. But, due to professional collaboration, the mentors' maintained their belief in their capability to positively impact NQTs' professional development.

Implications for further research

The limitations of this study must be considered when interpreting the findings. Variables like each novice's prerequisites or each school as an organisation may influence the context. Our findings cannot be generalised; however, the study confirms that context matters, and implementation of inclusive education creates a need for professions-specific mentoring as well as professional collaboration. Further research related to the mentor programmes regarding didactic and subject didactic supervision in inclusive settings is however needed.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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