# Mentors matter! What makes a mentor teacher a successful mentor teacher?

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# Teachers' Life-cycle from Initial Teacher Education to Experienced Professional

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# Mentors Matter! What Makes a Mentor Teacher a Successful Mentor Teacher?

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## Abstract

In the Netherlands, as in other European countries, school based teacher training is more and more common and successful in teacher education, it strengthens the connection between teacher training institutes and schools. The Dutch secretary of Education van Bijsterveld (2010) called it 'a great example of mutual learning'. Schools, training institutes, mentor teachers (MT), teacher trainers and student teachers (ST) are partners in the training of the students.

The Regional training school West Friesland (ROWF) is a cooperation of thirteen schools and three teacher training institutes. Two hundred teachers are MT's of over 300 ST's each year. Each school has one or two school based trainers and there are 6 institute trainers assigned to the schools. In this training school there are four groups who directly participate in the ST's guidance, the ST's themselves, the MT's, school based trainers and trainers from the teacher training institute. All are involved in the students' development but all with a different focus. There are two different types of teacher training institutes involved, a teacher training college and a post graduate teacher training course. At the teacher training college students are trained for four years at bachelor level, the post graduate teacher training course is one (or one and a half) year training at master level.

**Keywords**: mentors, mentor teachers' competence, training model

## Theoretical approach

### Studies on MT competences

How MT's behave during their mentoring, and what characterizes their success, is a question that has been studied from various perspectives and in different contexts. Most of the studies I used focus on one or two specific skills, for instance the specific supervisory and reflective skills of a MT (Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen & Bergen 2008); the MT as teacher educator (Feiman – Nemser 1998); the change in responsibilities of a MT- (Hall, Draper, Smith and Bullough Jr. 2008) and the role of expectations in the relation of mentor- and ST. (Rajuan, Beijaard & Verloop 2010).

Although it is very useful to focus on specific competences, I especially want to look at the combination of the most successful ones and look at where the different competences show overlap and similarity.

In the nine articles I studied, nine aspects of mentoring ST's were mentioned in two or more studies. I'll use these nine themes as a frame to discuss the theory about MT's competences. In four studies the work of the MT is understood as complex. Because of the increase in responsibilities in mentoring (Hall, Draper, Smith & Bullough Jr. 2008), the complex nature of teaching (Feiman – Nemser 1998; Buitink 2008), but also because the relation between ST and mentor is an interpersonal one, complex, dynamic and often problematic (Rajuan, Beijaard & Verloop 2010). Learning a complex activity like teaching can only be effectively done in an authentic context, i.e. in the schools (Buitink 2008).

Four studies pay specific attention to how the school becomes a learning - and workplace for the ST. The MT is crucial in creating a place where the student can learn, experience and develop. In teacher training the emphasis is more and more often placed on the school as a learning environment (Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen & Bergen 2007). This environment is a key aspect in the development of students teachers, so the learning outcomes are probably primarily determined by the organization of the learning environment. The MT plays an important role in this. (Buitink 2008). The classroom is a place to teach. MT's create opportunities for ST's to have rich learning experiences. These experiences are shaped by joint activities of mentor- and ST's (Hall, Draper, Smith & Bullough Jr. 2008; Feiman – Nemser 1998).

All the researchers address the importance of paying attention to the ST's concerns, and creating space to let the student reflect on them. One article pays more specific attention to that. Hennissen et al. (2007) state that over the years the role of a MT has changed from helping the student socialize in the school to a more reflective role. This role shift also requires that MT's attend to ST's present "concerns" (Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen & Bergen 2007).

Should a MT be a role model for his students? In four studies this theme is addressed. Many MT's think that being a model-, and demonstrating teaching are amongst the most important skills (Hall, Draper, Smith & Bullough Jr. 2008). But modeling is also a cooperative enterprise (Feiman – Nemser 2001; Feiman – Nemser 1998; Buitink 2008)! Generally modeling and demonstrating teaching activities are understood as useful as long as MT's see the danger of ST's not being conscious of why they follow their mentors (Buitink 2008).

