

Mentoring as a Means for Transforming Mentor-Teachers’ Practical Knowledge: A Case Study from Greece

Evangelia Frydaki^{1*} & Maria Mamoura²

¹Associate Professor - National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Faculty of Philosophy, Pedagogy and Psychology, Greece

²Ph.D., Scientific Cooperator - National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Faculty of Philosophy, Pedagogy and Psychology, Greece, mmamoura@ppp.uoa.gr

*Correspondence: Evangelia Frydaki, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Faculty of Philosophy, Pedagogy and Psychology, University Campus, Postal Code: 15784, Athens, Greece. Tel: +302109327040; E-mail: efrydaki@ppp.uoa.gr

DOI: 10.12735/ier.v2i1p1

Abstract

The purpose of this research article is to reveal hidden possibilities about how mentor-teachers’ professional development through the transformation of their practical knowledge could occur into a mentoring context enhancing the role of schoolteachers as mentors. Drawing on Transformative Learning Theory literature, the study explores how five secondary teachers, involved in a mentoring program with such an orientation, come to transform or negotiate their previous conceptions of teaching, learning, and teacher’s role. The results of the qualitative data analysis reveal the transformative potential of this specific mentoring situation as well as the four types of interwoven mentoring experiences influencing the mentors’ knowledge transformation processes: innovative ideas/practices student-teachers enact in classrooms, questions on “how” and “why” of mentors’ teachings, creation of an informal mentors’ learning community, and the presence among them of a colleague having already developed a reflection-stance. The article’s contribution lies in highlighting new aspects of meaningful mentoring experiences fostering mentors’ knowledge transformation and development.

Keywords: Greece, knowledge transformation, mentor-teachers, secondary teachers

1. Introduction

Practicum and mentoring began to be considered as fields offering important opportunities for learning through knowledge transformation rather than for demonstrating things already learned (Zeichner, 1996; Schulz, 2005). Research studies on mentoring have mainly focused on studying the effects of mentoring on student- or novice teachers rather than on the potential of mentoring to force mentors’ knowledge transformation (Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1993; Frydaki & Mamoura, 2011). Some studies (Stanulis, 1995; Bodoczky & Malderez, 1997; Bullough Jr. & Draper, 2004; Bullough Jr., 2005; Hagger & McIntyre, 2006; Simpson, Hastings, & Hill, 2007; Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009) bring to light, among other things, the impact of mentoring on the learning and the development of mentors themselves. Most of them have mainly focused on mentor- protégé relationships or on the increase of

mentors' self-worth rather than on the potential for transforming mentors' practical knowledge (Bodoczky & Malderez, 1997; Stanulis, 1995; Bullough Jr. & Draper, 2004; Bullough Jr., 2005). Even studies (Southern, 2007) focusing more specifically on mentoring for transformative learning, they do it through the lenses of mentoring relationships that foster transformation.

Although this study builds upon previous research, it differs from previous studies in the practicum field in significant ways. It focuses on the potential of mentoring to force mentor-teachers to "question their own assumptions and practices, to become experimental in trying different ways of teaching, and to be open to reflection and debate about the core activities of teaching" (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 39); it draws its underlying assumptions on transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991, 1995 & 2000), aiming to gain insights into the given opportunities for questioning and problematising the mentors' taken-for-granted views and practices; it attempts to investigate the potential for five mentor-teachers working in the same Greek secondary school to transform their practical knowledge through participation in a reformed university-based mentoring program enhancing significantly the role of school-teachers as mentors; it also explores the kind of experiences that made the difference in mentors' knowledge transformation into a music secondary school setting. Our research purpose is to reveal hidden possibilities about how mentors' professional development through the transformation of their practical knowledge could occur into a mentoring context.

We focus on the transformation of mentors' practical knowledge as we deem that the latter constitutes one of the most pivotal aspects of teacher's professional development. By the term "practical knowledge" we mean something which refers to the totality of teachers' personal practical knowledge including beliefs, conceptions, values, attitudes, orientations, and which results from formal and informal educational experience (Shulman, 1987; Fenstermacher, 1994). Practical knowledge underlies the visible teaching behavior, and insight into teachers' practical knowledge can therefore be of help to understand their teaching.

