

“ I need instant help”: Assessing the mentoring needs of new primary head teachers in Slovenia

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J. TIM GODDARD
University of Calgary, Canada

JUSTINA ERCULJ
National School for Leadership in Education, Slovenia

ANITA TRANAVCEVIC
University of Primorska, Slovenia

ABSTRACT: In this paper we describe a peer mentoring program for new elementary school head teachers in Slovenia. First, the results of a preliminary needs assessment are reported, and the dissonance between new head teacher expectations and the realities of their work are described. We then present an overview of the two cross-cutting themes that emerged, and conclude with a discussion of the need to integrate both theoretical and practical aspects of school administration into a mentoring program.

The Mentoring of Head Teachers in Slovenia

In this article we report on the establishment and first year of a peer mentoring program for new elementary school head teachers in Slovenia. Following a brief introduction of the educational context of Slovenia, we then present the results of a preliminary needs assessment. Second, we describe the mentoring program that was developed and implemented by the authors. Third, we provide a summary of participants' opinions following the first year of the program. And, finally, we discuss some of the implications of the program for educational leaders in Slovenia and elsewhere.

The Slovenian Context

Slovenia is a country of two million people in south Eastern Europe, located between mountainous Austria and Italy, the plains of Hungary, and the warm Adriatic Sea. The population is served by 595 schools, of which 147 offer secondary (15 – 19 years) and 448 offer

elementary (6 – 15 years) programs. Slovenia achieved its independence in 1991, and in 1995 the National School for Leadership in Education (NSLE) was established to prepare serving and aspiring head teachers for leading their schools more effectively. In April 2004, Slovenia joined the European Union.

The Organization and Funding of Education Act (Ministry of Education and Sport, 1996) [the Act] regulates that all head teachers acquire the licence (which could be also labelled as certification) within their first year of being appointed to a position. The Act also defines the governing structure of schools and the conditions which a candidate applying for head teacher must meet. In article 53 of the Act it is defined that the head teacher is a pedagogical (instructional) leader of a school as well as a manager. The duties and tasks are therefore related to the areas of planning, organizing and leading the institution, designing the annual plan, organizing mentorship for new teachers, communicating with parents and stakeholders, and a number of other tasks and responsibilities. The head teacher is responsible for implementation of the annual plan, for the work of school with respect to legal requirements, and for implementation of children's rights. The head teacher also defines the systemization of posts and takes decisions about employment of staff, disciplinary measures for staff and students, and matters concerning the promotion of teachers to the different promotional levels, mentor, advisor, and councillor, each of which has a different pay level.

As the purpose of this paper is not to list and analyze all the duties, responsibilities and tasks of a head teacher this section only illustrates the complexity of the head teacher's work. It is in this complexity that the justification for the training of new head teachers is embedded.

Article 53 of the Act states that in order to become a head teacher of a public school, the candidate needs to meet the following criteria (Ministry of Education and Sport, 1996):

- To have a university degree;
- To meet requirements for a teacher or counselling service member;
- To have 5 years of working experiences in education;
- To be an 'advisor' or 'councillor' or have functioned as a 'mentor' for five years; and,
- To have headship licence acquired or must acquire it within the first year of his/her headship.

Head teachers are appointed for a five year contract. After that period they can compete for the job again at the same school or apply elsewhere. Each school board is responsible to appoint a head teacher and may also relieve him/her of that duty, but approval from the Minister is also needed in order to hire or fire a head teacher.

In Article 106 of the Act it is also stated that for education and training of head teachers, the Government of Slovenia has established the School for Leadership in Education (Ministry of Education and Sport, 1996). The National School for Leadership in Education [NSLE] operates at arms length from the government and is an independent body concerned with research and professional education in Slovenia. The NSLE program is defined by the Minister on the basis of recommendations of the Professional Council of the Republic of Slovenia for General Education.

