

# BEGINNING TEACHER MENTORING IN ESTONIA: A BASIC REVIEW OF THE CURRENT STATE AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

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**Annotation.** As a downside, research shows that high-quality mentoring is rare. In 2017, more than dozen years after the launch of the induction program, a survey was initiated by the NGO Alustavat Õpetajat Toetav Kool. The characteristics of the current beginning teachers in Estonia and as well as the current situation in beginning teacher mentoring in Estonia calls for mentoring system improvements.

**Keywords:** beginning teacher; mentoring.

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## INTRODUCTION

Mentoring is a core element in beginning teacher induction programs in many parts of the world (Hobson et al., 2009). Its benefits have been linked to increased teacher retention, when well-conceived, carefully implemented, and soundly supported by the schools in which new teacher work (Ingersoll and others, 2004). As a downside, research shows that high-quality mentoring is rare (Johnson & others, 2005). There are many aspects in which it may fail: offering sufficient support for emotional and psychological well-being, providing enough challenge and autonomy, designing necessary scaffolding for the development of reflection and other critical skills, encouraging innovation - to list a few examples.

In Estonia beginning teacher induction program was implemented in 2004 with mentoring as one of its key components. Since that time, hundreds of mentors have completed special preparation program - for supporting beginning teachers in their adaptation to school culture and in their professional growth as teachers (Poom-Valickis, 2013).

In 2017, more than dozen years after the launch of the induction program, a survey was initiated by the NGO Alustavat Õpetajat Toetav Kool (in English: School for Beginning Teachers) as a way to collect basic information about the extent and nature of beginning teachers' mentoring practice, among other things. In the context of significant proportion of beginning teachers leaving the profession already before their second year, the aging teacher profession in Estonia, and the accumulating anecdotal evidence regarding insufficient beginning teacher mentoring, the need for more data had become inevitable.

The survey questionnaire was designed for beginning teachers with the aim of mapping out the current mentoring situation and to inform further steps, among other things. In particular, the focus was put on estimating how many beginning teachers in Estonia have access to mentoring, and what is its content. The survey was carried out at the end of the school year. 162 beginning teachers (17%) participated in the survey out of the total of 933 beginning teachers of 2017/18 school year.

To conclude - in order to review the current situation and suggest next steps for improvement - the author of the article sets out to

1. Portray the current beginning teachers in Estonia,
2. Describe the state of the art beginning teacher mentoring based on the survey of beginning teachers of 2017/18 school year,
3. Put the results of the survey into the context of the success factors of beginning teacher mentoring. Combining the synthesis by J. Hobson and others (2009) and the conditions described by European Commission (2010) in the handbook for policymakers, key pointers have been identified for improvements, in search to answer the question 'How might we ensure high quality mentoring for every beginning teacher in Estonia?'

## ESTONIAN BEGINNING TEACHERS - WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THEM

Teacher shortage and challenges with the new generation of teachers haunt a wide range of countries. In Estonia, taking into account only the replacement demand based on the age of teachers, it is estimated that the supply of subject teachers for general education is already one third behind the demand.

(Mets et al., 2018). At the same time, as many as 27% of beginning teachers leave teaching before the start of their second year. By the start of the fifth year of teaching, 50% of beginning teachers have left (see Figure 1).

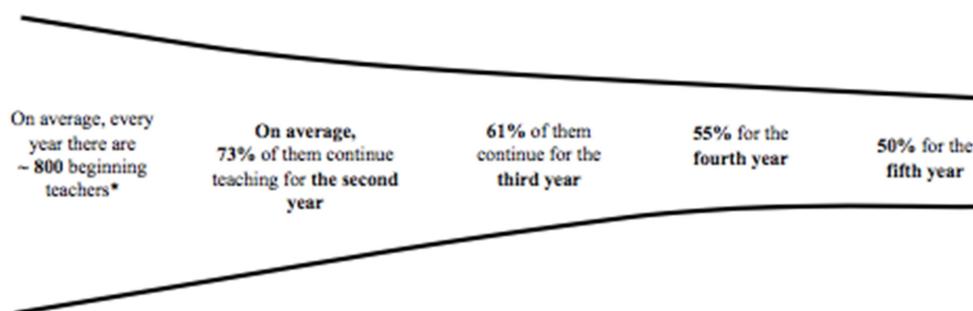


Figure 1. **Beginning teacher retention in Estonia 2010-16**

(source: Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, based on the data of Estonian Education Info System (EHIS))

The average age of Estonian beginning teachers is 35. This is an age that comes unexpected to many, as ‘beginning teacher’ used to equal ‘young teacher’ in the past. This also means different expectations to beginning teacher support, learning opportunities and needs, many of which can be well meant through mentoring that allows personalised approach.

