Mentoring as a constructive learning process: how to realise role modelling?

February 2005

F. Meijers & W. Wardekker
Mentoring as a constructive learning process: how to realise role modelling?

Summary

In Dutch vocational education mentoring is increasingly seen as an instrument to decrease motivational problems and drop-out. Numerous schools have experimented with mentoring, but until now mentoring has not been generally accepted. The main reason for this seems to be the absence of a theory of mentoring that explains how mentors can become a positive role model for their mentees. In literature, this process is generally explained by Bandura’s social learning theory, where role modelling has an important place in the development of attitudes and behavior. It is argued that social learning theory offers an inadequate explanation for several reasons. Using data from semi-structured interviews with eighteen successful mentor-mentee pairs, it is further argued that a ‘constructivist’ approach to the mentor-mentee relationship offers a better perspective for understanding how the behaviour and attitudes of the mentee are influenced by the mentor.
Mentoring as a constructive learning process: how to realise role modelling?

Introduction

In many countries there are problems with the effectiveness of vocational education. The character of these problems is partly a result of the nature of the school system in which general education has more status than and is separated from vocational education. In the Netherlands, somewhat more than 50% of all 12-19 year olds follow full-time vocational education in order to qualify for the labour market (CBS, 2002, p. 120). Education is concentrated in schools for prevocational secondary education (VMBO) for the 12-16 year old, and vocational secondary education (MBO) for the 16-19 year old. The drop-out rate is high: approximately 25% in VMBO and more than 30% in MBO (BVE Kort, 2002, p. 6). For many pupils and their parents, the choice for (pre-)vocational education is a negative one: young people are placed in vocational education because they are considered to lack sufficient intelligence for general secondary education (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2001). Moreover, the curriculum in (pre-)vocational education often stresses theoretical content, a consequence of which is that the majority of the pupils does not develop a clear career perspective or a distinct orientation to their future (Doets et al., 2000; Geurts & Meijers, 2002). Students continue to experience their education as a series of 'school tasks' that to them bear no real relationship to later work. At present, much is invested in the innovation of vocational education, and coaching the (educational) career of pupils gets a lot of attention (Ministerie van OC&W, 2001; Geurts, 2001). In many cases the introduction of mentoring is part of the innovation.

Mentoring is “a one-to-one interactive process of guided developmental learning based on the premise that the participants will have reasonably frequent contact and sufficient
interactive time together. Mentors contribute their knowledge, proficiency, and experience to assist mentees who are working toward the achievement of their own objectives.” (Cohen & Galbraith, 1995: 5-6). In the so-called ‘classic’ forms of mentoring, mentors will be successful adults, often of the same sex and from the same ethnic group as the mentee. The aim of this form of mentoring is not primarily to provide psychological guidance, but to establish a link with life outside school. Ideally, in vocational education the mentor is an adult from local business life, who supports pupils both in their cognitive and their social-emotional development as related to initial experiences with their chosen vocation. For both parties concerned, this is not an easy assignment: “For mentees truly to benefit from the help offered by a mentoring relationship, they need mentor participation that is based on mutual trust; accurate and reliable information; realistic exploration of their goals, decisions, and options; challenges to their ideas, beliefs, and actions; holistic support (intellectual, psychological, emotional) of their efforts; and encouragement to pursue their dreams” (Cohen & Galbraith, 1995: 5-6). It is supposed that these mentors, because of the fact that they are successful and are expected to build a warm relationship with their mentee, will over time act as role models for mentees. This constitutes the additional value of mentoring for vocational education: the mentor as a role model bridges, so to speak, the existing gap between the education system and the labour market. Once the mentor has become a role model, so the implicit reasoning goes, the student may develop a stable occupational preference, the relevance of the subject matter for his career may become clear, and as a consequence motivation for and success rates of the school may increase.

It has proven to be difficult, however, to get local businesses to provide mentors for coaching young people who attend school, probably because the Netherlands has no tradition of cooperation between business at local level and schools. And in those cases where finding
mentors was successful, the expected results in terms of reducing motivation problems and drop-out are not supported by research results.