Through a program developed and delivered by NSLE, a "headship licence" is one of the

conditions the applicants must fulfill when applying for a head teacher's post. Initially the program was a requirement for all head teachers who were in post. Over time the legislation changed and the licence became an entry requirement for the headship, and the number of aspiring head teachers has increased to approximately 90% cent of the annual cohort. The remaining 10% are school administrators who have already been appointed to the headship. Most of those who complete the licence do not become head teachers for two or more years, and few of them have had any prior leadership responsibilities in their schools.

It was apparent that some form of transition between the headship licence and the taking up of an administrative position was required. In response, in 2003 NSLE initiated a mentoring system for new head teachers. The authors (two of whom are connected with NSLE, and the third who acted as a participatory consultant in the process) were involved in developing and implementing this mentoring program.

Theoretical Framework

Leadership as a concept and as a set of practices has been the subject of a wide range of research and literature. It has been consistently argued by various authors, such as Day, Hall, and Whitaker (1998), Hargreaves and Fullan (1998), and Harris (2003), that the quality of leadership influence teacher performance. Similarly, researchers on school effectiveness and school improvement (e.g., Harris & Bennett, 2001; Reynolds, Bollen, Creemers, Hopkins, Stoll, & Lagerweij, 1996; Stoll & Fink, 1992) highlight the importance of leadership in schools. This has led to development of programmes for the preparation of head teachers in many countries. In Europe almost every country runs one or more programs for head teachers and aspiring head teachers. A comparative study that analyzed 18 training programmes for head teachers in 13 European countries (Verbiest, 2003) indicated that these programs suggest that there might be “a generic set of leadership skills and a common body of knowledge that any potential leader can access” (Harris, 2003, p. 11) and supposedly requires in order to become an effective head teacher. For example, all of these programs attempt to develop knowledge and skills related to the organization and administration of the school, the adaptation of curriculum to meet local conditions and circumstances, the improvements of the academic results of the students, the more effective leading of staff, and the designing of strategic policies for the school. On the other hand, it is also recognized that leadership depends heavily “on the social and organizational context in which it is exercised” (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999, p. 3). Riley (as cited in Harris, 2003) also recognizes the meaning of culture and context through which leadership is developed and exercised.

Taking into account both views we may conclude that ‘catch-all’ programs for preparation are not sufficient as they cannot be contextually sensitive to the situation in each individual school. Beside this, in Slovenia and in some other countries aspiring head teachers are faced with the situation of being prepared for a head teacher's post long before they actually get the position. The mentoring program described here was predicated in the belief that such an initiative might bridge the gap between general knowledge and specific context as well as between the completion of one's training for the headship and one's actual performance of the job.

The need for mentorship can be viewed as the need for significant support throughout a head teacher's career. Kirkham (1993) points to a predictable set of needs and concerns that are characteristic of a particular stage in one's career. Mentors can offer advice and counsel as well as emotional support in the initial stages, a period which may be referred to as entry and encounter (Weindling, 1999). This period is usually characterized by isolation in that head teachers often lack support in their "attempts to make sense of and develop a 'cognitive map' of the school, its communities, culture and problems" (Harris, 2003, p. 34). The new head teachers, given the opportunity of regular meetings with a mentor, can also build their capacity to engage in the critical reflection which is perceived vital to their professional growth (Coleman, 1996; Gunter, 2001; Harris, 2003)

Peer mentoring programs have been developed for new teachers and administrators in England and Wales (Bolam, McMahon, Pocklington, & Weindling, 1993; Bush & Coleman, 1995), the United States (Daresh, 1995; Grover, 1994), Canada (Goddard, 1998; Szumlas, 2000), and elsewhere (Low, 1995). Such programs accept that the professional development of school administrators requires a more experienced individual who is willing share his or her knowledge with someone less experienced in a position of mutual trust (Clutterbuck, 1992). Slovenia had not had such a program in the past.

According to the literature, new heads need mentoring in order to reduce their feelings of isolation, stress, and frustration in a new job, to increase their confidence and self-esteem, and to provide an opportunity to improve their personal skills and technical expertise while reflecting on their new role (Bolam et al., 1995; Bush & Coleman, 1995; Grover, 1994; Monsour, 1998; Southworth, 1995). A properly selected mentor will assist with this process, establishing a unique relationship (Samier, 2000), engaging in a compassionate and mutual search for wisdom (Bell, 1996), and helping bridge the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of school administration (Goddard, 1998).

