

## **From Studying to Teach to Learning to Teach**

### **A Self-assessment Approach in Mentoring Primary Student Teachers**

*Stanislav Bogdanov*

#### **Abstract**

In an attempt to throw some light on the issues of mentoring student teachers, this article reports on a small-scale investigation carried out in a state-owned school, following an encouraged self-assessment and evaluation approach to help a primary student teacher to more easily move on from acting like a teacher to thinking like a teacher during the teaching practice. It offers some insights based on the analysis of the student teacher's reflections and self-evaluation in her teaching practice diary. Implications are drawn about the importance of self-evaluation and self-assessment in initial teacher education.

#### **Резюме**

В опит да се хвърли малко светлина по въпроса за наставничеството на стажант-учителите, тази статия представя едно проучване, проведено в държавно училище, следвайки самооценъчен подход по време на учебната практика, който да помогне на стажант-учителите по-лесно да преминат от "играта" на учител към мисленето на учител. Статията предлага коментар, базиран на анализа на размислите и самооценката в дневник на учебната практика на един студент. Направени са изводи за важността на самооценката в обучението на стажант-учителите.

#### **Résumé**

Cet article, dans une tentative d'éclaircir dans une certaine mesure la question du monitoring des instituteurs-stagiaires, présente une étude, réalisée dans une école d'Etat, en suivant une démarche d'autoévaluation lors de la pratique éducative qui puisse aider les instituteurs-stagiaires de passer plus facilement du "jeu" d'enseignant à la manière de penser des enseignants. L'article offre un commentaire, basé sur l'analyse des réflexions et de l'autoévaluation dans un registre de la pratique éducative d'un étudiant. Des conclusions sont faites sur l'utilité de l'autoévaluation dans la formation des instituteurs-stagiaires.

#### **Introduction**

Professional development has always been a focus area in teacher education (Calderhead and Robson, 1991; Kagan, 1992; Day, Calderhead and Denicolo, 1993). A great deal of research has been carried out into how student teachers learn to teach. One of the common findings is that during the learning process student teachers typically go through a number of different stages of development (Fuller, 1969; Clark and Peterson, 1986; Nespor, 1987; Bullough and Baughman, 1993; Grossman, 1995; Maynard, 1997). Fuller (1969) theorized that teacher concerns can be classified into three distinct categories – self concerns, task concerns, impact concerns – and that one moves from self through task to impact concerns as experience is gained. Maynard (1997) suggests five stages of development - (1) early idealism, (2) survival, (3) recognizing difficulties,

(4) hitting the 'plateau', (5) moving on<sup>1</sup> – each with its range of concerns. Maynard's 'survival' stage corresponds to Fuller's self concerns; the task concerns to the 'recognizing difficulties', the impact concerns to hitting the plateau. No matter what terms are adopted, both models suggest diachronic development. The researcher argues this and hypothesises that professional development is of synchronic nature.

For the vast majority of students in training, their only experience of the teaching process has been as pupils themselves. The first days and weeks in the classroom are extremely challenging and stressful for them, both personally and professionally. One of the common complaints that student teachers make in these early days is that they find it difficult to disentangle the complexities of teaching and understand the processes. Either they assume it is straightforward or they are overwhelmed by its complexity. Another important feature of early classroom experience is that student teachers frequently become "*obsessed with their own survival*" (Maynard, 1997); they become dominated by their concern to manage the pupils. Teaching and learning activities are judged almost entirely in terms of whether they contribute to achieving that end. Eventually, most student teachers manage to at least act like teachers; they learn how to control the class and engage the pupils in some purposeful activity. However, "*once student teachers have achieved a basic level of competence, they may reach a plateau and stop developing. Many student teachers appear to have found one way of teaching that works and are determined to stick to it.*" (Maynard, 1997: 46). The challenge at this point is for mentors to help student teachers move on from acting like a teacher to thinking like a teacher. Maynard goes on to suggest that one of the key differences between these two stages is that experienced teachers

*"... are able to devote their attention to thinking about their pupils' learning and appropriate ways of teaching to support that learning, rather than simply focussing on their own performance"*

Maynard, 1997: 46

It is essential that student teachers too learn to experiment and/or show concern for pupils' learning if they are to improve the quality of their teaching. It is suggested, however, that without external support, this transition is often difficult.

