

Abstract

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THE ROLE OF MENTORING IN TEACHERS' CAREER DEVELOPMENT: MECHANISMS AND DYNAMICS OF MENTORING EXAMINED FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL COGNITIVE CAREER THEORY (SCCT)

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Mentoring in education is widely recognized as a key determinant in supporting teachers' professional development (Hunskar & Lejonberg, 2024; European Commission, 2007). The essence of this process is an asymmetrical interaction in which the mentor strategically stimulates the mentee's development, enhances their operational efficiency, and supports their inclusion into the institutional goals of the educational establishment (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Sidor-Rządkowska, 2012). The impact of mentoring is holistic in nature: it dynamizes both the personal and professional dimensions of the mentee, generates a high sense of self-efficacy, develops reflective learning, and supports the transmission of tacit knowledge and professional ethos (Czechowska-Frączak, 2013). In the realities of the Polish educational system, teachers' career advancement relies heavily on mentoring structures (Ośrodek Rozwoju Edukacji, 2024). Despite reforms, its transformative potential is sometimes reduced to a bureaucratic requirement (Oleksyn, 2011). This study responds to this research gap by exploring teachers' individual narratives regarding their mentoring experiences.

The theoretical foundation is based on Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994). It was assumed that self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations serve as key mediators between mentoring experience and career-related behaviors.

The primary objective is to explicate the processual mechanisms of mentoring in Polish education and to formulate applicational recommendations. Specific objectives were divided into: (a) explanatory-relational objectives – identification of causal and relational mechanisms in light of SCCT, the role of organizational culture, and the impact of support on professional resilience; (b) contextual-inductive objectives – uncovering contextual conditions, interaction frequencies, structural barriers, and burnout prevention strategies.

Seven main research questions (Q1–Q7) and detailed sub-questions (SUB-Q) were formulated, covering, among others, the dichotomy of formal and informal mentoring, identity formation, the impact of barriers, and best practices supporting career development.

A phenomenological orientation and constructivist paradigm were applied, giving primacy to subjective meaning-making and processual analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2015). Empirical material was gathered in Polish public and non-public schools (urban and suburban areas) using written narrative transcripts and oral qualitative interviews (open and semi-structured).

The analysis, synthesized across analytical dimensions, revealed that: (a) formal mentoring is sometimes equated with bureaucratic oppression and tokenistic activities, whereas informal relationships—based on spontaneity, authenticity, and mutual trust—constitute a key channel for transmitting tacit knowledge and emotional support; (b) the effectiveness of mentoring dyads depends on the coherence of educational philosophy, communication style, and professional ethics, with mentoring stimulating self-efficacy by activating SCCT sources (mastery experiences, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion); (c) the primary distractors include bureaucratic overload, lack of protected time, expert mismatch, and lack of supervision; (d) trajectory differences were observed depending on the type of institution: in private schools, orientation toward innovation increased over time due to managerial flexibility, whereas in public schools it decreased in favor of conformity and formal advancement requirements; (e) mentoring catalyzes the transition from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation, building professional identity and unleashing authentic agency.

The obtained results possess high applicational potential, serving as a practical starting point for modifying educational policy, the principles of matching dyads, and supervision in educational institutions. The replicability of the approach enables its reapplication in different organizational, geographical, or cultural contexts.