**Results of classic mentoring**

High expectations for mentoring abound both in the Netherlands and in the USA – where this method was developed in the seventies and has been used since extensively both inside and outside formal education (Freedman, 1993). It tends to be seen as a panacea: “Mentoring is a strategy for teaching and coaching, for strengthening character, improving social harmony, promoting social change, assuring quality education for all, and creating opportunities for personal empowerment” (White-Hood, 1993:78). A comparably broad array of expectations can be seen in so-called techno-mentoring projects in secondary vocational education in the Netherlands, where girls in technical programmes are coached by a female professional in a technical occupation. Based on a survey of project leaders in participating schools, Van Wijngaarden (1988, p. 4), the national co-ordinator of the project, concludes that the principal target is "improving the linkage with the labour market" (mentioned by 71% of project leaders). This target is immediately followed by "reducing school drop-out" (65%), "changing the culture of school" (60%), and "better coaching during the apprenticeship period" (35%). Truly a variety of targets! Positive effects for both students and schools are expected mainly from the mentor as role model (Meijers & Reuling, 1998, 2002).

The expectation that a mentor has a positive influence on the (chances of) development of young people seems intuitively very probable. Still, such a positive influence has seldom been found for mentoring. Many researchers give exceptionally positive reports of the effects of mentoring, often on the basis of a few cases and relying on retrospective judgments by participating youth, their teachers, parents and mentors (for an overview for classic mentoring projects, see Galbraith & Cohen, 1995; for peer and student mentoring,
Goodlad, 1995, 1998). But positive effects on school success criteria of participation in a mentoring program are very difficult to demonstrate. Jacobi (1991), basing himself on a literature survey, observes that it is unclear whether mentoring contributes to educational success, and if there was any relation between participation in a mentor programme and school success, it is unclear how this relation arises. "Both theoretical and empirical answers to these questions are lacking", Jacobi (1991, p. 505) concludes. Ten years later, Philip (2001) and Colley (2003) draw a similar conclusion, not only concerning the relationship between mentoring and school success but also regarding the relation between mentoring and integration in society. Neither did research in the Netherlands show a causal relation between participation in a mentor programme and school success (Veugelers, 2000; Crul, 2001).

Research by the present first author has shown that classic mentoring in secondary vocational education is not functioning adequately (Meijers, 2001; Kneppers, Kuijpers & Meijers, 1999; Meijers & Reuling, 1998, 1999, 2002), the main reason being the fact that in the schools under study, a common frame of reference is lacking that would make it possible to relate mentoring (and other forms of career guidance and career development) to the educational process. In other words, mentoring is seldom seen as an instrument that helps to realise intended learning processes, and is at best interpreted as a safety net to catch students dropping out of regular educational processes. As a consequence mentoring, being a special and intensive form of coaching, is relatively marginal in most schools.

In the mentoring projects under study there is no clear problem definition. In most cases it remains vague for what sort of problems mentoring is supposed to provide a solution. Insofar as targets are formulated, these are mostly occasional, not anchored in existing policies or an explicit view of education. Nowhere has mentoring been defined explicitly as a counselling method supplementary to counselling by teachers or school counsellors. In many cases participation in a mentoring project is compulsory, especially for girls in technical
courses and for so-called students at risk. The consequences can be guessed: pupils feel stigmatised and are not motivated to create and sustain a relationship with their mentor. This will soon bring the mentors to ask themselves what to discuss with their mentee and even whether the mentee is willing to talk with them at all. The final result is that in nearly all cases the relationship, even after an elaborate matching procedure, comes silently to a close.