---

<sup>1</sup> The researcher has introduced the numbering for ease of reference.

### Objectives of the study

The present study had two foci of interest:

- first, to see if the mentee would go through the stages of development advanced by Maynard, and would hit a 'plateau' during her teaching practice; and
- second, self-assessment as a viable approach to mentoring student teachers; in particular, self-evaluation and self-assessment as a means of helping student teachers construct a framework of 'good practice'.

### Definition of key terms

Various authors have referred to the students in training as student teachers, trainees and mentees. These have been used interchangeably in the present article.

### Self-assessment

Dickenson (1987), who sees self-assessment as being crucial in the process of learner development states that

*"... it is essential for a learner preparing for autonomy to be able to make some kind of judgement about the accuracy and appropriacy of her performance, and also because self-assessment emphasises learning, the process, rather than the results, the product."*

Dickenson, 1987: 151

Maynard suggests that self-assessment develops student teachers' abilities to assess themselves and to devise action plans for their own further professional development. She recognizes, however, the limitations that the student teachers' evaluations of their developing competence are *"framed according to their particular (and possibly limited) understanding of teaching and learning, their capacity for critical analysis, the perceived expectations of their tutors and mentors, etc."* (Maynard, 1997: 65). In addition, student teachers usually find it difficult to acknowledge their strengths and their weaknesses, in particular. Despite these limitations, though, they should be helped to evaluate their progress. Becoming centrally involved in their own assessment, student teachers are likely to feel an increased sense of commitment to developing their professional competence and understanding.

Elekes (1997a) changed the format of the observation guidelines into a set of grading criteria with the purpose of facilitating the student teachers' continuous self-assessment and concludes that “*self-assessment questionnaires are absolutely suitable for facilitating trainees' self-assessment ... as it can foster trainees' reflection on their teaching*” (Elekes, 1997b: 7).

### Controlled diary writing

Applying self-assessment necessitated orientating the research subject towards stringent self-appraisal. This would, it was predicted, result in improved evaluative comment on the teaching experience and extended outcomes measured by her own perceptions of the benefit of undertaking the project itself. An approach based on a naturalistic form of inquiry with the student teacher being given little or no guidance as to what to write about, or how to write her diary was found less appropriate than controlled diary writing. Palmer (1992) suggests in a study on diaries for self-assessment in INSET that

*“while this form of consciousness-raising through introspection has provided many useful insights [...], the quality and quantity of the evaluative comments obtained is not always satisfactory being on occasion superficial and inconclusive and hence effectively limiting the scope of the evaluation.”*

Palmer, 1992: 228

He later speculates that “*by allowing the diarists total freedom to use the diary as they wished, the scope of the project might become too great to draw any useful conclusions*” (Palmer, 1992: 232).

Therefore, it was considered more appropriate that some control over diary entries would focus the mentee on the possible content of her diary and guide her through the writing process.

### Diarist-as-participant Orientation

Prior orientation is justified on two counts: firstly, to familiarise the student teacher with the aims and methodology of the project involved and, secondly, to raise her self-awareness as a learner, prior to diary writing, in order to extend pedagogic and evaluative outcomes - that is the quantity and quality of individual achievement and of the evaluative comment.