Another important indicator characteristic to present day beginning teachers is that approximately 45% of them do not meet the qualification standards at the moment when they start teaching. In this case they are hired with temporary contracts for the maximum length of one year.

Location-wise, close to 50% of the beginning teachers start their career in Harju county - the county of the capital city of Estonia, Tallinn (Selliöv et al., 2018).

## **CURRENT MENTORING PRACTICE IN ESTONIA – WHAT DID THE SURVEY REVEAL**

Since 2004, beginning teacher mentoring has been promoted by Tallinn University and the University of Tartu as part of the induction, a program that had traditionally been offered to teacher training graduates during their first year of teaching. Keeping up with the changes in the beginning teacher force, the program has also been opened to those who have not completed teacher training.

The universities have also been in charge of mentor preparation trainings (their scope: 60 ECTS credit points), contributing to an increasing number of trained mentors in schools. A minimum of three years of working experience - teaching and development work - is required as the pre-condition for enrolling on mentor training.

While induction, including mentoring, is ever more relevant with the growing number of beginning teachers without qualifications, and while the number of trained mentors has been growing together with general awareness about its role and importance, the 2017/18 school year beginner teacher survey revealed that only 55% of the beginning teachers had a mentor. A mere 15% of the beginning teachers had participated in the full induction program itself, while more than 60% of the 2017/18 beginner teachers said they didn’t know what induction program was.

For entering the role of mentor, there are no uniform criteria - it is most often the school leader who assigns a mentor for the beginning teacher. It is not known how many of the university trained mentors are active mentors on yearly basis. These facts have contributed to the hypothesis that there might challenges with beginning teacher mentoring.

The 2017/18 beginning teacher survey revealed that close to 50% of new teachers who had a mentor, met their mentor at least once a week (the nature of the meetings remains yet unknown - to what extent had these been planned and to what extent had they been coincidental). Close to 10% of the new teachers reported meeting their mentor every two weeks, 15% - once a month, and 18% - once every quarter. 3% met once in half a year and 10% reported meeting based on need, with no regular meetings. While weekly or biweekly meetings have the potential to serve the purpose well, it remains questionable whether less-frequent or only needs-based meetings deliver the space for quality mentoring.

What also became visible in the survey - when asked about lesson observation, 35% of the 2017/18 beginning teacher survey participants said they had not had a single lesson observation by their mentor throughout the year - a practice that is considered one of the most powerful strategies in beginning teacher mentoring (Heilbronn et al., 2002; Hobson et al., 2002).

Another very much anticipated question to the beginning teachers was about the topics that were tackled within mentoring. Figure 2 illustrates the share of beginning teachers who had a particular topic addressed in at least two mentoring meetings, and the results proved alarming. Student behaviour management is one of the most seriously perceived problem area of beginning teachers (Veenman, 1984). As the results show, though it is topping the topics list, student behaviour management had only been addressed with  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the beginning teachers. Regrettably, at the bottom of the list there are the critical ‘Self-reflection and evaluating the efficiency of one’s work’ and also ‘Personal management’ (covering time management, emotional welfare management, stress management etc) - only being addressed with approximately every 5th beginning teacher.