In four studies the interaction between teacher training institutes and school is of importance in school based training, and the connection between theory and practice a powerful tool in the development of ST's (Hall, Draper, Smith & Bullough Jr. 2008). Feiman – Nemser (1998) considers MT's as school based trainers, and sees it as a major role! To help ST's make this connection, MT's need to have relevant theoretical knowledge (Feiman – Nemser 2001).

MT's possess a practical or usable knowledge and help ST's develop this knowledge (Feiman – Nemser 2001; Buitink 2008).

Reflection is a powerful tool. Five articles focus on reflection more specifically. Reflection is crucial in making the things students do (well) but are not aware of, visible and explicit (Feiman – Nemser 1998; Buitink 2008). Trained mentors are better in reflecting on ST's actions than untrained mentors (Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen & Bergen 2007; Harrison, Dymoke & Pell 2006). MT's should help ST's by helping students to focus on the kids in their reflective conversations (Feiman – Nemser 2001; Buitink 2008). All articles point out that reflection is learning how to help a ST reflect and making a ST reflect. Self-reflection is important for MT's too!

Effective MT's give feedback and are able to be , constructively, critical. Two researchers go deeper into that part. Feedback should always be specific and focused on growth (Hall, Draper, Smith & Bullough Jr. 2008; Feiman – Nemser 2001).

Good MT's are thoughtful MT's, they have a clear vision on what good teaching is, and are able to share that with the ST. They help and stimulate ST's in developing their own vision on good teaching ( 3 studies: Feiman – Nemser 1998; Feiman – Nemser 2001 ; Buitink 2008).
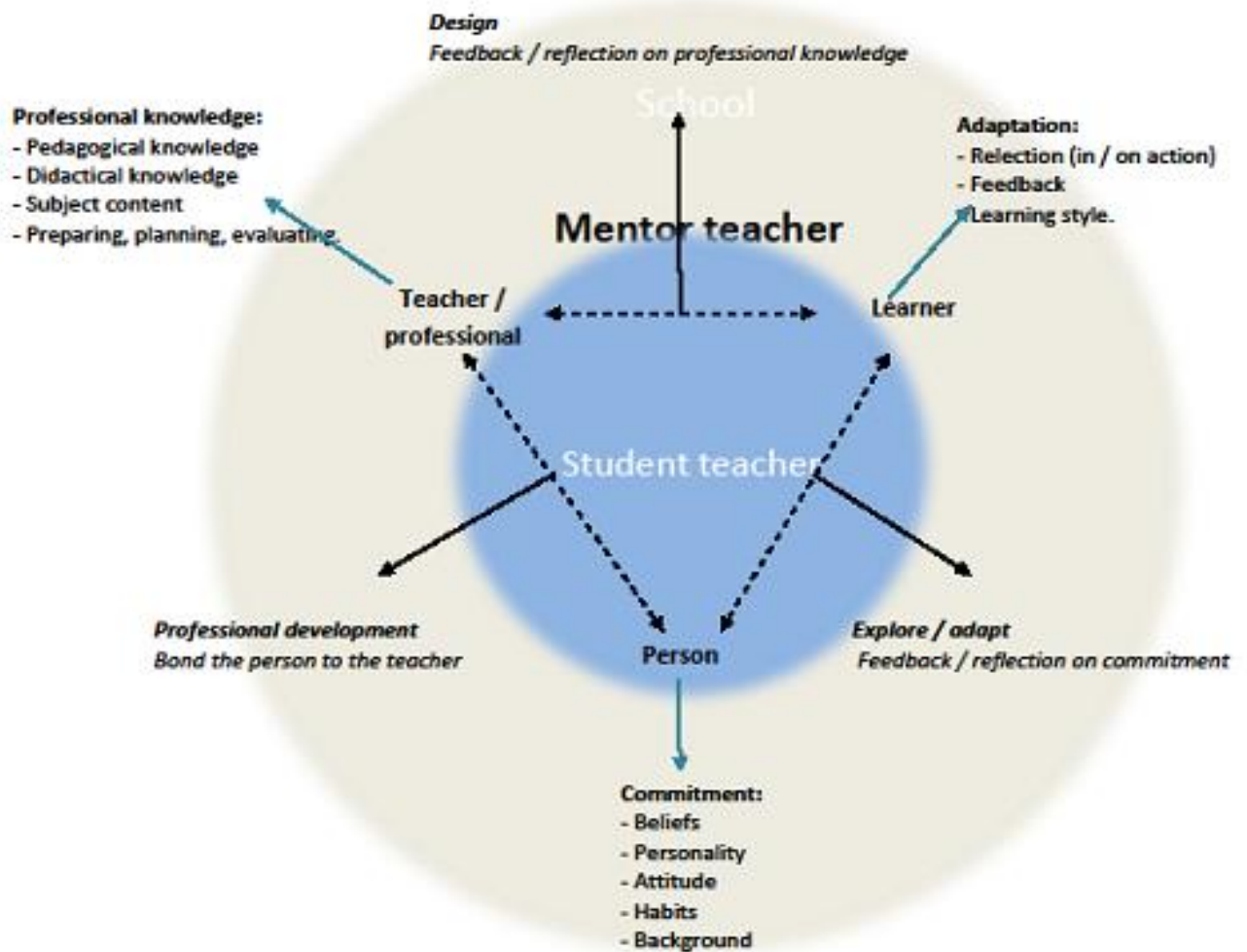
Every ST but also every MT has his or her own style and personality. These factors have an influence on the ST's learning processes (Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen & Bergen 2007). Especially where the pairing of MT's and ST's is a forced one it is critical to monitor if the mentors approach and the students' needs are matched. (Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen & Bergen 2007; Rajuan, Beijaard & Verloop 2010)