2. Background

Our first underlying assumption is the idea of school-teachers as teacher educators. This implies moving more of teacher education into field settings, i.e. schools, and assigning school-teachers important roles as teacher educators and mentors in those settings (Orland, 2001; Hagger & McIntyre, 2006). This shift implies in its turn an expectation that school teachers, as mentors, could best develop or transform not only their mentees' but also their own practical knowledge via the opportunities for trying and testing new ideas in collaboration with student-teachers, through collaborative relationships, and for talking about teaching and learning in new ways. The literature on transformation provided constructs for supporting mentoring as a professional development practice which would transform both mentor and mentee (Daloz, 1986; Mezirow, 1991; Stanulis, 1995).

The conceptual framework guiding our research purpose and analysis derives from Transformative Learning Theory according to which adults learn as a result of reflectively transforming the taken-for-granted frames of reference (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mind-sets), making these frames more inclusive, differentiating, discriminating, reflective, more integrative of experience, and also more open to alternative perspectives, so that will prove more justified to guide action (Mezirow, 1991, 1995, & 2000; Cranton, 2006). The influences on Mezirow's TLT include Habermas's (1984 &

1987) differentiation between *communicative learning*, in which meaning is negotiated, from *instrumental learning*, in which information and facts are learned without full understanding of the meaningfulness of the activity. TLT also reflects the constructivist assumption that personal meaning derives from human interaction and communication (Cranton, 2006). Although individually we may create new meaning from our life experiences, a shift in meaning perspectives comes from the tension that is created by encountering different perspectives and ways of being that cause us to question the taken-for-granted views and practices. Hence, interaction with others and self-reflection lie at the heart of transformative learning (Daloz, 1999).

A third foundation for our research program is the research focusing on powerful practicum experiences into related settings. This research indicated that “breaks” with ordinary experience, experiences that foster teacher reflection through his/ her exposure to different perspectives and unfamiliar problems may afford opportunities for questioning and problematising the taken-for-granted views and practices. (Buchmann, 1991; Lauriala, 1997 & 2000; Frydaki & Mamoura, 2011). This kind of practicum experiences could mirror the conditions held by Mezirow (1991, 1995, & 2000) to be fundamental to transformative learning—freedom from coercion, engagement in dialogue devoted to assessing contested beliefs, reflection, equality of opportunity for participation in discourse and action, and norms of action that reinforce commitment to building shared meanings.

3. Research Context and Questions

The authors of this paper are members of an academic team involved in the reform of practicum program, which took place in the academic year 2010-2011, at Athens University. In the previous practicum framework, student-teachers had to conduct their practicum, divided in cohort groups, by observing a range of lesson implementations offered in different schools by expert school-teachers, filling in an observation form for each lesson implementation, and discussing on the instructional aspects observed under the supervision of a faculty advisor; school-teachers were usually absent from the discussion followed. After that, each student-teacher ought to accomplish one teaching implementation in a secondary school, and the faculty advisor had to evaluate him/her. This form of practicum was giving central role to faculty advisor, and was confining the role of secondary school-teacher to a minimum.

The reformed practicum program, focusing on the needs of both student-teachers and their mentors, was designed to be innovative, built on the need for change from the traditional, technical skills practicum model to a model fostering reflection, collaboration, a culture of questioning and a dialogic stance about teaching (Zanting, Verloop, Vermunt, & Van Driel, 1998; Schulz, 2005). This program was planned and conducted in a context of a rapid, imposed and highly rationalized educational reform in times of “Greek crisis”, that is of a dramatic social change which had a negative impact on teachers’ work and could discourage them from engaging spontaneously in any professional development effort. These circumstances seemed to be very limitative, in the sense that they could inhibit teachers’ voluntarily participation.

Thus, in this program, student-teachers had to accomplish the whole practicum (consisting of a great number of teaching observations and one or two teaching implementations) into the same school setting. Some by that time cooperating secondary teachers in each school became voluntarily mentor-teachers of one or two student-teachers. Mentor-teachers undertook the main role in practicum, as they had to

support and in parallel challenge their mentees' instructional planning as well as their teaching implementations engaging them in reflective discussions about practice. Another duty school-mentors undertook was mentees' assessment. To prepare mentors for their role, an induction-into-mentoring workshop was collaboratively designed and implemented by the authors of this paper and two experienced faculty advisors. Both mentors and student-teachers have been motivated to question each other on "what", "how", and "why" of their teaching.