The pairing of mentors and protégés requires careful consideration. The literature shows that characteristics of the school (rural vs. urban location, number of students, grade levels offered in the school, socio-economic status of community, etc.), of the mentor and protégé themselves (gender, age, experience, ethnicity, etc.), and of the level of support provided by the organization (time, training, monitoring and evaluation) are all important factors (Malone, 2001). However, it was apparent to the authors and to the participants that these factors must also be considered within the Slovenian context.

In other countries the mentoring of new principals has been a very successful exercise. With respect to a program in New York, Grover (1994) reported that 80% of the new principals found this to be helpful or extremely helpful. Similarly, Bolam et al. (1993) reported that 66% of the new heads and 73% of the mentors found their experiences with the national mentoring program in England and Wales to be successful or very successful. This is the first time data from the Slovenian project have been presented.

Method

The paper draws on quantitative data collected in response to the Needs Assessment Survey. Qualitative data collected through open-ended questions were also collected and analyzed. All data were collected in Slovenian and the findings translated into English. The Needs Assessment Surveys were distributed to participants by mail, accompanied by a short questionnaire that requested demographic data (Appendix A).

Survey Instrument

The Needs Assessment Survey was adapted from that previously administered in a study of mentoring among rural educators in Alberta, Canada (Goddard & Habermann, 2001). The adapted survey is presented in Appendix B (Slovenian) and Appendix C (English translation).

Respondents

The Needs Assessment Survey was distributed to 42 head teachers across Slovenia. This population comprised all the elementary head teachers in the country with 1 to 3 years of working experiences as head teachers. A total of 16 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 38%. This sample was considered to be an acceptable return rate for a mail-out survey in a country with little experience of such a process.

Of the sixteen respondents, eleven were in their first year as head teachers. Only two had previously held deputy head positions; the majority had been promoted directly from roles as teachers or school counsellors, and had no prior managerial experience. Four of the respondents were head teachers of urban schools in two of the major cities and eleven were responsible for rural schools. Approximately one third ($n = 5$) of the respondents were responsible for schools that had kindergarten programs. In Slovenia, such programs are considered additional responsibilities for the head teacher.

Process

On the basis of the results from the Needs Assessment Surveys, the authors developed the mentoring program. This consisted of 5 organized meetings and a series of face-to-face meetings that mentors and protégés organized together. These meetings were encouraged by the authors but were arranged independently by the participants.

The formal program of meetings was arranged as follows:

1. Introductory meeting (getting to know each other, principles of effective mentoring, organization of the programme, setting ground rules between the mentor and the protégé);
2. Legal matters and inspection (current issues and answers to specific questions defined by mentors and protégés during their face-to-face meetings);
3. Leading people (motivation, managing conflicts);
4. Planning (development plans, short-term planning, setting priorities); and,
5. Managing teacher performance (observing lessons, teacher professional development).

All sessions include some theoretical input, a discussion of practical examples, and conversations predicated on the answers to pre-prepared questions. This combination of theory and practice seemed to be accepted in a very positive way. In their mid-program evaluations both the mentors and protégés stated that they had appreciated such an approach. Through the theoretical perspectives they understood that they had gained new perspectives on their practice while the practical examples helped them in situations where they “needed instant help.” The third dimension in this program was the opportunities for both mentors’ and protégés to reflect on practice through the mid-program evaluation.

Findings

The researchers analysed the data from the Needs Assessment Survey. The results indicate that there exists a major dissonance between the challenges that new head teachers expected to experience and those with which they were actually faced. Following a presentation of those expectations and realities, we provide a discussion of the implications of this dissonance.

Expectations

In reflecting on their pre-appointment concerns, the respondents indicated that they had expected their major challenges to be in the realm of pedagogical or instructional leadership. There were four areas identified. First, new head teachers were concerned with knowing how to establish a positive climate in their school, with developing effective communication skills, and with introducing sustainable educational innovations and change. A second area was in strengthening the relationships between the school and the communities it served. They perceived a need to build the profile and reputation of the school among both the local and wider communities. Third, they were anticipating that they would have problems in organizing their own work and the overall structure of the school. Finally, they predicted that they would require assistance in developing their own personal skills, increasing their self confidence in order to facilitate self-growth and professional development.