**A shortage of theory**

The lack of a clear concept of mentoring in Dutch vocational education is related to the lack of an adequate theory of mentoring. This lack of theory has been pointed out by various authors (Healy & Welchert, 1990; Harnish & Wild, 1994; Rhodes, 1994; Philip, 2001; Meijers & Geurts, 2002). As we mentioned before, in prevailing theories the positive effects of mentoring are mainly thought to be related to the mentor's functioning as an example: ideally, the mentor has to become a role model for the mentee (Kram, 1983, 1988). This understanding is generally founded in Bandura's social learning theory, where role modelling has an important place in learning and in the development of attitudes (Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Walters, 1963; Meyer, 1994). In this theory, learning a certain behaviour and the attitudes behind it is considered to be the result of an interaction of self-confidence, the expected results of the behaviour in case, and personal aims. Both self-confidence and expectations about the results of behaviour are construed as the outcomes of two learning processes. The first of these processes concerns learning taking place following success or failure in a specific area (positive or negative reinforcement). The second process concerns 'vicarious learning', that is the imitation of behaviour positively valued by the group one wants to belong to. Social learning theory presumes that an individual is motivated to imitate another's behaviour because the individual has a clear aim to belong to a group and thinks that realising this aim will be served by imitating the behaviour of somebody else who is
successful in that group. Thus, the individual is presented as a rational actor motivated by the maximising of self-interest.

This is what the theory says. The available empirical evidence, however, suggests that its presuppositions are not valid for those young people attending vocational education. Most of them have no clear aims related to labour: they have no, or only vague, occupational desires and a diffuse orientation on the future (Meijers, 1995; Doets et al., 2001). Young people use what Simon (1983) called a 'bounded rationality'. Their decisions are not coherently related to the totality of their lives, “but are generally concerned with rather specific matters, assumed, whether correctly or not, to be relatively independent of other, perhaps equally important dimensions of life” (Simon, 1983, p.17). Coleman (1989) adds that the environment does not present itself to young people in its entirety, but as a collection of partial problems. In this way only are they able, Coleman says, to find solutions for the problems that confront them during adolescence. This is not only due to developmental reasons, but also to the fact that their environment becomes literally less coherent because society is in transition (Giddens, 1991). As a consequence, the choices they make are often determined by the sequence in which alternatives present themselves and often are rationalised (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1993; Witzel, 1993). Emotions play a double role in choosing behaviour: young people are usually very uncertain about their choices (Law, Meijers & Wijers, 2002), and in many choices, emotions are an important factor (Kidd, 1998). Social learning theory hardly gives attention to the role emotions play (Meijers & Wardekker, 2002).

Moreover, social learning theory assumes a social context in which success or failure can be clearly defined. For mentoring in vocational education this translates into the assumption of rather stable vocational roles. This assumption too is refuted by available facts. The number of different occupations in the Netherlands is declining swiftly: they are being replaced by much

We conclude that social learning theory does not offer a good starting point for understanding and improving the operation, and thus the added value, of mentoring related to realising a good transition from school to work. "Role modelling" does not adequately describe what actually happens, and where mentoring procedures are based on this theory they turn out not to work well. A different insight in what happens in mentor-mentee relationships is called for.

To understand how a mentor can become a role model for a mentee in a rather unpredictable and fuzzy situation, a theory of learning is needed that gives the agency of both mentor and mentee a central role. Such an approach is now being developed within the sociocultural (Neo-Vygotskian) paradigm (see e.g. Rogoff, 1994; Wells, 1999; Wertsch, 1990). This theory describes learning as a process of the gradual transformation of people's participation in social (e.g. work) practices. This transformation implies much more than just acquiring technical knowledge and skills necessary to function adequately in a work practice. Rather, it means that in the process of this acquisition, one's view of oneself in relation to the occupational role changes. Knowledge and skills are not just acquired 'as is', but are appropriated into this implicit view, to become a quality of one's actions. But this change is primarily of a subjective and affective nature. It rests on and transforms a feeling of connectedness, of being interested in and wanting to belong to a specific practice. Without connectedness, no real learning can take place; it is replaced by memorising – which is often thought of as acceptable in schools, but does not help much in terms of better participation. However, the development of connectedness as a prerequisite for transforming participation is a two-sided process: it depends not only on the learner, but also on the acceptation by those people that are already
acknowledged members of a community of practice. This acceptation will always depend not only on technical, but also on personal aspects of the way a learner is able to participate.

As to the intellectual and technical aspects of learning in this way, the constructivist approach in learning psychology has elaborated some of the conditions under which the intended changes may take place (for an overview see Simons, Van der Linden & Duffy, 2000; De Laat & Simons, 2002; Illeris, 2002). Research from this approach shows that changes in attitudes and behaviour occur when four conditions are met: (a) learners must have an active role in the design, the proceeding and the evaluation of their learning process, (b) learners must have the opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences together with others, whereby they create meaning in dialogue with each other, (c) learners must learn in a concrete or 'authentic' context, and (d) learners must be enabled to develop their own perspectives gradually ('to make sense'). It is important to note, however, that sociocultural learning theory emphasises the role of engagement or connectedness as a two-sided prerequisite for real learning.