So, in line with new research on mentoring that illuminates the mentors' point of view, this study attempts to investigate

- a) whether and to what extent the five mentor-teachers' involvement in the reformed practicum program has contributed to their own knowledge transformation, and
- b) what kind of mentoring experiences were the ones that made the difference in a possible knowledge transformation.

3.1 Context and Participants

The current qualitative study draws on data from five mentors in one Greek secondary school representing a case study, and it is part of a larger study involving 140 mentors and 28 schools during the period 2010-2011, which is still in progress.

The school context in which research was conducted is a secondary music school including both the junior high school and the high school level. The students (age 12-18) are taught, apart from formal national curriculum, music theory and practice. Of five (5) mentors, who were all female, all have degrees in Ancient or Modern Greek Studies, two have degrees in drama or music studies, four have master degrees, and two are candidate doctors. Each mentor undertook one mentee. The privacy and confidentiality of all participants was maintained through the use of pseudonyms: Alcestis, Barbara, Georgia, Daphne, Helena. All mentors have been teaching from 13 to 23 years, and in their current position for 7-8 years, excepting Helena who has been teaching for 7 years, and every year she is transferred to a different high school. We must point out that Alcestis, a candidate doctor in didactics, is very committed to teacher education and to collaboration with the university faculty.

3.2 Data Collection

In response to the research question, data were collected through in-depth interviews, chosen to highlight teachers' views, perceptions and meanings; interviews appeared to be a powerful avenue to ascertain thorough understanding of the question in hand (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all mentors in April 2011, just after student-teachers had finished their practicum. Participants were asked questions seeking to reveal the impact of their involvement in the reformed practicum program: What did you learn about teaching, learning and mentoring from your experience as student teachers' mentor? Were there any comments, ideas and practices for student-teachers or your colleagues' part helping you to rethink some of your beliefs and practices? Which problems did you confront during mentoring, and how did you handle them? What were your most fruitful experiences during mentoring? Additionally, this paper draws upon the following sources of data: (a) Observation notes and transcripts from small-group conversations with mentors over a 4-month period. Our first small-group conversations with mentors were held in October 2010, one month before student-teachers begin their practicum. In the first conversation session,

discussion revolved around questions typical to ask with respect to revealing participants' practical knowledge and their sense of professional identity: Can you describe what it means to be a teacher? From where do you think you draw on the main attributes of your identity as a teacher? What do you think is essential for student-teachers to learn during their practicum? During the practicum, two small-group conversations with mentors were held besides the interviews. (b) A brief questionnaire with four open-ended questions: i) What did you satisfy in the mentoring process? ii) What challenges do you think you faced during mentoring, and in what ways you confronted them? iii) Were there aspects of your role as a mentor for which you would need more support? iv) Were there ideas, perspectives or comments from the side of your mentees that influenced your thoughts and practices?

The development of these method tools has been carried out in an iterative, rather than linear, manner. This has been critical to our understanding of the area being researched. By using this variety of tools it was possible to strengthen the conclusions derived from the evidence, as recommended by Eisenhardt (2002).

3.3 Data Analyses

In the ongoing detailed data analysis, we first arranged the data into three groups according to our two research questions, including a preliminary section pertaining to *mentors' initial perceptions about teacher's role*. Thus, the groups of data were formed as follows: (1) mentors' initial conceptions about teaching, learning and teacher's role; (2) aspects of transformation; (3) factors influencing the knowledge transformation processes. The first group pertaining to *mentors' initial conceptions* necessarily precedes the others in order to serve as a starting point for the transformation processes to be revealed.

3.3.1 First Small-Group Conversations Data

Teachers' conceptions about teaching, learning and teacher's role represent the most pivotal aspects of teacher's practical knowledge (Pratt, 1992, p.204). In order to reveal whether and to what extent the five mentor-teachers' involvement in the reformed practicum program has contributed to their practical knowledge transformation, it was necessary to disclose their initial relevant conceptions. For this purpose we analyzed the first small-group conversations data, held before student-teachers begin their practicum.