*Training model*

Teaching is complex, as is the guidance of students who learn how to teach. To frame this complex process for participants the ROWF uses a training model. This model was first developed in the Ignatius project, an international project on the guidance of newly appointed teachers. (Van der Linden, Kragten, Koet 2008; Kragten, Hoeksma, Koet, Van der Linden 2010)

In this model there are three levels; level one concerns the student, level two the MT and level three the school (- organization). The ST is the starting point of the model and within the development of each ST, three 'roles' are active, the professional didactics, pedagogy, organizing lessons, subject content etc.), the learner (reflection and feedback on the ST's development and learning style) and the person (what kind of person is the ST, what kind of teacher does he wants to be, how does he think about teaching and children etc.). The MT (level 2) must focus equally on all three roles, as does the school in organizing the school based training. This research focuses on the second level of this model, the MT. This model might be- a useful tool to frame all the data collected in this research.

*Figure 1. Training model Regional training school West Friesland.*

**Design**
*Feedback / reflection on professional knowledge*

School

**Professional knowledge:**
- Pedagogical knowledge
- Didactical knowledge
- Subject content
- Preparing, planning, evaluating.

**Adaptation:**
- Relection (in / on action)
- Feedback
- Learning style.

**Mentor teacher**

Teacher / professional

Learner

Student teacher

**Professional development**
*Bond the person to the teacher*

Person

**Explore / adapt**
*Feedback / reflection on commitment*

**Commitment:**
- Beliefs
- Personality
- Attitude
- Habits
- Background

**The research**

A lot of things can happen at the ST's workplace. One of the goals of training schools is to connect the workplace to theoretical concepts and thus give the ST more, and more effective, tools to cope with all the things happening in and around the classroom. Universities and teacher training institutes have performed numerous studies on the role of the MT in the development of the ST.

I searched for the role of MT in well-known and reviewed researches and then described what competences make this role a successful one.

In the structure of school based training, and arranging the workplace of the ST, the MT is very important. This role requires specific competences of this teacher. The competences of a successful teacher are not by definition the same as those of a successful MT. And what it is that makes a teacher a successful MT that we don't know for sure!

I wanted to know what aspects in the mentoring of teacher student create success, and what MT's need to make their guidance a successful one and if the mentioned training model provides a useful framework to establish this.

