

Interview

Mentoring Teachers and Researchers: A Meaning-Making Process

Ravinarayan Chakrakodi & Gitanjali Chawla in conversation
with Kenan Dikilitas

Kenan Dikilitas is a Professor of University Pedagogy at the University of Stavanger in Norway. Kenan's research interests include (bilingual) teacher education, mentoring and investigating action research, as well as in-service teacher development with a recent focus on higher education pedagogy.

Ravinarayan Chakrakodi (RC): Prof. Kenan Dikilitas, Thank you for agreeing to share your experience on mentoring with us, we are sure it will be a huge value addition for our readers. To begin with, can you tell us about your work with teachers and the recent studies you have carried out on teacher research?

Kenan Dikilitas (KD): I have been, and am still working with English language teachers in Turkey and beyond who are interested in conducting research to explore their own understandings of teaching and learning, to improve their practices and to shape their professional career. These mentoring experiences have been rewarding, I have noticed and reflected upon many un- or underexplored procedural issues for teachers doing research in their classrooms. These helped me develop new insights into potential research topics and reformulate research questions to investigate and publish. This led to articles on peer and mentor roles in teacher research, teacher researchers' self-efficacy development, autonomy development through reading research, identity development, and mentor development, along with impact of reading exploratory action research on pre-service teachers. I also have monographs on autonomy development through action research as well as research and inquiry skills of pre-service teachers. The close

collaboration with teacher researchers led me to investigate both my own practices of mentoring, and their experiences from multiple lens and impact dimensions.

Gitanjali Chawla (GC): Prof. Dikilitas, why do you think mentoring is gaining significance these days? And how important is mentoring in pre-service teacher education courses, for beginning teachers and the experienced ones?

KD: Mentoring teacher-researchers has gained significance in recent years for two key reasons. One is that many teachers appear to lack the relevant and necessary skills to conduct research in their classrooms, which is understandable, without the necessary training. If engaged in reading others' research, especially experts' academic publications, this would not necessarily help them learn how to do research themselves. In relation to this, the second is that they may simply not be aware of the potential insights and gains of being actively engaged in research. It is less likely that teachers develop such an awareness themselves without the support of a mentor committed and dedicated to promoting the key role research engagement plays in professional development. Few teachers would attempt to do research in order to improve their practices unless clearly shown how research can be turned into a practice that can support their professional development. Mentors' roles, however, involve not only increasing awareness and highlighting the key insights that can teachers can gain, but also facilitating their process of doing research, and providing knowledge that they need. For a novice teacher-researcher, it is important to build an enduring relationship with a mentor since research mentors need to be non-judgemental when they provide feedback, patient when mentees need time to understand, and welcoming and supportive when they suggest different ways of doing.

RC: According to Dr. N.S. Prabhu, a pioneer in the field of English Language Studies, "The most powerful source of educational change is the individual teacher's mind with its reflections, interpretations of experience, and judgments and decisions made in the daily act of teaching." He further says that "The teacher's growth is something that arises from the ongoing activity of teaching... It is a process of thinking about and making sense of one's classroom experience". In this backdrop, what is the role and significance of mentoring?

KD: Well, reflection on classroom experiences is essential if teachers are to develop their knowledge. Experience in the classroom does not

lead to practical knowledge immediately, so teachers need to build their learning on this by processing systematically and critically, and by understanding, by themselves or discussing with others, what happened, and how and why. Following these basic questions, they can re-reflect on all the processes to seek novel meanings for themselves. Research inherently involves doing reflection; teachers need to reflect on the data they generate and interpret it carefully. Such a meaning-making process is not an easy task, but a mentor can pose critical questions and challenge them to see more clearly what the data tells them, and make use of this. Research mentors play a key role in facilitating teachers' engagement in making sense of the data.

GC: Can you tell us about your experiences of mentoring teachers and researchers? What were some of your successful experiences and some of the challenges you experienced?