The main categories used to explore the participants' initial conceptions are derived from the category scheme of Boulton-Lewis, Smith, McCrindle, Burnett, and Campbell (2001) including four general categories of conceptions of teaching: (a) Transmission of content/ skills (teacher/ content focus), (b) Development of skills/ understanding (teacher to student focus), (c) Facilitation of understanding (teacher/ student interaction focus), and (d) Transformation of students (student focus). Within these core categories, there were themes emerged from the data. The continuum of the category scheme may be seen as reflecting a gradual progress in conceptual change and is consistent with reform rhetoric about teaching.

3.3.2 Interview Data

Interview data were audio taped. Afterwards, all kinds of data (including observation notes and transcripts from small-group conversations as well as the questionnaire's open-ended questions) transcribed into a text and analyzed as interview transcripts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), in order to

answer the two main research questions. Analyses and interpretations of the data were attained in an iterative manner (Dornyei, 2007), as transcripts were reviewed multiple times. As a first step, ‘codes’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.56) were used to assign meaning and to organize the data as the contents of the interview transcripts were broken down into discrete parts. Codes were assigned to different size parts of data: words, phrases, and sentences, for instance, used by participants and were identified by searching for ‘topics that occur and reoccur’ (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975, p.83).

As Bogdan and Biklen (2003) point out, particular theoretical approaches suggest particular coding schemes. Our approach suggested using a specific “start list” of constructs (Miles & Huberman, 1994), in order to serve as initial codes for organizing data. This list included terms of the advanced categories of Boulton-Lewis *et al.* (2001) on the conceptions of teaching, learning and the teacher role (such as *student focus* and *creation of meaning*). It also included key-themes and key-words of Mezirow’s TLT, which have been seen as reflecting a gradual progress in the transformation of mentors’ practical knowledge (such as *question the taken-for-granted views*, *negotiation of meaning*, *interaction* and *reflection*). We also kept notes on the emerging themes and unique comments, and constructs that were not part of the initial start list. In such a way overarching themes indicating clear transformation or development of some mentors’ previous knowledge emerged along with sub-themes showing opposite directions (such as emergence of conflicting conceptions on teaching).

Regarding our second research question, namely the mentoring experiences that made the difference in a possible knowledge transformation of the participants, there were no preconceived hypotheses. Rather, we expected the descriptions or classifications of these factors to emerge from the data. This process was more interpretivist; we were interested in highlighting “the immediate and local meanings of actions, as defined from the actors’ point of view” (Erickson, 1986, p. 119) and the contextual factors connected to these meanings.

We attempted to check the validity of the interview data through observing the high school literature classrooms of five participating mentor teachers twice at the end of the practicum. We also tried to control our expectations and potential biases for the duration of the study, using techniques to establish reliability, such as triangulation, peer debriefing and member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.108–109). After the transcripts were read and categories had emerged, a 25% sample of the transcripts were audited by three colleagues besides both of us (peer debriefing). Patterns and questions identified in the initial analysis were presented to participants, discussed and altered (member check). During report writing, we presented the findings and conclusions to the participants to determine whether the analysis reflected their experiences. The portrayals of their views seemed to them to be realistic and accurate.

4. Findings/Results

The following findings summarize our combined impressions and are organized around the preliminary section pertaining to *mentors’ initial perceptions about teacher’s role*, and the two research questions.

4.1 Mentors’ Initial Perceptions about Teacher’s Role

This section is about the conceptions mentors held before student-teachers begin their practicum. The following major themes which emerged from data analysis are:

a) Teacher as educator/ facilitator of personal development: A prevailing conception of teacher's role emerging from data analysis is that to be a teacher means "*to hear students and facilitate them to express personal characteristics and abilities*" (Barbara) or "*to have a constant meaningful interaction with students in order for them to learn things other than knowledge itself..., to assert their rights, undertake their responsibilities..*" (Georgia). The four participants seem on the one hand to be more or less oriented to students' personal development and well-being rather than to their learning development. But this orientation seems to have rather an emotional connotation: "*The interaction with students gives me a sense that I offer them pieces of my soul*" (Georgia), or "*I love children, I want to see them in a process of progress*" (Helena).