## **The Study**

### *Design and planning*

The study was carried out with a female second-year university student during her teaching practice in a 1st grade class in a state-owned primary school. The mentee had no teaching experience beforehand. She had observed 10 lessons of experienced teachers, reflected on the teaching process and conferred with her university tutor (as the university programme required). The teaching practice (TP) took place from March to May 2000. Before the TP the mentee was verbally introduced to the project. As planned for the study, during the TP the mentee had to (a) observe 10 lessons of an inexperienced peer and reflect not only on the teaching process but also on the pupils' learning; and (b) to teach 10 (in two series of five) lessons and reflect on the teaching process and on the pupils' learning as well. The mentee was familiarised with a set of criteria descriptors (the university performance expectations) by observing and evaluating peers as to help her construct a mental assessment framework. Later, it was envisaged, this framework would help her when evaluating her own lessons. After the mentee's first lesson, she was briefed as to identify areas for development during her teaching experience. The mentor conferred with the mentee after each of these lessons for a total of 20 post-lesson mentorial sessions (10 peers' observations and 10 her own). In addition, the mentee kept a learning diary, which served as a basis for the post-lesson discussions and was used by the researcher for data analysis in the study.

The TP diary took the form of both structured sections (guided reflection) and unstructured ones (free reflection). A lesson evaluation form (provided by the university) was used to encourage reflection on the lessons in a structured way, in addition ensuring the evaluative comment. For the unstructured part loose guidelines were given which were intended to prompt the mentee about what to include. Thus, the diary writing was not restricted. At the end of the TP the mentee was given an improvement checklist to help assess her own overall progress and evaluate the teaching experience.

### *Data elicitation*

Data has been elicited from the mentee's portfolio which included 10 lesson plans, 10 self-evaluation forms of these lessons, 1 global self-evaluation of TP and a global peer evaluation. The diary was not required by the university as a part of the course portfolio, but introduced by the researcher.

### Ethics

The diary was kept specifically for this study and the mentee knew that confidentiality would be maintained by the researcher. However, she gave her permission for quotes to be cited in the study. For ethical and privacy reasons, as discussed at the preliminary session, information potentially damaging to the diarist is withheld; and the student teacher hereinafter is referred to as Mentee. The researcher does not know precisely how much has been omitted in raw data but in practice little is probably edited and is certainly dependent upon the relationship and trust the mentor and Mentee have built up.

### **Results and Discussion**

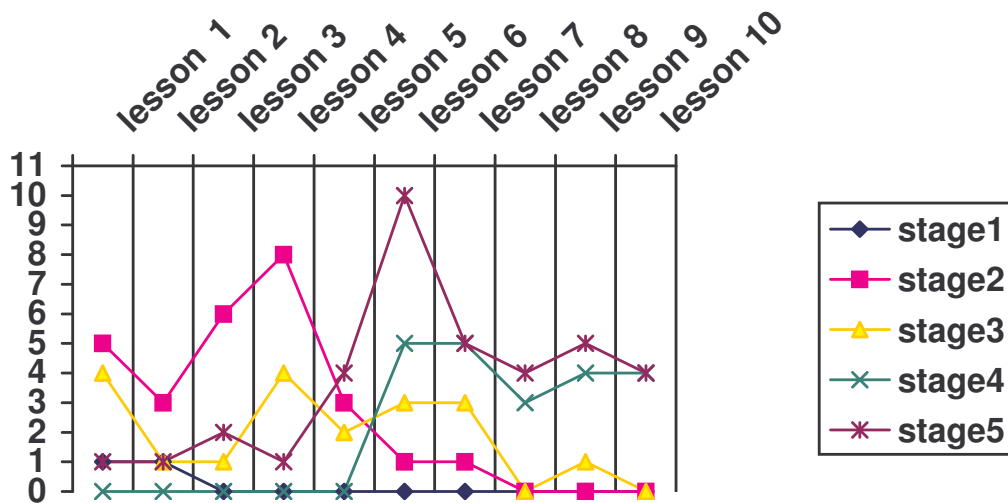
Data have been compiled and analysed. The aim of the data analysis was to find wording of diary entries that would be interpreted as certain stages of development of the Mentee, as advanced by Maynard. It was supposed that the quantity of the evaluative comment on a particular stage would suggest a prevailing anxiety – that is, the greater the amount of reflection on particular teaching aspects or teaching-related personal issues, the bigger the concerns. Quality of reflection (choice of particular words) was also taken into account.