KD: Mentoring teachers and teacher researchers has often been a challenging process, for myself too. For mentoring researchers to be successful, the mentor needs to make sure they make space for continued dialogue and critical reflection, to help both parties elaborate on classroom issues. One of the key skills for mentors is first to listen and understand the mentee without judging, and then guiding the mentee to act on this. The mentor should focus on addressing key questions, such as what the researcher wants to investigate, and then discuss why and how. Encourage the researchers to reflect on these issues so they can clearly see the themes, purpose and questions that interest them. This means avoiding being directive, particularly in the themes and topics the researchers intend to explore, while helping them organize the ideas for the research they want to do. Teachers need to focus on understanding whether their new interventions create enthusiasm, motivation, active engagement, and more importantly a renewed interest in learning. A pre- and post-design research can tell us how many students were helped, but in the case of high or low correlation between the pre-test and post-test results, the teachers would need to reflect on why. This requires qualitative data to reveal unexplored views of students. Mentors need to keep them focused on the quality rather than quantity of learning, especially for the purpose of their research engagement.

However, this is a rather difficult task to achieve if mentors themselves as well as teachers, are not aware of the role of data generated with and from students in understanding their learning process. It is a daunting

task to lead to such a change in the paradigmatic state of research from positivist (numerical and measurable) to naturalistic (verbal and exploratory). Most teachers, I found, wanted to access results as measured impact such as scores, percentages, and averages, rather than as written reflection of learners, in the form of themes and categories. Most teachers believe that the success of the interventions can be measured by numbers, while the voices of learners is much harder for them to make sense and meaning of. This is one area that mentors need to focus on if they want to develop their skills in research mentoring: learning qualitative research methods to help teachers work with written texts, verbal records, and other artefacts from the classroom.

RC: Are there any instances that you are aware of when mentoring did not help teachers/researchers improve their professional/pedagogical/research skills?

KD: Mentoring happens in a context where mentees work and are supported by a mentor whether internally assigned or externally hired. It requires a safe environment that is characterized by its non-judgmental, supportive, constructive aspects. It aims to build and develop teachers' capacity, encouraging them to work, learn, and develop in their own way. I see mentoring as encouragement, inspiration and motivation provided by mentors. However, failure is inevitable if the mentor does not address challenges the mentees go through or the gaps that they need to address over time, if the mentor is unable to provide support to create a safe environment where they can share their critical views on the issues of interest and needs. Mentors should inspire self-discipline, self-regulation, and show appreciation of their efforts to develop themselves. Mentors should see mentoring as a learning opportunity for their own development, too while supporting their mentees. They should adopt a growth and development-based mentoring, where mentor influence is initially short-term but can extend over time.

GC: Professor, what according to you are the different styles and characteristics of mentoring?

KD: Mentoring can be practised in different ways, and the style will depend on the relationship between a mentor and mentee. There are, for example, external mentors hired by an institution to help their teachers. Such mentors can help, but the impact might be lower since key processes that support collaborative development might be relatively weaker; these include building trust, developing mutual understanding,

sharing key experiences, providing continuous support, engaging in sustained authentic dialogues, and building a sustainable community of inquirers, where everyone is involved and helpful. Such mentors are, naturally, knowledgeable, and experienced, but their impact might not be sustainable, the teachers might gradually return to their former daily routines after mentors leave. There are also mentors internally assigned or selected. Such mentors can provide prolonged mentoring and immediate support when needed. Such mentors are selected due to their experience in the institution, but the experience in teaching does not guarantee success in mentoring others without training to develop mentor qualifications and skills. This training should provide critical insights into teaching or research practices, particularly because experiences need to be reflected upon systematically to make meaningful knowledge out of them. While peer mentors have the advantage of being able to relate to their peers, having extensive contextual knowledge, and providing very relevant critical advice, but might not be objective or critical enough due to lack of professional distance.

RC: And how different is mentoring teacher researchers from mentoring academic researchers?

KD: Mentoring academic researchers is more like taking on the role of a supervisor, which creates a hierarchical relationship. However, sometimes even in such formal contexts, some supervisors act in the spirit of a mentor, leaving aside their institutional identity. They develop a democratic, non-hierarchical relationship by building a community of mentees allowing collaboration to be fully experienced. There is a difference between mentoring teacher-researchers and academic mentoring; mentoring teacher-researchers aims to exert a practical knowledge development primarily based on reflection and interpretation of their own student data, but in academic mentoring or supervision, dissertations or theses require complex conventions and the ultimate aim might include developing a new or revised model, revealing new knowledge, contributing to the existing knowledge, or drawing implications for the relevant field. Mentoring teacher-researchers, in contrast, is often more flexible and person/context-specific, generally at the level of teachers researching their classrooms with their students.