Seen from such a theory, the mentor is a representant of the work practice of which the learner wants to become an accepted member. Acceptation by the mentor, both as a person and as a contributor to the goals of that practice, is then essential to continued learning efforts and to the personal well-being of the learner. However, acceptance will over time depend on the way the learner is able to transform in a way that the mentor, from his or her position within the practice, is able to evaluate as positive. In analysing mentor-mentee relationships, one should then expect to see a personal relationship between mentor and mentee gradually transforming into a coaching relation where the mentor acts as a representant of the work practice.
Method

For testing these theoretical ideas in an exploratory manner, we use data from two studies on the functioning and effects of mentoring projects. In these studies semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve successful mentor-mentee pairs. A relationship was defined as successful if (a) it existed for more than six months (because it is unlikely that in relationships that exist shorter, the mentor can become a role model) and (b) the mentee, as perceived by the leaders of the mentor projects, significantly profited in terms of increased self-confidence and positively changed behavior. We did not interview ‘unsuccessful’ mentor-mentee pairs, although failures often are very informative, because we were interested in the ‘construction of success’ (i.e. in how mentor and mentee together construct a relationship that becomes a strong learning environment for the mentee). Because in constructivist learning theory, dialogue is central and knowledge is understood as self-constructed by the mentee within a dialogue, the choice was made to interview mentor and mentee as a pair. Together they build the relationship and together they produce the effects of this relationship. In the literature on mentoring we have found no other examples of such a way of data collection.

In December 2001 six successful pairs of an adult, working mentor and their mentee were interviewed (Meijers & Reuling, 2002). In the summer of 2002, the same interview was held with six other successful pairs (Meijers & Flohr, 2003). All mentees were from an ethnic minority group, were enrolled in secondary vocational education (MBO), and were between 18 and 21 years of age, except for one person who was 33 at the time of interview. Seven mentees are male, five are female. Six of the mentors were of Dutch origin, six were originally from other countries; their ages were between 31 and 54 years; all were of the same sex as their mentee. Their education varied: from lower to higher vocational education.

The interview consisted of several parts. We started by charting the personal data of both mentor and mentee. Then we went into the way the relationship had originated, the
mutual expectations, the contents of their conversations, and their mode of interaction. Upon testing the list of questions, the interview soon proved very confronting, both as to content and because mentor and mentee were interviewed together.

The interviewer is a 'stranger' asking after emotions and sometimes very intimate details of the relationship. This requires the couples not only to be open and honest but also to do this in the presence of the interviewer. We tried to support the couples to do this in three ways. Firstly, to create trust by taking ample time at the beginning of the interview to discuss the way the relationship started. This is a 'safe' subject and a good introduction for the more emotionally charged topics coming after it. Secondly, the interviewer introduced him/herself to the couples in a more elaborate way than is usual. Lastly, an agreement was made that certain information which would be important to get a clear insight in the relationship but which the interviewed did not wish to see published, would be considered confidentially.

Enthusiasm about the relationship was striking, while problems encountered in the relationship, the emotions these elicited, and the struggles they entailed, were not played down. Regularly there was spontaneous laughing. Mentor and mentee teased each other. Sometimes they helped each other formulating answers to the questions, especially where emotional aspects were concerned. Mutual affection was evident in nearly every relationship: winks, touching as solace or encouragement. Sometimes mentor or mentee, or both, were moved to tears by each others' spontaneous remarks about how the other was perceived.