### Stages of development

This study ascertained that a variety of concerns were evident throughout the Mentee's development during the TP. It showed that among the variety of stages coded in the reflections on a lesson there was a dominating one. It could be suggested that a Mentee would face and experience various issues that could be attributed to the different stages with a prevailing concern illustrative of a particular stage. For example, during the first five lessons, the Mentee was preoccupied with stage 2 (survival) issues in varying degree. In her diary these came along with stage 3 concerns (recognizing difficulties) and instances of stage 5 ones (moving on).

*I wanted to prepare pictures for all students but it was impossible – it takes a lot of time ... [lesson 2]  
I had to pay attention on pair work, time, encouragement and extra activities for the quicker students.  
[...] I am aware of my weaknesses but I wanted to present my 3<sup>rd</sup> lesson and myself in a good way  
[lesson 3]  
I realized after the lesson that I had to be more relaxed and warmer with the pupils [lesson 4]  
I had to pay attention to everything and everyone [lesson 4]  
I want my lesson to be better than the previous [lesson 4]  
It was difficult to prepare for the lesson – each part and activity, to avoid previous mistakes [lesson 5]*

Stage 5 concerns were present throughout the whole TP. This is probably due to the fact that the Mentee was encouraged to think of each lesson as another developmental stage and the fact that she was aware of the development of her teaching competence. Indeed, the TP was highly informative and heavily loaded with the acquisition of new competencies. What is interesting to note is the sharp increase of stage 5 concerns after the fifth lesson (as seen in Graph 1 below). Since people need to step back from their cognitive processes to reflect on their experience, it is in fact necessary for a mentee (as a learner) to internalize the newly acquired knowledge and skills. The break between the two series of five lessons served this purpose as the Mentee had the time to reflect and evaluate the achievement of objectives.



Graph 1: Amount of mentee's reflection in the teaching practice diary

The increase of stage 5 concerns comes with a significant drop of stage 2 worries, thus suggesting a reciprocal relationship between them. It might be speculated that actions taken by the Mentee towards experimenting with new ideas would decrease the realistic perception of the potential difficulties. This is probably a result of the Mentee's increased confidence, as also suggested by the increase of stage 4 indications ('plateau') at the same time. It will be interesting to investigate if any combinations of stage concerns are a typical occurrence.

Another finding was that the Mentee did not go through the stages in the particular order suggested by Maynard. This contradicts the proposed 5-stage model. In particular, the Mentee did not start with a dominating stage 1, but stage 2 (survival) concerns. Starting from stage 2 could be

attributed to the fact that the Mentee visited peers and assessed their performance in class. These observations and the briefing with the mentor afterwards helped her realise the many issues she had to pay attention to in class and could have helped skip the 'early idealism' stage. It could be speculated that if she had visited peers who were performing less successfully, she might have developed a high opinion of her teaching, this further resulting in little progress, or starting from stage 1 - 'early idealism'.

The findings corroborate claims about the multidimensional nature of learning to teach (Elliot & Calderhead, 1994). The mentee would probably continue throughout her development to move to expertise in different areas at different rates. Thus, it is unlikely that there would be a linear progression in all domains of developing competencies as suggested by the stage models. What is more likely is development across a range of competencies at different times for different student teachers. Hence, learning to teach, in this sense, is idiosyncratic and personal. This speculation is very interesting and needs further investigation.

#### 'Plateau'

No entries were found pertaining to stage 4 'plateau' until after the fifth lesson, but indications were present during the second series of five lessons. The Mentee wrote in her diary after the fifth lesson that she had no worries about discipline; this was also noted by the mentor and recorded in his observation sheet. She was basically in control of the class and could distance herself from her performance to think about better ways of supporting the pupils' learning.