b) Teacher as a "transmitter of content/ skills: The teaching conception mentioned as "transmission of content/ skills" (Boulton-Lewis *et al.*, 2001) permeates somewhat the discourse of all of them, particularly as regards what is essential for student-teachers to learn during their practicum. Barbara believes that student-teachers ought primarily to "*elicit their mentors' content knowledge so that they develop a solid knowledge of the subject matter*". In this line of arguing Helena adds that "*content knowledge is the main precondition for a teacher to transmit it in an appropriate way*". Concerning the way in which participants conceptualize their role as mentors, almost all of them believe that their primary task is to create opportunities for student-teachers to try out what they have learned at the University and to assist them to plan and implement their teaching.

c) Teacher as constant learner: Alcestis was the one who mentioned that she was interested in becoming a secondary teacher from an early age. Since the first years of her career she wanted to do something more in life than "*just teaching*". Thus she continued her studies at a postgraduate level in a field closely related to teaching. After receiving her master degree, she undertook her doctoral thesis without stopping to work in school and to cooperate with the University even before the practicum program was reformed. She was often talking about the desire of having opportunities to continue to learn all her life and of working in educational research. Her views are reflected on her conception about teacher's role: "*being a teacher for me means to be constantly a learner, constantly alert, in the sense that you have to spread out your antennas and be open to what surrounds you*".

4.2 Aspects of Transformation

This section is about the conceptions mentors held at the conclusion of their involvement in the practicum program, just after they had asked to reflect on their experiences during their mentoring, their beliefs about teacher and mentor role, the challenges they believe they faced, and the ways they confronted them with. The findings of this section are organized around the first research question: whether and to what extent the five mentor-teachers' involvement in the reformed practicum program has contributed to their own knowledge transformation. The major themes identified in the mentors' frames of reference were:

a) Clear transformation of some mentors' conceptions of teaching and learning: Three mentors (Georgia, Barbara and Daphne) clearly recognize that previously held conceptions or beliefs are not adequate to face the demands of new circumstances: "*I realize that students learn better when one stimulates their thought*" (Daphne) or "*...in a stimulating environment*" (Georgia). "*I apprehended that students need to construct meaning for them*" (Barbara). The awareness of the fact that teaching should provide meaningful experiences shows a shift of focus from reproduction of content to the creation of

meaning (Boulton-Lewis *et al.*, 2001). Regarding the emotional way participants conceptualized their students' development, they now seem to reach a new level of awareness too. Georgia questions her previous relevant belief by saying: *“Only love for students is not enough. A teacher has not to allow them to merely express what they think but to provide them constantly opportunities to think, to wonder, to question... My mentee was very good in this, I watched him doing it constantly”*.

b) Emergence of a culture of questioning previous beliefs and practices. The mentors' involvement in a new communication network affording opportunities for meaningful dialogic interactions with their mentees and their colleagues seems to undermine their prior self-certainty. *“Until I became a mentor, knowledge and subject were my ideals. During mentoring and foremost during collaboration with my colleagues I realized the value of helping student-teachers to become autonomous thinkers instead of becoming an authority on subject matter”* (Georgia). It also reveals the possibilities for them to recognize the ambiguity and complexity of the matter under discussion taking into account some of their own prejudices, the prejudices of the student-teachers and the very fact of the different points of view: *“Observing how some student-teachers think and act, I began to wonder whether my obsession with curriculum implementation and classroom control was detrimental to students' interests”* (Barbara).

c) Refinement or development of previous knowledge: Alcestis had already developed communicative competences for the purpose of learning from the others and negotiating meaning: *“My personal disposition, my doctoral thesis on ‘teaching dialogic practices’ and my previous mentoring experiences changed my understanding of being a teacher from one who teaches the others to a person who learns from the others and with the others”*. Thus, Alcestis had already developed a reflection-stance, an engagement in dialogue, and a disposition to question her own assumptions and practices, which allowed her to establish a context in which she could challenge her students and mentees instead of just supporting them. Naturally, she states that a) this mentoring situation bringing into school through student-teachers new University-based theories and tendencies about teaching forced her to rethink her views and practices, and b) the interaction with her colleagues into a newly-created community, the free from coercion exchange of views, and *“seeing a situation through the others' eyes”* created her new understandings and questions as well.

d) Emergence of conflicting conceptions: Helena, who has less teaching experience than the others, often expresses conflicting conceptions or beliefs. Through her exposure to different perspectives and unfamiliar problems, she problematizes some of the existing conceptions or beliefs, but at the same time she wonders whether some new emerging conceptions or beliefs are viable or workable: *“My mentee applied the co-operative teaching method in a literature classroom. The material she gave to students' groups and the group dialogues in which everyone considers different points appeared to be fruitful to some extent But, teaching was not accomplished. I query what it's most worthwhile in a teaching... ”*.