**Results**

A successful mentor – mentee relationship starts, as is evident from the interviews, with a clear need for learning on the side of the mentee. In all relationships we examined, this need determined the contents of the relationship. At the beginning of the relationship, the need for learning is normally not so specific, but relates in rather broad terms to 'experience related to
work'. Nearly all mentees say clearly in the interview that they hardly have a concrete image of work and working. They wonder how one can get a job, what the relation is between the education they are now receiving and work, how to behave in the work place, what to expect of an employer and of one's colleagues. Most of them also struggle with the question whether on these points different expectations apply for people with different cultural backgrounds. Being in contact with a mentor for them thus is primarily a way to receive answers to their questions about work and working. The mentor thus has to have concrete experience in this area. This need not be in the exact field of studies or vocation that has the mentee's interest. Mentees understand experience broadly: for them, experience in study and in work is sufficient.

Another aspect of knowledge mentees consider important during the length of their relationship with a mentor is that the mentor 'knows the way'. Especially in the case of fugitives or immigrants who are not quite at home in Dutch society, it is important that a mentor knows how and where to get health insurance, what a job centre can and cannot do, how to handle revenue forms, study grants, one's own or one's children's education. In the Netherlands everything is well-regulated, several interviewed said, but it is a 'difficult' country for one who does not know how to approach those agencies, organisations, bureaus and provisions. The mentor need not be able to answer all questions in this field. Most important is that he more or less knows the way or at least knows whom or which institution to address for a specific problem.

Related are mentee questions that address social-emotional rather than cognitive aspects: it is not only whom to ask, but also how to ask. When are you perceived as cheeky and when are you assertive? In what situations can you assert your rights? Should you be matter-of-fact or can you show something touches you? The interviewed mentees find they can really ask those questions only of their mentor. Firstly because they find it awkward to
ask a teacher: often these turn out to take knowledge of such things for granted. Secondly because they trust their mentor: a mentor will give an honest answer and help you, if necessary by providing practice in such situations. Here we come to the core of the relationship: trust.

Both mentors and mentees call trust the central property of their relationship. At the same time, however, they realise the relationship has a purpose. In this respect the relationship with a mentor clearly differs from that with a peer. Mentees know the relationship will sooner or later be ended ("When I can do it all by myself, when I get my certificate, when...") This too, of course, is different from friendships, that are not tied to a time period. Trust 'materialises' in successful mentor-mentee relationships in two ways: in mutual respect, and in the space mentees and mentors get (and indicate they experience) to be themselves. Some striking quotes (some salient elements of the vernacular will be lost in translation):

You carry your mentee around with you, so to speak. She'll always somehow be a part of who I am myself. Together you enter upon something that has to do with herself, also with myself. If you're not willing to accept that, I think you'd better not become a mentor. (mentor)

I think the most important is to be respectful. To accept each other as you are. I will never force him, no, that does not bring us any further. Of course you have to dare to be yourself, to bring your mistakes, your own vulnerability into the relationship. But without imposing yourself, of course, that's absolutely out of the question. Respect, trust, that's what it's about. (mentor)
I don't know how to describe her. A bit of everything: friend, sister, pillar, oracle, mate, sometimes a bit a mother, at other times a bit an angry stepmother (roaring with laughter). There is no adequate word for it. Mentor, that's what seems to fit best.
(mentee)

Many mentees say they value enormously not to have to express their problems in 'school language' or 'social work language' (which has consequences for their own conceptualisation of the problem). They are allowed to tell in their own, sometimes poor, Dutch what they experienced or where they feel a problem. Exactly this helps trust to grow, and self-confidence too: mentees experience that ultimately they are able to put their problems into words and in the process to systematise them. Thus, talking and searching, they come to understand better what they actually want or what exactly is their problem.

I have changed, yes; not much, but even so. Because of him, yes, because he helped me. I've more nerve to open my mouth and so. (turns to mentor) What did you call that again. A difficult word, that you don't let people walk all over you and yet are not cheeky? (Mentor:) Assertive. (both laugh, slap each other on the shoulder.)