***Research questions:***

What do MT's do to make their guidance a successful one?

- What competences are the most important, relevant ones?
- Does the mentioned model provide a useful framework?

***Methods***

I used a semi structured interview with twelve participants to collect data to find out what MT's do to make their guidance successful. To structure the interview I used two frameworks; the first one arose from themes I had found in the literature. Nine themes were mentioned in two or more studies. According to these studies a MT should:

- pay attention to the complexity of teaching;
- create a workplace where the ST can have rich experiences;
- pay attention to the ST's actual concerns;
- be a role model;
- help the ST to connect theory to practice;
- reflect on- , and let the ST reflect on his experiences;
- give constructive feedback;
- have a clear vision on good teaching;
- be able to create a workable relation with the ST.

The second structure is our training model. Although this training model does not play a role in the interviews, I placed these nine themes in our model so that that could be used as a tool in the analysis of the data afterwards.

Themes 1 to 5 all have to do with the development of the professional knowledge a ST needs to become a teacher / professional. Themes 6 and 7 have to do with- adaptation, reflection and feedback on the experiences and learning process of the ST. Themes 8 and 9 have to do with personal aspects, beliefs, having a safe and inspiring relation with the MT.

*Participants*

In our training school there are four groups who directly participate in the ST's guidance, the ST's themselves, the MT's, school based trainers and trainers from the teacher training institutes. From all groups I interviewed three participants.

The three students I chose were nominated by their school based trainer, two of them had had three or four mentors the last three or four years, one only had one. The three MT's also were nominated, as good MT's, by their school based trainer but were not the MT of the chosen students. They had 3 years of experience or more and were trained in guiding ST's. Two of them are MT's of bachelor level ST's and one of them is the MT of a master level student. The three school based trainers were chosen from different schools and selected on the basis of experience and training. From the teacher institute trainers two are teacher trainers at the teacher training college, one is a teacher trainer at the post graduate teacher training course.

**Data collection**

The goal of the interviews was to collect data on what a successful MT is from all four perspectives. The school based and institute trainers look at the MT on the same level but also from the institute's perspective. Do MT's connect theory to the practice of the ST's? I started each interview by asking if the participant could tell what he or she thinks is the most important competence of a MT.

Also all the participants were asked if the mentioned competences are realistic, useful and developable. All participants I invited agreed to participate.

**Measures**

The interview was a semi structured interview. All together I arrived to the nine themes mentioned in 4.2. Supplemented with a tenth theme; what is missing, what's the most important competence?

When the participants were invited I gave them a list of these ten themes accompanied by a short explanation per theme so that they could think things over. All the interviews took place within three weeks and were recorded on audio and video. The interviews lasted 1 hour.

I made a transcript of the interviews per respondent and per theme.

Then I wrote down all the respondent's statements per theme and compared them with what the different studies say about that particular theme.

*Reliability / validity*

To guarantee the reliability I invited two colleague researchers, who are also school based trainers, to look at the transition of the 11 studies to the interview themes. They stated that the transition had been done well and the themes selected were valuable in answering the research questions. The transition into the themes was correct, but I had to make sure not to be too detailed in my questioning, and to be aware that there is enough space for the participants to state their view. I performed two test interviews, one with a ST and one with a teacher trainer. In advance I asked them to specifically look if the interview, the structure and the themes, would lead to an answer to the questions: 'What do MT's do to make their guidance a successful one? And what are the most relevant competences?' They were positive, felt comfortable and got enough room to express their feelings and opinion and felt the themes were the right ones to answer questions.

**Results**

Teaching is complex, and guiding ST's is too. All of the participants agree that teaching can only be learned properly in the schools; this corresponds with at least three studies.
The model is used to combine the themes from the studies and the data from the interviews.

***What does a successful mentor do to support the ST in developing his professional knowledge?***

*He helps the ST's get a grip on things.* To do so they must be able to make things smaller;
"the MT must be able to break up the content into small pieces.. " (Lisette, student teacher).
"Together with your ST you have to look for chances for success." (Jan, teacher trainer).