4.3 Factors Influencing the Knowledge Transformation Processes

The findings of this section are organized around the second research question: what kind of mentoring experiences were the ones that made the difference in a possible knowledge transformation. The emerging mentoring experiences, which could be seen also as factors influencing mentors' knowledge transformation processes included:

a) *Innovative ideas and practice some student-teachers enacted in classrooms*. These ideas and practices seem to offer to mentor-teachers considerable opportunities for rethinking and transforming

their conceptual frameworks of teaching and learning: *“Some teaching approaches student-teachers adopted or ways of classroom management were so interesting and fruitful..., they indeed disabused me!”* (Georgia). As eloquently put by Daphne *“One student-teacher taught a choral of the Greek tragedy Antigone with the support of musical instruments. The outcome was amazing. I could never imagine that such a teaching could take place in my classroom. It was one of the most essential experiences I have ever had. At the end of this teaching some students asked me to teach themselves Antigone to their schoolmates!”*. It is obvious that several participants became simultaneously mentors and learners of the student-teachers they had to educate.

b) *Student-teachers’ questions on “what”, “how”, and “why” of mentors’ teachings.* When a mentee questions his/ her mentor after observing her teaching he/she seems to help her to better understand her own general principles which underlie her teaching practice. These questions were identified as important experiences regarding mentors’ knowledge transformation; student-teachers gave them key-opportunities for reflection and rethinking by forcing them to reflect in their turn on “what”, “how”, and “why” of their teaching practices (Zanting *et al.*, 1998): *“After every teaching, my mentee was asking me ‘why did you pose these teaching goals? Do you believe that this teaching planning mobilized students?’ etc”* (Barbara). After such a question mentors seem to wonder to what extent they actually have awareness of their teaching orientations and of what they give priority to. The student-teachers’ questions led them also to feel a strong sense of responsibility towards them, which brought into question several taken-for-granted beliefs and conceptions: *“When my mentee was asking me about my goals, my priorities..., I was feeling that the way I see the matter was often insufficient to provide answers. I was feeling that working with student-teachers committed me to knowing where my thinking is coming from”* (Helena).

c) The emergence of a kind of mentors’ learning community into the school setting: Barbara and Georgia pointed out how the need to respond to the demands of mentoring engendered an unexpected collaboration between all mentors: *“After the second week student-teachers came to school we started to have a mentor-meeting once a week. Although we struggled to find a common language, we attained to share views regarding what was of more importance for the mentees’ needs”* (Barbara). Georgia expanded on the topic clarifying how a different kind of professional collegiality was developed among her colleagues who were mentors; how they reached the point of searching a collective vision of student learning instead of just assisting their mentees to plan and implement their teaching. Georgia illuminated the way in which this learning community was created: *“Firstly I felt the need of knowing my colleagues’ point of view: how we shall work with our mentees about this... and this.. Thus, I decided to begin with Alcestis asking her questions such as ‘how do you propose to tackle student-teachers’ teaching plan?’ or ‘how may I make my lessons goals explicit for my mentee?’. She suggested a brief meeting with all of us without delay. These meetings were continued but they were not brief anymore! Our discussions took an unexpectedly meaningful turn...; they expanded in a range of exciting topics such as ‘what it means to be a teacher and what it means to think about the curriculum”*.