In order to achieve these goals, they expected that they would receive help from formal governmental and non-governmental agencies. In Slovenia the educational system is quite centralized and the Ministry of Education, Science, and Sport (MESS) has a major role in developing educational policy. The Association of Head Teachers (AHT) is a national group with responsibility to develop the status of head teachers, to engage in the policy discourse, and to inform their members about new initiatives in education. The AHT is a consultative body with a concern for the professional development of its members. The respondents anticipated that they would receive support from MESS and AHT in their first few years as new head teachers.

Reality

As new administrators, the respondents were surprised to discover that their major challenges were not related to pedagogical leadership. Rather, they found themselves dealing with issues of day-to-day management and routine administrative tasks. The major concern was the need to become knowledgeable about legislation related to schools, in three areas. These were financial, human resource management, and school organization. Sub-sets of this theme included the

motivation of staff, the delegation of responsibilities, and the development of an overarching understanding of the larger educational system. Although these matters had been covered in one of the modules of the headship licence program, respondents found it difficult to transfer this knowledge into the practical arena.

A second concern was the lack of time available for instructional leadership activities. Respondents were kept so busy dealing with the administrative routines of the school that they were not able to devote time to classroom visits, pedagogical coaching, and so forth.

When asked to provide specific examples of areas where help was expected but not received, the respondents focussed on concrete situations. For example, they expressed the need to better understand how to prepare for school inspections, to develop annual work plans, and to deal with staffing issues such as recruitment, discipline, and the determination of tasks and duties of staff.

Respondents reported that the anticipated support from MESS and AHT was not forthcoming. Only one person reported receiving help from AHT. Rather, such assistance as was received came mainly from senior colleagues, usually through an informal process that has developed where groups of head teachers meet three or four times a year to discuss educational matters relevant to their local region. Such groups, of which there are nine, are not formally recognized. This finding suggests that some informal mentoring of new head teachers was taking place in Slovenia but that this was based on social and regional networks, rather than on professional or national institutions.

Emergent Themes

Two themes emerged from the responses of the new head teachers to the Needs Assessment Survey. First, there was the previously noted dissonance between pedagogical leadership and administrative tasks. Second, there was a strongly expressed need for a formal mentoring process to support new heads.

Pedagogy Versus Administration

When describing their understandings of the knowledge and skills required by new head teachers, respondents talked broadly of the larger philosophical issues. They described, for example, the need for the school to play a central role in the community, and for the head to provide instructional leadership to his or her teachers. They emphasized skills such as communication, tolerance, and the possession of a broader pedagogical knowledge of learning processes. When discussing their personal and individual needs, however, they focussed wholly on concrete matters of administration. For example, three respondents expressed a need to better understand how to develop the annual school plan. Others talked of the need for specific strategies to implement the reforms of the new educational legislation. There appeared to be a desire for a “cookbook” approach to leadership, where new heads would be provided with the recipes required to deal with organizational and administrative tasks.

A Mentoring Program

In the open-ended responses to the Needs Assessment Surveys, one participant observed that “you don’t know what help you will need when you start, it’s all new.” A second commented that “I needed instant help” but this was seldom available. When new head teachers were able to discuss their problems with more experienced colleagues, they often found that there were a variety of strategies recommended. As one reflected, “there were so many different answers to the same question that I was even more confused than before.” It appeared that there was a need for a more structured approach that would provide new heads teachers with a guide to practice, a guide that was designed in such a way that it addressed common issues but left room for individual adaptation to local context.