Learning how to teach, and mentoring that process is a joint activity of ST and MT. (Feiman – Nemser 2001).

*The MT creates possibilities to teach*, he sets the pre-conditions (Hall, Draper, Smith and Bullough Jr. 2008). The school, the class, the pupils, you cannot do without them in learning how to teach! (Hall, Draper, Smith & Bullough Jr. 2008; Buitink 2008). "The MT takes care that the class is in order and that the ST can teach safely there." (Evert Jan. Teacher trainer). Learning at the workplace is a joint activity, MT and ST are fellow learners. (Feiman – Nemser 1998). "The MT is co – developer, and participates" ( Harry. School based trainer). The whole school is involved, not only the ST's mentor!"(Joseph. School based trainer). The school is a place where the ST can practice, experiment and have rich learning opportunities

(Feiman – Nemser, 1998). " … everybody wants to help, give tips, or be a listening ear. Not just the MT, but everybody!" (Lisette. ST).

*A MT should have insight in what his ST's concerns are* and pay effective attention to that (Buitink, 2008). The ST's decide what's important. "The guidance should be customized, every ST is different" (Jan. Teacher trainer). "My MT should see what's bothering me" (Pieter. ST). The ST- and MT should always reflect on the ST's (actual) concerns! (Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen & Bergen 2007).

*One way or the other a MT is a role model.* Being a model is important but the modeling should be 'thoughtful' (Feiman – Nemser 1998). MT's demonstrate and show activities of good practice, but they can explain why they do things and connect them to the ST's development (Hall, Draper, Smith & Bullough Jr. 2008). The danger of unconsciously copying your MT's teaching style does not exist if this is discussed openly between MT and ST. (Buitink 2008). "Copying is not a problem if you know what and why you copy"
( Noortje. Teacher trainer). "Copying is good! I copy a lot, why shouldn't I if it works! We do talk about it though." (Leonie. ST). Although all participants think that the MT should be a good teacher, everybody wonders what a good teacher is!
*MT's become school based educators*, they make their knowledge accessible, and they help ST's make meaningful connections between theory and practice (Feiman – Nemser 1998; 2001). "The role of the MT is essential." (Evert Jan. Teacher trainer). "You don't need to have all the knowledge, but you must know it's there and how to stimulate a ST to go and search for it." (Jan. Teacher trainer). " If my MT asks me to search for solutions, and explain them to him that next week, that is useful and fun, getting concrete questions." (Pieter. ST).
MT's have a considerable practical (usable, tacit) knowledge, they should be conscious of that knowledge and make it accessible (Feiman – Nemser 1998; Buitink 2008). "My MT is intellectual challenging…. She connects theory in all the steps… !" (Lisette. ST).
All the participants endorse the importance of connecting theory to practice by the MT. They also state that it is not done often, or constructively. The MT's say they do not have enough knowledge of institute concepts to use that structurally in their mentoring practice.

**What does a successful mentor teacher do to let the ST (successfully) reflect on his classroom experiences and professional development?**

MT's should learn how to reflect and learn how to let the ST reflect on himself or herself (Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen & Bergen 2007).
Learning (how to teach) only takes place when the learner reflects on his learning process, on what he wants to achieve (Schön 1983). "Reflection must be focused on what the ST

wants to reach!.." (Sjef. School based trainer). " .. Ask for concrete behavior … if that does not come I'll connect it to observations." (Paul. MT). Trained MT's are better in helping, and reflecting on the ST's process (Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen & Bergen 2007; Harrison, Dymoke & Pell 2006).

The MT is the person to help him create consciousness of what they are doing and knowing what works and why! (Feiman – Nemser 1998; Buitink 2008). ST's learn how to teach without being conscious of it. " The MT must stimulate the ST to come out his 'intuitive state'." (Jan. Teacher trainer).

Reflection is also important to help the ST to focus on the pupil's perspective. 'What did they learn? What did I do to make them learn? ' (Feiman – Nemser 2001; Buitink 2008). "The MT must be able to reach that with his ST" (Hans. MT).