Alcestis underlined many times that all five mentors during their collaborative meetings made great efforts to understand and interpret the voices of others. As she says, partners were open to new understandings in order to create *“a shared world in which they may or may not agree”*. The key was how teachers listened to each other. Alcestis and Daphne consider that the quality of listening in the community and the respect of the others obviously reflected in classrooms, as listening became a basis

for the instructional conversation. Intense listening by the teachers affected the manner in which students listened to the subject matter, to the teacher, and to each other: students “*initiated conversations on various topics they were curious about, they were willing to share their queries and experiences, and they became involved spontaneously in several activities adding new things to the every day curriculum*” (Daphne).

d) The presence among them of a colleague (Alcestis) having already frames of reference more inclusive, reflective, and more open to alternative perspectives. Although as planners of the reformed practicum program we had no intention of replacing the faculty advisor with a school-mentor as leader, Alcestis actually took this place. She has been the tenacious bond between her colleagues in their genuine efforts for meeting the requirements of mentor role. The quality of listening into the mentors’ community was ascribed from them to Alcestis’ moral qualities, “*on the respect, in the sense of the acceptance of the other person as they are*” (Helena). In the previous practicum form, the faculty advisor had the direct responsibility. Two of the five mentors who had participated in previous practicum forms mention that they were feeling “*somewhat marginalized from the heart of mentoring process*” (Barbara). As eloquently Daphne says, “*the faculty advisor had the first and the last word; it was difficult then for us to develop a sense of commitment in order to reflect, to communicate, to question about the whole meaning of this process*”. Contra wise, in the present context of openness and trust, Alcestis attained as a *primus inter pares* to trigger off meaningful dialogic interactions with her colleagues moving them from the certainties to a reflective stance.

e) Some other contextual factors identified from the data included the *type of school* and its *organizational context*. This school was, as mentioned above, a music secondary school. It is noteworthy that two of the five mentors have done, apart from their basic studies, music and drama studies. Thus, “*there is a climate of freedom, the music flows out of every corner*”, as Daphne says. And Georgia adds “*students know one or two musical instruments, take part every so often in concerts and musical performances*”. Besides, participants attached great importance to the school’s tendency to participate in experimental programs: “*Our principal and all of us usually have a very positive stance to any perspective of experimenting with new ways of working*” (Alcestis). These factors made their special marks on this school, as well as on the practicum context: a context, by definition free and open, which implicitly supports any effort for interacting, communicating, sharing experiences and adopting new perspectives.

A conclusion we can draw from this part of data analysis is that, although mentors’ work was, as they state, often characterized by interruption or fragmentation, “*pressures, and unexpected events*” (Alcestis), mentoring functioned as a “break” with ordinary experience, and provided an opportunity to reflect on their beliefs and actions taken.

5. Conclusion, Discussion, Limitations & Perspectives

Prior research suggests that teachers find the mentoring role to be professionally rewarding (Daloz, 1999; Bullough Jr. & Draper, 2004; Hagger & McIntyre, 2006; Simpson *et al.*, 2007; Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009; Hobson *et al.*, 2009). While this study coincides with such findings, provided new insights into how the five mentor-teachers’ involvement in the University-based practicum program helped them to

proceed in a kind of transformation of their practical knowledge. All the five participants in the specific school context, although they undertook this role more hesitantly rather than expecting transformation, had indeed opportunities for encountering many things that do not fit into their dominant narratives on how the teaching situation is or how it works. The most important results show that three of five participants seem to have learned new epistemic frames of reference transforming or refining their initial *teacher/ content* oriented conceptions to *student growth* ones, altering their conceptions about teacher's role, and developing a culture of reflecting on and questioning previous beliefs and practices. A conceptual change about teaching, learning and mentoring was obviously mirrored in their statements and practices as well. This examination also yields the remark that one participant's initial conceptions, beliefs and orientations being by that time rather reflective and more open to alternative perspectives appear strengthened. Moreover, the evidence suggests that one participant seems, although having gained a greater awareness of her beliefs about teaching and her own practices, to look for a balance between her prior certainties and some new emerging *student* oriented conceptions, the viability of which is to some extent questioned.

Of most importance we deem the mentoring experiences influencing this transformation. The innovative ideas and practices some student-teachers enacted in classrooms, the meaningful dialogic interactions with them, and a sense of responsibility towards mentees enabled mentors to refresh professional perspectives they had neglected (Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009). We also think that the development of a kind of mentors' learning community into the school setting was the new intermediate motivational factor in the process of conceptual transformation that our research demonstrated. The emergence of the crucial role of teacher communities in teachers' learning is consistent with other reported results according which these communities offer strong opportunities for promoting belief awareness and change in teachers (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Eraut, 2002; Kelly, 2006; Shulman & Shulman, 2004; Wilson & Demetriou, 2007). Beyond what has already been demonstrated, our research highlighted how the specific mentoring situation caused the creation of an informal mentors' learning community, in which mentors involved spontaneously, transformed to some extent their frames of reference and empowered them as subjects of education.