The Needs Assessment Surveys permitted us to understand what Slovenian head teachers perceived to be the characteristics of an effective mentor. Such persons, they suggested, must have the ability to listen and be ready to act by giving suggestions in response to questions. It was suggested that mentors would be able to predict potential difficulties, and thus save time for the protégé by forewarning them of situations that might arise as a result of certain actions. Mentors would of course be knowledgeable and comfortable in their own work, but they would also have a knowledge and awareness of the broader environment. This knowledge would then be made available to the protégés, who would be able to navigate context more efficiently as a result of this assistance. The mentor would have certain personal characteristics: he or she would be tolerant, kind, able to raise morale during difficult situations, and able to maintain confidence in the protégé even when it appeared that they were floundering. More pragmatically, the mentor would also be a good economist, and thus able to assist with the nuances of budgeting, and would have a high reputation at the Ministry, thus being able to speak well of the protégé.

Using the responses to the Needs Assessment Surveys as a guide, a national mentoring program was developed by the authors. The program was also informed by the research literature, and by the personal experiences of the authors in other contexts. Ten new head teachers were invited to participate in a pilot of the mentoring program, and these were paired with eight head teachers who were to act as mentors. The first meeting of the group took place in October 2003, with a series of presentations related to successful mentoring programs (Erculj, 2003; Goddard, 2003). At this time the mentors and protégés agreed to an organizational protocol that described the number of meetings they would have, who would take responsibility for initiating the meetings, and so forth. The basic rules of confidentiality were established, and participants identified those topics that they did not wish to be discussed. A further series of meetings were held throughout the year, at which time the topics identified in October 2003 were more fully discussed. These topics were: legislation (December 2003); pedagogical and instructional leadership (March 2004); organization and planning (May 2004); evaluation of the process (June 2004). A thorough analysis of the data gathered from the second evaluation of the program is being conducted and it is anticipated that the results will be published over the next few months. This paper has focussed on the design and implementation phases of the project.

Implications and Discussion

The findings from this pilot study to investigate the development of a mentoring program that addressed the professional development needs of new head teachers in Slovenia have implications for such programs in other jurisdictions. It is apparent from the literature, confirmed in this study, that there are certain elements common to the task of running a school, and that these elements have cross-jurisdictional application. Within the Slovenian context, new head teachers in different parts of the country, in both urban and rural schools, faced similar issues related to the national legislation and the expectations of head teachers held by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. Nonetheless, in the practice of school leadership the local contexts varied and required new head teachers to implement strategies specific to their own situation.

The international literature suggests that the issues being faced by the new heads in Slovenia are similar to those experienced by their colleagues in other countries. This finding supports the actions of the authors in developing a mentoring program that relied heavily on the literature for its conceptual underpinnings. The administration of a survey used in Canada, adapted for local context, was shown to be a reasonable research strategy. Such policy borrowing, however, is not generally recommended as the tendency to simply adopt new ideas without first accounting for national and local context can prove problematic. At the same time, merely local solutions that address practical issues without considering the wider theoretical literature are equally problematic. Such approaches can result in each school reinventing the wheel and require a strong dependency on the mentor.

We would suggest that the head teacher licensing program initiated some years ago in Slovenia provides aspiring head teachers with a theoretical and general understanding of the role of the school administrator. Through informal local or regional networks, new heads then received practical and specific advice on their role. The national mentoring program sought to bring together the best elements of these two activities.

Through the culture of supported practice established by the formal mentoring program, new head teachers in Slovenia are now provided with an integrated approach to practice and theory. Such praxis knowledge enables individuals to enhance their craft knowledge with a broad grounding of the conceptual frameworks of practice. This model may have implications for other jurisdictions in the emerging democracies of the post-modern world. In nation-states that have a strong record of centralized government and policy structures, school administrators sometimes find the transition to contemporary leadership practice to be challenging (Goddard, in press; Goddard & Fagnou, 2002). The provision of a structured and supportive environment appears to be a useful countervail to this challenge.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a first report on mentoring in Slovenia. In describing a peer mentoring program for new elementary school head teachers in that country, we have presented the initial results from a preliminary needs assessment. We have identified some of the dissonance that exists between new head teacher expectations and the realities of their work once they are appointed to the principalship. We presented an overview of the two cross-cutting themes that

emerged, namely: (a) the struggle to balance pedagogical leadership and administrative tasks, and (b) the strongly expressed need for a formal mentoring process to support new heads. The paper concluded with a discussion of the need to integrate both theoretical and practical aspects of school administration into a mentoring program.