"A MT must be able to be critical and be able to give feedback." (Lisette. ST) Feedback and criticism should always be constructive and specific! (Feiman – Nemser 2001; Hall, Draper, Smith & Bullough Jr. 2008).

Giving feedback and reflection are related. "Feedback should be focused on the ST. All participants regard feedback as useful, but only constructive and with a positive attitude. Feedback must be concrete, small, realistic and has to stimulate success! "Tips are not feedback!" (Noortje. Teacher trainer).


### What does a successful mentor teacher do to connect the ST's personality, habits, beliefs, attitude and background with his professional development and reflectiveness?


*'Thoughtful' mentors have a clear vision on good teaching* ( Feiman - Nemser 1998, 2001). The MT discusses this vision with his teacher student. "Promoting your vision is stating what's important for you. " (Jan. Teacher trainer).  "On the way back we spoke about teaching and his experiences. You learn a lot by that." (Pieter. ST).  Having a clear vision on teaching is important. But again everybody asks himself: "What is a good teacher?".


*"It is important to have a match! The MT must be conscious of his style! He must be sensitive to the needs of the ST."* (Evert Jan. Teacher trainer).

A mentor – ST relation is an interpersonal relation- and because of that often problematic. Although it is better to create informal relations, in almost all the Dutch training schools the relation between MT and ST is a formal one, most of the time subject related and based on availability of the MT's (Rajuan, Beijaard & Verloop 2010).

MT's and their ST's often have different learning styles (Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen & Bergen 2007). Student – and MT's have expectations of the relation and the other , these expectations can match, in that case it often feels harmonic, comfortable and safe for the ST ( and MT). When the expectations mismatch, it feels uncomfortable, ( to)

challenging and sometimes threatening for ST, but most of the times there is a mixed pattern (Rajuan, Beijaard & Verloop 2010). "It felt like a bad marriage, our relation was under constant stress, I set borders, I only will guide you on Biology and teaching! " (Marco. Mentor teacher). When there is too much comfort there might be not enough challenge for learning, and where there is too much challenge the relation might be so threatening that student- or MT ends the relation (Rajuan, Beijaard & Verloop 2010). "That MT gave me the feeling; 'I am not good at this', I almost quit school, that half year was painful, hard, no fun." (Leonie. ST). "It is this point in training where MT tell things are going wrong! Expressing expectations should take place at the start of a mentor – ST relation. " (Noortje. Teacher trainer).

Extreme match and mismatch contribute to limited opportunities for learning (Rajuan, Beijaard & Verloop 2010). "Clearly all the participants had the most to say about this theme! It is quite clear that each student- and MT brings his own style and personality into the relation. That is not a problem. But consciousness about that is important. A good match leads to learning for both student- and MT! (Rajuan, Beijaard & Verloop 2010).

## Conclusions

### *What do MT's do to make their guidance a successful one?*

Successful MT's always and first pay attention to *the person*. They make contact, establish a comfortable relation in which a ST feels safe and comfortable with enough room to develop his or her own style. MT's are responsible to discuss the expectations they have with the ST. They invite the ST to do the same! A relation preferably is not too comfortable. A successful MT recognizes the level of comfort and can switch, challenge the ST if the level of comfort is too high. On the other hand no comfort creates an unsafe environment with too much challenge for the ST; here too the MT can react successfully if he notices that the ST is not feeling safe enough.

Especially this aspect in guidance is crucial because ST's indicate that if things go wrong here they can get the feeling there not suitable to teach (and quit)! Especially there where the relation is a 'forced' one; a MT should always discuss this at the start of his relation with the ST.

MT's can be a role model and they can explain why they do the things they do!

They help the ST *develop professional knowledge*, by organizing their class in a way that the ST can teach ( a lot!). They help the ST organize lessons and together with the ST they create rich learning opportunities. They know how to help the student connect theory to practice and challenge the ST to look for, theoretical, answers.

They know how *to reflect, but of all let the student reflect* and make unconscious actions conscious!