Our research has also shown that in this mentors' learning community, the sharing of experiences, information, questions, beliefs, and ideas between them, seem to be fostered by some core-elements of mentoring program such as mentors as co-thinkers and learning companions. The fact that both mentors and mentees were somewhat prepared for such a collaboration framework, made the questions on "what", "how", and "why" of teaching more triggering and fruitful rather than pressing or menacing. Moreover data analyses reveal that the transformation process is more likely to occur when the new perspectives and ways of being are held by open-minded persons whom we respect and trust (Southern, 2007; Frydaki & Mamoura, 2011). The presence among mentor-teachers of a colleague having already frames of reference more inclusive, reflective, and more open to alternative perspectives seem to enhance interactions reinforcing commitment and building shared meanings. Mentors were encouraged to reflect on their roles and question previously and maybe uncritically held meaning perspectives mediated by an experienced "mentor of mentors" whom they trust. This sort of guided reflection, which appeared to help these mentors develop important knowledge, skills and dispositions, was reinforced, in their opinion, by the absence of the faculty advisor holding probably a dominant role. We deem the subsequent learning was transformative, as participants acknowledged and challenged old habits and

assumptions, negotiating the meaning of acquired knowledge, developing new, more integrative understandings of themselves and their role (Mezirow, 2000).

A significant finding of the study indicated that the specific mentoring situation became a kind of format for mentors to interact with colleagues around problems of practice, to question their previous prevailing beliefs and practices, and to develop new ways of purposeful work. This finding is in line with a new trend in teacher communities research work, showing that in schools where teachers had formats for interacting with colleagues around problems of practice in which they could raise questions about practices, meetings were more successful than in schools where formats did not permit deep discussions of practice (Little, Gearhart, Curry, & Kafka, 2003; Halverson, 2003). The finding is of more importance given that the State of Greece, in which the current study was conducted, differs from many European nations in terms of school culture (less collectivist) and the organization of the educational system (a more centralized system). (Dimaras, 1995; Skourtu, & Kourtis-Kazoullis, 2003). Such an educational system seems discouraging regarding teachers' engagement in learning communities. This discouragement in combination with the neo-liberal pressures for mandated change as well as the pressures of austerity resulting from the Greek crisis could destroy teachers' autonomy and challenge their identities (Hardy, 2008; Tang, 2011). Although these social and educational circumstances seemed to be very limitative as regards mentor-teachers' disposition to make professional development efforts, we consider that the meaningfulness of some mentoring processes became indeed a counterbalance towards all pressures.

This case study should not be misunderstood as a suggestion for reflective mentors in school to take the place of faculty advisor so that reflective mentors' communities are created. The smallness of the sample size and the qualitative nature of data collected do not allow us to isolate the impact of these intervening factors systematically or to compare their impact. However it can serve as an indicator of the fact that mentor-teachers' knowledge transformation could depend on a kind of bottom-up communication network into school settings, which is mainly influenced by mentors already oriented to the desirable professional development model. In other words, the presence of a "mentor of mentors" whom their colleagues respect and trust could represent itself a powerful mentoring experience as well as a counterbalance to the natural emotional reactions of human beings to the threat of losing certainty, predictability or stability (Korthagen, 2001).

Another limitation lie within the danger for the mentors to return to more conservative orientations than the ones produced via reflection during their mentoring, which was often pointed out by the research concerning teacher development (Pajares, 1992). Knowledge transformation is to be considered a continuous process without a clear ending point. Such a process can take place through teachers' continuous participation in social situations and dense communication networks systematically affording opportunities for questioning the taken-for-granted views and practices. Mentoring could be seen as such a helpful network, on the premise of a stronger institutional commitment to teacher development and of the correlated educational structures providing support.

Thus, further research concerning the kind of mentoring experiences, environments, and communication networks fostering knowledge transformation might be revealing fundamentally different dimensions of teacher development. The possibility of a more systematic and institutional school-university partnership, in order to enhance meaningful mentoring experiences for both student-teachers and mentors should also be investigated (Zeichner, 2010).

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