In the beginning we always talked about my being not so bright. I'd say as much: I'm just too stupid for this. Problems in school, so on. He helped me, with my homework, but actually mostly with plans and eh… well, things that kept bugging me. Private matters, so on. He always said: man, you're ten times as bright as I am, you just don't have any rest in your mind or body. Now I've come to agree with him, yes, that I am more bright than he is. (mentor and mentee are helpless with laughter)
One of the mentees told in the interview that he seldom asked anything in class, because he did not get an answer and was laughed at. In his talks with the mentor it became clear to him that the mentor took him seriously, both as to the content of the question and the 'pain' of being laughed at. The result was that he dared to ask questions in class more often. Mentors have lots of patience, do not have a tendency to speak for the mentee (in the sense of finishing their sentences, taking over the mentee's problem). They listen in a special way: not only for what somebody is trying to say, but also for the emotions behind it. A mentor expresses this as follows: "You don't listen only with your ears, but also with your guts."

When in a successful relationship, the mentee presents a problem to the mentor, the latter will not react with a ready-made solution. Rather, the problem as such is discussed: the background, the circumstances, the importance for the mentee, other people involved, emotions that may play a role. In this process, the mentor's personal experiences and the way he handled them are explicitly expressed. In nearly all examined pairs there is mutuality on this point. The mentor's credibility in a sense depends on the willingness to open up to the mentee his or her own life.

It looks as if through this approach, the mentee learns a number of things. They learn that it is not necessary to be swamped or intimidated by a problem; together with the mentor they can gain some distance. On the one hand, this happens because in searching for words and for answers to the mentor's questions, they themselves gain a better insight in what is happening, and express this (literally: pushing it out, thus distance themselves from the problem). On the other hand, mentees learn that the mentor has known such problems too and has been able to solve them successfully. Such shared reflection leads to self-reflection.
I often need to take some time to think over what she [the mentor] said. Often I understand it only after a while, when we've talked it over again. (mentee)

So I lie in bed and I think: "How would he handle this?" (mentee)

Because mentors often refer back to prior conversations, learning is cumulative. Solutions that the mentee finds alone or together with the mentor, often provoke new questions that are tackled in the same way. This alternation, and the interlocking of dialogue with oneself and with the mentor lead, apart from the making of choices as such, to making more well-considered choices, to a growing motivation for actually taking certain decisions (e.g. qualifying for a diploma, or switching educational tracks), and, last but not least, to more self-confidence on the part of the mentee.

Next to trust, to the mentees it is of fundamental importance that they experience the mentor to be 'always there for them'. This does not mean that the mentor has to be available on demand: all mentors are busy people with jobs, overflowing calendars and all kinds of obligations. Rather, it is the experience that the mentor, when an appeal is made, takes this seriously and reserves time for the mentee at the shortest possible notice. All interviewed mentees are convinced of this: there is somebody you can always fall back on.

She is always there. I don't mean literally always, but you know she's there when it really matters. That's a strange thing indeed, somebody just doing that for you. Well, strange is not quite right, I don't know what to call it. It's fantastic, really (tears in eyes). (mentee)
At first I thought: why is that man doing this? Why does he make time for me? When I got to know him better, I asked him. Do you remember what you said? (turns to mentor) That you thought me worthwhile. At the time I thought: come on, that's ridiculous. (mentor laughs) And now I think: I'm not so bad after all. (mentee)

Important here is that mentors are volunteers: the mentees realise very well that the mentor really makes a choice for them, and respect this greatly. This figures in the relationship: "All in all, it's different when a professional social worker deals with you. Somebody who does it because it's the job, is paid for it, probably forgets about you ten minutes after you leave and the next client enters", says one of the mentees. As a consequence, the mentees too are more willing to listen, to think along, to be corrected if necessary. "When he gives me a dressing-down, I put up with it, of course I do." "No, with a teacher I think, get stuffed, man!"

An important element in mentor-mentee relationships is, as we said earlier, the mentor being willing to share former life experiences with the mentee. Often these are 'boundary experiences': experiences that put the mentor's self-image into question. Getting to know these experiences is instructive for mentees in two respects. Firstly, they learn cognitively by it: never run away from a boundary experience but learn from it. Secondly, they learn emotionally: somebody else is willing to be vulnerable, to share something personal. Often this makes a deep impression and the result is that mentees are willing to really do their best, even for causes that they are apprehensive of. Some mentees give examples of situations where they, although not intrinsically motivated to do something, went ahead in order not to disappoint their mentor. Later, such situations were openly discussed with the mentor.