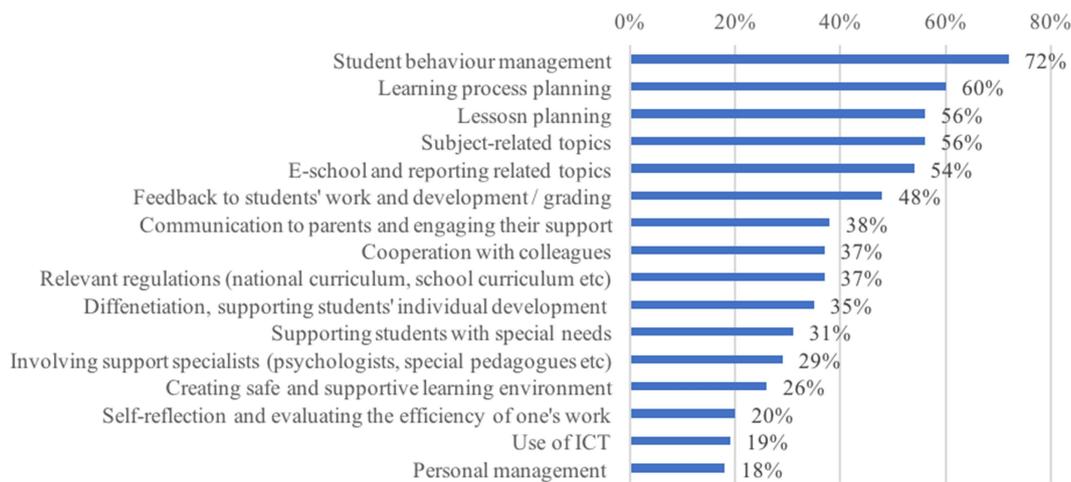


Figure 2. Mentoring topics addressed in at least two mentoring meetings throughout the school year. (source: 2017/18 beginning teacher survey)

Figure 3 shows the number of topics and the share of beginning teachers with whom they were addressed. Out of the 16 topics visible in Figure 2, in the cases of 73% of the beginning teachers 8 topics or less had been addressed during the mentoring within a year’s time.

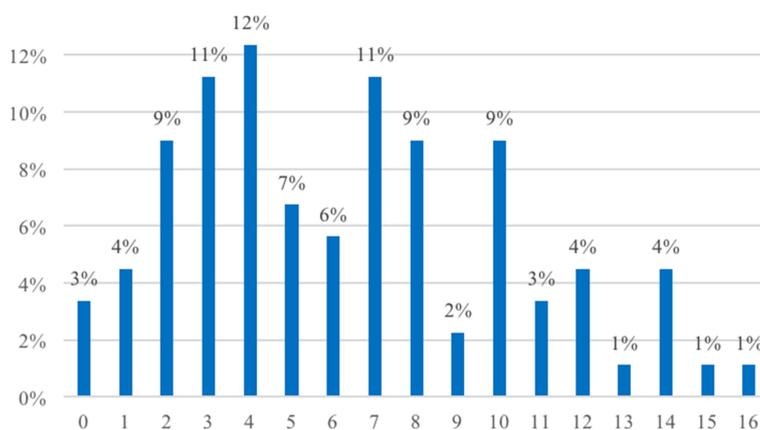


Figure 3. The share of beginning teachers and the number of mentoring topics addressed in at least two mentoring meetings throughout the school year (source: 2017/18 beginning teacher survey)

Alongside this information, 47% of the beginning teachers who participated in the survey and had a mentor rated the cooperation with their mentor as ‘very valuable’ and addition 25% - ‘valuable’. This indicates the currently unused potential of mentoring relationships in Estonia that could create a lot more value for the beginning teachers.

## BEGINNING TEACHER MENTORING SUCCESS FACTORS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING BEGINNING TEACHER MENTORING IN ESTONIA

There are a number of factors that shape the effectiveness of beginning teacher mentoring. Based on the research of various of authors, Hobson (2009) has synthesised the following.

- Contextual support. This includes having time for mentoring, fair compensation or incentives for the mentor, relative freedom from excessive externally determined goals and agendas such as prescriptive criteria for teaching practices, mentor's involvement in the design and evaluation of the programs where mentoring is part of, having mentoring in school culture that is collegial and supports learning, and where both mentors and mentees have access to support outside of the mentoring relationship, such as from other teachers in the school or from external networks of peers.

- Mentor selection. It is important that mentors would be effective practitioners who are able to demonstrate good professional practice. They also must be willing and able to make their work 'public' and make explicit the factors underlying their classroom practices. In addition to favourable traits and skills (supportive, empathetic, good listening), the willingness and ability to take an interest in the beginning teacher's work and life is crucial together with the commitment to being a mentor. Mentoring tends to be less effective when the mentor is part of school's leadership team - because of likely time availability issues and the effect of higher status in school.