*I could manage the class. My task in the lesson was to see things from the pupils' perspective.*

*[lesson 8]*

*Some students had problems with plural. [lesson 5]*

*It's not easy but I hope to improve myself and my work as a teacher. [lesson 6]*

*The children had something to take away from the class. They became aware of their progress.*

*[lesson 3]*

It could be suggested that the mentee had reached her **first** 'plateau'. The mentor's role was to help the mentee to overcome this very first plateau. And it could be claimed that the undertaken self-assessment approach had its significance and can be therefore considered a viable approach.



### Self-assessment

Quality and quantity of the evaluative comment in the Mentee's diary increased as the TP progressed. In the beginning the Mentee had only vague objectives. With more specific goals being established, the amount and quality of reflection increased. After her first lesson, the Mentee wrote in her diary [...] *I need more knowledge to 'play' as a teacher does*. Later, after the third lesson she stated: *I need more time to get used to classrooms and working as a teacher*. Further on, after the sixth lesson, she put down: *It's not easy but I hope to improve my work as a teacher as soon as possible. The lesson was successful, but it needs more if I want to be a good teacher*. The above excerpts clearly show the increased amount of reflection. More interesting, however, is the wording – from *'play as a teacher'* through *'working as a teacher'* to *'a good teacher'*. The change of attitude is also in evidence.

It was found that self-assessment could extend the mentee's insights into her own and her pupils' behaviour, hence her capabilities for professional learning. However, it is not always sufficient to place mentees in the position of 'reflective veteran teachers' and assume the experience will shed light on what goes on in the classroom. Although this may happen, it is often difficult for the mentees to assess the relevance of different insights and experiences in relation to their own teaching situation. Therefore, encouraged self-assessment could streamline professional learning by allowing the mentee to respond to different types of classroom events hence getting a better perspective of the learning and teaching processes. The difficulty, however, would be the mentee's capacity for reflection and critical introspection. Morse (1998) states that reflection can be taught by breaking reflection down into component skills that are 'teachable' and able to be practised. Self-evaluation through diary writing is not something which comes easily to most people and therefore guidance is needed. The Mentee herself did not claim to have found the diary keeping difficult or helpful. What is important is the act of verbalising her objectives to provide a standard of comparison for the future measurement of outcomes and recognition of strengths and weaknesses. Although not conclusive, the data analysis suggests that the TP diary did fulfil a partial role in helping the mentee evaluate individual progress and a very important role in helping her to assess her success as a whole.

### Peer observation

Two types of observation need to be considered when encouraging peer assessment - competency-based and pupil-focused observation. The former is appropriate when a mentee has gained some

insight into the rules, routines and rituals of the classroom and is ready for a more systematic approach to training. Then, acquainting the mentee with the assessment criteria (performance expectations) would provide a means for measuring progress. It would also provide a framework for setting targets for further development by focusing on more specific areas for improvement. Following that comes pupil-focused observation in order to direct the mentee's attention towards the quality of the pupils' learning and the learning outcomes rather than towards the mentee's own performance. This kind of observation will be particularly useful when the mentor encourages self-evaluation with a view of the quality of the pupils' learning. It is indeed a fact that many teacher education programmes emphasise the importance of competency-based observation, and often seem to disregard pupil-focused observation.

### **Conclusions**

The study does not reject the logical order of Maynard's model of stages of development. Nor is it assumed that a mentee would hit *the one and only* 'plateau' of her professional development in 5-10 lessons. Since no learning takes place as a smooth upward curve, it is wise to suggest that professional learning is of multidimensional cyclic nature. In other words, following the five-stage model, the cycles will be numerous in one's professional growth with the mentee developing one or more competencies simultaneously. Every lesson, class or academic year could follow the five-stage model, each with its plateau. Therefore, any 'plateau' reached should not be feared, but viewed as a necessary stage when the student teacher (being a learner) steps back, reflects on the experience and enjoys the achievements. Since newly qualified teachers, after graduation, will most probably face a reality where they will have to cope with difficulties on their own, reflection and critical self-evaluation and self-assessment will be of most help to them. Therefore, the mentor's job is to help student teachers with self-evaluation and self-assessment as a way to become self-critical reflective practitioners. This should be an *encouraged self-evaluation* approach with the necessary competency-based, and more importantly, pupil-focused observation as to help the mentees to construct a framework of good practice.