Finally, in successful relationships mentees experience that mentors do not judge quickly. This is related to the bond of mutual trust, but also precedes it: the bond also came into being because the mentor did not judge in advance. Everything is open to discussion,
everything is taken seriously. This does not mean that mentees always agree or get their way. Neither does it mean that in the relationship, everything is considered serious. As a mentee says: "And laughing. We can laugh together so unbelievably! It really does give you a kick, I can tell you!"

What motivates mentors? Nearly always it is their own course of life and the experiences in study and work they have made. Nearly all interviewed mentors have travelled a complex, long and often difficult road of study and work to reach their present place. This has given them strength and pride, but also the conviction that, if it is possible to get someone to their place by a shorter route, this is sensible and valuable.

I do realise I was lucky. That I got chances my brothers and sisters did not get. You don't realise that when you're young, but afterwards you see it clearly. I want to give my mentee such a chance. It takes so much energy to discover it all by yourself. If I can help a bit, that is great. (mentor)

Mentors are people who have reflected on their own lives, although they will deny this when asked directly. With the wisdom they derive from it, they have no anxiety or aversion to talk about their emotions and their struggles. In many cases they receive mentees in their homes and make them acquainted with their families. They dare tell their mentees openly that they are learning from them in many respects: how one can think about certain matters, about other cultures, about certain aspects of a discipline or a type of education. In short, they are open-minded people, able and willing to have a flexible attitude. At the same time it is clear for the mentee that they are tenacious and assertive. Mentees are not handled softly, and demands are made. Almost each mentor demands dedication from the mentee. The mentor demands efforts in thinking and talking with the mentor, trying to find solutions together. If a mentee shows
no dedication, however minimal, the mentor pulls out. In that sense, nearly all mentors are real educators by experience. Without fail they are able to co-construct their mentee's 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978).

And especially no defeatism. Difficult is not the same thing as impossible! No blind optimism or support of impracticable ideals, no, stay real. That's not to say that dreaming is not allowed. But you should not stop there, life is not a dream. (mentor)

A role model? Me? Please, no. I'm just an ordinary guy. See, you hope he'll achieve something, whatever. It does not matter what, even though of course it's easier when it's in my area. But the most important is that you can handle yourself well, you believe in what you can do. That's what we aim at. (mentor)

I always ask myself how I'd like to be treated in such a situation. What would stimulate me. And of course I also often ask him whether I'm not going too fast, am not asking too much. (mentor)

Discussion

One important reason why, in Dutch vocational education, classic mentoring does not get off the ground is that there is no theory that acknowledges mentoring as an important part of a constructive learning process involving the whole person (and not just his/her cognitive side). In this contribution, we looked at successful mentoring situations, guided by a theory in which personal development is considered essential for a learning process conceived as the transformation of participation in a practice. Before we discuss the results, first the limitations of this study have to be outlined.
The study has a number of limitations. First of all, some clarifying information has been kept out of the report on request of the interviewed. Secondly, especially the mentees, but also the mentors – although less so, are not used to talking about themes like values, experiences, role models, emotions and self-confidence. A third limitation concerns the operationalisation of the concepts important to the model of constructivist learning. From the perspective of this model a successful mentor-mentee relationship is characterised by elements like meaning giving, sense making, and dialogue. It is not easy to find adequate operationalisations for such concepts. Next to what participants pronounce and name, the nonverbal communication between mentor and mentee turns out to yield much information about the quality of the relationship. The interviews evoked a lot of emotion, also in the interviewer. In the course of almost every conversation, the interviewer virtually 'disappeared': mentor and mentee respondend to each other instead of to the interviewer. Thus, the interview became a conversation between mentor and mentee about themes provided by the interviewer. A further limitation concerns the absence of a control group of unsuccessful mentor-mentee pairs. A final limitation is that the interviews focussed on what makes the mentor-mentee relationship a success. The problematic elements of the relationship were not specifically asked for, although in the course of the interview much was said about problems and the way they were solved.