RC: The real, human connection is one of the great things about mentoring, right? It, as you rightly pointed out, involves long conversations, thoughtful questions and deep reflections. How do you think digital

media, online tools and resources help in mentoring, developing long lasting relationships?

KD: In recent years, especially after the breakout of the pandemic caused by Corona Virus, we have had to shift our interaction online, including for mentoring. This has influenced the way mentoring can be conducted. Personally, I found it helpful to be online since I had the opportunity to connect with the mentees more often and for longer. It automatically made the interaction multimodal, allowing sharing resources in modalities including both text to video. In live online mentoring, for example, multiple mentees can contribute in various ways. While one mentee is speaking, others can comment in the chat box or send interactional emojis to agree, like or encourage the others. Online mentoring allows for maintaining regular synchronous and asynchronous interaction at any location in the world, it helps in building a community and network that can tele collaborate in multiple ways and furthermore, it establishes multidirectional relationships that support learning in multimodal environments.

Nowadays we have more inputs and resources in the form of digital media which we can access to understand and learn about mentoring, as is the case for all other fields of inquiry. Taking a creative approach, online environments can become spaces where mentoring can become more participatory and inclusive, and conducted as a community of mentors and mentees. Online environments especially open access asynchronous pages make mentoring more transparent, since people can access these dialogues, and so they can monitor the mentor's strategies and styles. It can also help us understand the nature of language used during the mentor-mentee relationship. How a mentor explains things is often more important and influential than what is said. Written and verbal language can function as complementary processes to provide deeper argumentation and criticality, compared to the interaction based on single modality.

GC: Let us look at the other side of the picture, what do mentors learn from mentoring teachers/researchers? What are the benefits of being a mentor?

KD: As I said above, mentors should also understand that they learn from their mentees, since mentoring is inherently a mutual process. One can only mentor another if the mentees are fully involved, being active participants rather than simply the recipients of what mentors

are telling them. By mentoring others, mentors can raise their own awareness through multiple experiences which gradually enrich their own perspectives. It also helps to nurture their ability to interact and respond to various issues, expanding their repertoire of critical incidents they might encounter in the future. It does give them opportunities to challenge themselves by dealing with each teacher's unique questions and puzzles.

RC: Professor, how effective is mentorship in transforming educational policies, practices, and teacher education in particular?

KD: Mentorship is based on establishing relationships and maintaining positive interaction with others, and developing mutual understanding, so it needs to be integrated in institutions because it brings staff together, and it creates a sense of collaboration and achievement. Through mentorship, common issues, and deeply rooted questions become more visible to teachers and/or researchers and are subject to greater scrutiny. The topics and themes arising in mentorship begin to make the school more transparent and democratic, by helping everyone to become part of the discussions. New insights are generated, especially if those who experience them can verbalize them in a community which is attentive and respectful. Mentorship might provide such a context that is conducive to school development, because everyone is reflecting more critically, rather than simply criticizing without a purpose. Mentors then have an opportunity to support the dialogues, arguments and the emerging insights as these are identified, discussed, and understood, and ultimately, change the way teachers think and develop within their context.

GC: How can school heads and principals support mentoring programmes?

KD: Being able to mentor is one of the characteristics of school leaders, especially when they know how to communicate with teachers, how to open space for deeper teacher engagement in school-related decisions and pedagogical practices. By taking on mentor roles, principals can co-build practical knowledge with teachers, by including them systematically in the process of change and development as a school. Although this seems to be implicit rather than explicit mentoring, it is perhaps more effective since it is more likely to empower teachers by respecting their critical views on key decisions. Such mentoring is also important to involving both teachers and students in negotiating learning and achievement

in order to identify and address priorities. Principals therefore need to adopt a more non-hierarchical mentoring style, downplaying their institutional roles and becoming a team member who is able to reflect as an equal with the teachers. They may face challenges undertaking mentor roles, since teachers might already see them as an authority, rather than a colleague who can help without judging them. Therefore, rather than directly being involved, they can support the idea of co-mentoring, or assigning interested teachers as mentors who can support others.

RC: Professor, this has been very enlightening indeed! It was wonderful interacting with you and we are sure that this will benefit our readers immensely.

KD: Thank you, I enjoyed it as well and if readers would like to go through my research and publications in this area, they can access it at <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=UH2eSy0AAAAJ&hl=en&oi=ao>

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