The MT knows how to involve the pupils perspective in the ST's reflection. They help the ST to make big things small and understandable.

*What competences are the most important, relevant ones?*

Knowing how to establish a comfortable relation, with enough challenge! Be conscious of the mutual expectations and be able to discuss that. A MT lets the ST's develop his or her own style. They know how to communicate well. They are a role model, can demonstrate-, and discuss his or her vision on good teaching. Together with the ST they can create rich learning experiences for the ST's. They can challenge the ST to search for theoretical answers on practical questions. They can help the ST to reflect on his development, and make the invisible, visible. They involve the pupils perspective in the reflection of the ST. They help the ST to make big things small and understandable.

*Does the mentioned model provide a useful framework?*

MT's should always pay attention to all the different aspects of a ST's development. Looking at the model that means all three roles, the person, the learner and professional. The model helps to structure this process and helps to clarify to what role an actual concern is related to.

As do Hennissen et al. (2008), this case stresses the importance of training. This research is only the start. I'm curious what a larger group of ST's, MT's and school based trainers think about this. I'm going to examine that in September. After that I will design an experiment in which I will try out a training with a group MT's based on the most effective and crucial competences of a successful MT. How? That we will see next year.

Mentoring ST's: Complex? Sure! Interesting, even more! Developable? Yes! Is it useful for schools? Definitely! Or as Feiman – Nemser (2001) states: "Tools of good mentoring are also the tools of continuous improvement in teaching. "

**ETALAGE: a good example of how to organize workplace learning for ST's**

Because of the partnership with teacher training institutes, training schools are involved in all kinds of development and research projects. One of the projects the ROWF is involved in, is the ETALAGE project. ETALAGE stands for *European Task-based Activities for Language Learning; a good practice exchange*. In this Comenius Multilateral project samples of good practice of ICT based language learning tasks for four levels of the Common European Framework are collected, re-designed, adapted and disseminated and in-service teacher training courses in which teachers are trained to adapt these samples to their own classroom

situations are produced. A unique characteristic of this project is the cooperation of 8 national tandems of Teacher Education Institutes and schools. At the ROWF ST's co-create, deliver and evaluate task based language activities for pupils.

When ST's start their placement at a school, the school always looks for interesting tasks for ST's. When a school participates in a project like ETALAGE ST's will automatically participate in this project. In this case two schools were involved and at both school two fourth-year ST's of English participated.

The ST's helped their MT's, who were teachers of English, in the design and delivery of the language learning tasks. Especially this design process was a joint activity of ST's and MT's. It forced them to look into the theory of task based language learning and connect that to the delivery of the tasks. These ST's actually delivered all the tasks to different groups of pupils and with different teachers. They brought the concept of task based learning to different teachers and classes. They enhanced their knowledge of task based learning and improved their teaching through evaluating the tasks with the pupils. These ST's were given considerable autonomy. They felt very confident and got all the space they wanted in developing, organizing and delivering the tasks. Because of their feedback some tasks were changed, with a good result.

At the start of the ST's' commitment to the ETALAGE project there was a meeting with the coordinating teacher. He thought that the tasks and their role in designing, performing and evaluating the tasks was clear. The ST's did not have a clue and had other expectations of their role, the meeting and the coordinator. After this first meeting their enthusiasm was almost gone and they stated that they would rather not be involved in the project. A second meeting was necessary to discuss this and explain the MT's and ST's' expectations. After this meeting the ST's were reassured.

A project like the ETALAGE project gives ST's lots of opportunities. They were involved in a joint activity with other ST's and teachers. They had to search for theory of the underlying concepts and connecting them to the performance of the tasks. They did involve the pupils' perspective through performing structured evaluations with them. There were lots of discussions with the teachers and the ST's on the use of the tasks, their effect and the question if the tasks are a better way of learning English than more traditional activities, such as grammar and vocabulary exercises. And the ST's felt the liberty to explore; they gained confidence in delivering the tasks the way they wanted. But they were guided and helped whenever they needed. This was definitely a rich learning experience for both student and MT's!

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