These findings will make a contribution to the literature, in that not many studies have been conducted in jurisdictions outside the Anglo-American sphere of influence. The findings will be particularly useful in Slovenia and in other emerging democracies, where major systemic change demands new types of organizational structures and individual approaches to work (Catana, 2003). It is important that leaders in such countries are aware of the need to change the values and belief systems of people, and to do this in ways that are open, collaborative, and respectful. The mentoring program seeks to model these processes.

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Appendix A: Demographic Information

Spoštovani!

V šolskem letu 2003/2004 bomo v Šoli za ravnatelje zaceli poskusno izvajati program Mentorstvo ravnateljem – zacetnikom. Zasnovali smo ga tako, da bomo kar najbolj upoštevali izzive in probleme, s katerimi se srečujejo ravnatelji – zacetniki v slovenskem prostoru. Zato vas prosimo, da nam pri tem pomagata in izpolnite priloženi vprašalnik.

Zahvaljujemo se vam za sodelovanje.

OSNOVNI PODATKI

1. Koliko let ste že ravnatelj/ica?

1 2 3

2. Ali ste bili pred imenovanjem za ravnatelja/ico pomočnik/ca?

da ne

3. Kako bi opredelili svojo šolo glede na kraj, v katerem deluje?

mestna primestna vaška

4. Koliko učencev ima šola?

5. Ali ima šola podružnice

ne da (koliko?) _____

6. Ali v okviru šole deluje tudi vrtec?

da ne

Appendix B: Principal Survey

MENTORSTVO RAVNATELJEV

VPRAŠALNIK ZA RAVNATELJE

1. Katere izzive ste pričakovali, ko ste bili imenovani za ravnatelja/ravnateljico?
2. S katerimi problemi ste se dejansko srečali prvo leto svojega ravnateljstva?
3. Ste v prvem letu ravnateljstva pričakovali pomoč? Če ste, cigavo?
4. Kakšno pomoč ste dobili v prvem letu ravnateljstva?
5. Kdo od naštetih vam je najbolj pomagal?

	Nič	Nekaj	Veliko	Vse, kar sem rabil-a
Drugi novi ravnatelji				
Drugi izkušeni ravnatelji				
Zavod za šolstvo				
Ministrstvo za šolstvo, znanost in šport				
Šole za ravnatelje				
Združenje ravnateljev				
Drugi (naštetje, kdo)				

1. Napišite konkreten primer pomoči, ki ste je bili deležni.
2. Napišite tri primere, ko bi potrebovali pomoč, pa je niste dobili.
3. Naštetje tri primere informacij oziroma znanj, ki so po vašem mnenju nujno potrebna novemu ravnatelju.
4. Menite, da bi ravnatelji – novinci potrebovali mentorja? Odgovorite z DA ali NE.
5. Če ste odgovorili pritrdilno, naštetje nekaj lastnosti dobrega mentorja ravnatelju-zacetniku.

Appendix C: Principal Survey – English translation

1. When you were first appointed as a new principal, what issues (problems, challenges) did you expect to face?
2. What issues (problems, challenges) did you actually experience during your first year as a new principal?
3. When you were first appointed as a new principal, what kind(s) of support did you expect to receive?
4. What kind(s) of support did you actually receive during your first year as a new principal?
5. From whom did you receive this support?

	Not at all	Some	A lot	All I needed
Other new principals				
More experienced colleagues				
Institute of Education				
Ministry of education				
National Leadership School				
Principals' Association				
Other (please say who)				

6. Please, give one or two concrete examples of the support you received.
7. Please give on or two concrete examples of the type of support you would have liked to receive but did not.
8. Please give three examples of the information, types of knowledge or training that you feel should be given to every new principal.
9. Would it have been useful to you if one experienced principal had been appointed as your mentor for the first year?
10. If your answer to Question 9 is »YES«, what kind of person would have been effective as a mentor?

Author's Address:
Faculty of Education
2500 University Drive NW
Calgary, AB, Canada
T2N 1N4