There are still very many questions to be answered as to how student teachers learn to teach. It is interesting to find out if any concerns occur typically in combinations and which combinations are addressed simultaneously. Are there any stages that can be skipped until a plateau is reached, or only the initial one? Despite its small scale, this study suggests that self-assessment is a viable

approach in mentoring student teachers and should be investigated in more detail in the future, something which was not possible within the scope of this study.

Mentoring student teachers to help them lay the foundations of development as independent reflective practitioners is, in essence, how mentors can help student teachers, upon hitting their very first 'plateau', to move on more easily from 'acting like a teacher' to 'thinking like a teacher'. Mentors have the important role to make the link between *learning about teaching* at university and *learning teaching* at school.

### References:

- Alderson, J. C.** (1985). 'Evaluation', *Lancaster Practical Papers in English Language Education*, 6, Oxford: Pergamon
- Anderson L. W.** (ed.) (1995, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn.). *International Encyclopedia of Teaching and Teacher Educational Research*, Oxford: Pergamon
- Bullough, R. V., & Baughman, K.** (1993). 'Continuity and change in teacher development: First year teacher after five years', *Journal of Teacher Education*, 44 (2), 88-95.
- Calderhead, J., & Robinson, M.** (1991). 'Images of teaching: Student teachers' early conceptions of classroom practice', *Teaching & Teacher Education*, 7, 1-8
- Clark, C. M., & Peterson, P. L.** (1986). 'Teachers' thought process' in Wittrock, M.C. (ed.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, (3<sup>rd</sup> edn.), New York: Macmillan, 255-296
- Day, C., Calderhead, J., & Denicolo, P.** (eds.) (1993). *Research on teacher thinking: understanding professional development*, London: The Falmer Press
- Dickenson, L.** (1987). *Self-instruction in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Elekes, K.** (1997a). 'Let the trainees do it' - facilitating self-assessment, *School Experience*. Special Issue, September, 12-13
- Elekes, K.** (1997b). 'The proof of the pudding ... On the use of the Self-assessment Questionnaire', *School Experience*, 2 (1), 4-7
- Elliot, B. & Claderhead, J.** (1994). 'Mentoring for Teacher Development: Possibilities and Caveats' in McIntyre, D., Hagger, H. & Wilkin, M. (eds.) *Mentoring: Perspectives on School-Based Teacher Education*, London: Kogan
- Fuller, F. F.** (1969). 'Concerns of teachers: a developmental conceptualization', *American Educational Research Journal*, 6, 207-226
- Grossman, P. L.** (1995). 'A psychological view of teachers. Teachers' knowledge' in Anderson, L.W. (ed.) *International Encyclopedia of Teaching and Teacher Educational Research* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.), Oxford: Pergamon.
- Kagan, D. M.** (1992). 'Professional growth among preservice and beginning teachers', *Review of Educational Research*, 62 (2), 129-169
- Maynard, T.** (1997). *An Introduction to Primary Mentoring*, London: Cassell
- McIntyre, D., Hagger, H. & Wilkin, M.** (eds.) (1994). *Mentoring: Perspectives on School-Based Teacher Education*, London: Kogan
- Morse, D.** (1998). 'Reflections. Can reflection be taught?', *Teacher Development Newsletter*, 38, 14
- Murphy-O'Dwyer, L. M.** (1985). 'Diary studies as a method for evaluating teacher training' in Alderson, J. C. (1985). 'Evaluation', *Lancaster Practical Papers in English Language Education*, 6, Oxford: Pergamon
- Nespor, J.** (1987). 'The role of beliefs in the practice of teaching', *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 19 (4), 317-328
- Palmer, C. H.** (1992). 'Diaries for self-assessment and INSET programme evaluation', *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 15 (3), 227-238
- Wittrock, M. C.** (ed.) (1986, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn.). *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, New York: Macmillan