Even though the study is exploratory, the interviews make clear that in successful mentor-mentee relationships the four conditions are met that constructivist learning psychology describes as determinants for meaningful learning. In successful mentor-mentee relationships (i.e. relationships that existed for more than six months and where the mentee, as perceived by the leaders of the mentor projects, significantly profited in terms of increased self-confidence
and positively changed behaviour) mentees have an active role in the design, the proceeding and the evaluation of their learning process. Their need for learning is the starting point of the relationship, they decide together with their mentor about how to interact with each other, and they evaluate together with their mentor what happened in their relationship. In successful relationships mentees do have the opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences together with their mentor, thus creating meaning in dialogue with each other. And in successful relationships mentees do learn in a concrete context (they learn from their experiences) and are enabled to develop their own perspectives gradually by their mentor.

Successful relationships prove to be powerful learning environments in which cognitive as well as affective learning processes take place. Moreover, both learning processes seem related. In most interviews, both mentor and mentee indicate that making emotions open to discussion results in creating a distance from the event producing these emotions and, as a consequence, the event will be better understood. Moreover, the interviews make clear that mentees learn about themselves and the world around them, not in an unilateral way (‘from the outside in’ as social learning theory suggests) but in a dialogical way where their own need for learning is the starting point (‘from the inside out’).

Trust, it appears from the interviews, is a basic condition. Trust has to grow in a process in which discursive meaning-giving (to understand a fact or situation by putting it into words) and intuitive sense-giving (to make sense of a situation or fact by relating it to the own life history) appear to alternate. It seems essential here that the mentor time and again creates space both emotionally and cognitively. Emotionally by 'always being there', cognitively by conceptualising experiences differently, without judgment. When mentors create space in this way, all interviewed pairs indicate, at some time boundary experiences (i.e. experiences that seriously question the self-image) will come up in a natural way.
Communication about significant experiences is not unilateral. In successful pairs there is a relation of equality. The mentor's experiences are a discussion topic too. The mentor's credibility partly depends on his willingness to admit the mentee into his own life and on that base to enter into a conversation on values. This is in agreement with research results of Hamilton & Darling (1996). They conclude that mentors only can become a successful role model if they make explicit the moral challenges and dilemmas they have encountered in their own lives, and if they make it clear to the younger partners how adults think and act in difficult situations. Philip (2001: 7) too observes that in successful relationships, “the mentors were individuals who had themselves been involved in risky situations and who were prepared to disclose and discuss this with the young person. In this way rules and boundaries were frequently open to renegotiation by both parties.” The most important element for the success of mentoring, then, seems to be an authentic personal relationship. This, of course, at the same time constitutes a problem: being a mentor is demanding both on the professional and on the personal level, and as such is not something that people enter upon easily. This may be one reason why it proves difficult to find mentors.

But do successful relationships enable mentees to change their attitudes and behaviour fundamentally? From these research data, this cannot be established. There are no convincing indications that the mentee's self-image and behaviour change under the influence of the mentor. Because our study is only a single moment observation, it is indeed unlikely that a change could be measured. In a one-time measurement, this would require a far higher degree of reflexivity than our mentees possess. To find out whether the mentees' self-image changes under the influence of communication with the mentor, a longitudinal study is necessary. Such a design is needed not only to be able to create an objective image of the effects of the mentoring relationship, but also for substantial other reasons. From attribution studies (e.g.
Weiner, 1986; Yan & Gaier, 1994) we know that people are inclined to attribute the successful solving of problems to themselves. Therefore it is important not to describe the development of the mentor-mentee relationship with hindsight. A possible research design would be to have both mentor and mentee report critical events immediately to the researcher so as to have them discussed and analysed by mentor and mentee together guided by the researcher.

Our research results do make clear, however, that the effects of classic mentoring on motivation and school success of students will be the more positive as in educational situations more space is created for experiential learning. In many interviews the mentees mentioned that they conduct qualitatively different dialogues with their mentors than with their teachers. Partly this is related to trust, partly to the fact that the mentor is not a professional but a volunteer who is not paid for his efforts, partly because the mentor is not perceived as part of the institution 'school' that many students have learned to hate.

References


ILLERIS, K. (2002). *The three dimensions of learning: Contemporary learning theory in the tension field between the cognitive, the emotional and the social.* Frederiksberg: Roskilde University Press


*Mind, Culture, and Activity, 1*, 209 – 229.


Dordrecht: Kluwer.