- Mentoring strategies. Mentoring is most effective when it is fit for purpose and is responsive to the needs of the mentee. The mentors should respect beginning teachers as adult learners, taking into account their individuality, concerns, their current stage of development and their goals (and review them periodically). A number of studies suggest that at an early stage mentors should seek to help mentees to identify and interrogate critically their conceptions of teaching, of learning to teach and of mentoring. It is suggested that this process should include explicit discussion of the nature and advantages of different forms of reflection. Next to personalised approach, there are also a few strategies that have proven successful in various contexts.

- a. Providing emotional and psychological support, creating the feeling of welcome, acceptance and inclusion.

- b. Having regular meetings, and are available for informal contact at other times as well.

- c. Allowing beginning teachers have an appropriate degree of autonomy to make decisions and to develop their own teaching styles.

- d. Having lesson observations. Numerous studies have found that one of the most valued aspects of the work undertaken by mentors is lesson observation (both of and by the beginning teacher) together with analysis, done in a way where the goals have been agreed in advance, and where the post-meeting is done in a safe way, where there is focus on specific aspects and where the discussion is genuine and constructive.

- e. Ensuring sufficient challenge, sufficient education and scaffolding into deeper levels of thinking and reflection, notably about teaching and learning.

- Mentor preparation and support. Mentors need preparatory training, but not that alone. There should be planned strategies to assist individuals in developing their identities as mentors: seminars, organisation around the practice of mentoring together with other mentors and teacher educators. This would facilitate the development of a shared discourse for mentoring, and enhance mentors' skill development through conversations about mentoring practice and pedagogy. Also, it has been found helpful directing mentors towards appropriate research to underpin their mentoring activities and their ability to stimulate beginning teachers to reflect on their actions.

In addition, the European Commission (2010) emphasises the role of school leaders, who are in the position of allocating the resources and in ensuring that the school's policy on supporting new teachers is understood and supported by the staff team. It is the competences and commitment of school leaders that are important for creating a coherent induction system and a collaborative learning culture in the school. Also, the European Commission (*Ibid.*) stresses the importance of regular monitoring and evaluation. It suggests that one criterion for a quality induction system is the level of commitment shown by stakeholders to the development of evidence-informed practice, i.e. the desire to monitor the effectiveness of the system and, where necessary and appropriate, to improve it. The set up of evaluation and monitoring programmes, both on the level of the school and of the programme as a whole is necessary.

Taking into account what has been said and the fact that the current system is not providing sufficient and sustainable start for Estonia's critical new generation of teachers, there are following steps that could be taken to ensure high quality mentoring for every beginning teacher in Estonia.

1. Creating opportunities for ‘professional mentors’ to emerge and grow. When the mentors are experienced teachers who work (nearly) full time, there is not enough space for them to grow their identity and competence as beginning teacher mentors - supporters of the growth of adults and specifically in the early stage of teacher role. This could be a new role in Estonia’s teacher career model that requires specific commitment and level of professionalism. And, building and sustaining it as a learning community would be necessary.

2. Having beginning teacher mentors come into school from a central ‘pool’ rather than having them in a school. Taking into account the unpredictable nature of beginning teacher inflow and the fact that in some areas beginning teachers are highly concentrated and in other they are scattered, in most cases it does not make sense to keep in-house beginning teacher mentors ready-to-go in each school on yearly basis, not knowing whether there will be beginning teachers coming to the school or not; and if yes, how many of them (cases may range from one beginning teacher to 15, which requires totally different capacities in all cases). It could be considered to have professional beginning teacher mentors come in to school based on need, having been pre-selected, prepared and continuously supported.

3. Setting the goal to ensure high quality induction to every beginning teacher in the country, allocating necessary funds for developing the necessary support structure and coordinating body / bodies. In order to have synergy, coordination is necessary to ensure quality pre-selection, preparation and continuous support of the mentors as well as the allocation of mentors to schools and relationship building with the schools to maximise the benefits of external mentoring for both the beginning teacher as well as the school: the mentor can also act in the capacity of the school leadership’s partner in school development. The same body / bodies could also develop monitoring and evaluating systems in order to provide continuously improving service, and assist and consult school leaders with know-how on beginning teacher support.

4. Supplementing individual mentoring with group-based supervision. Beginning teachers could have region-based supervision group meetings with other beginning teachers, lead by a competent supervisor. That is to ensure peer-support, group learning opportunities and sharing of problems that are similar to most beginning teachers.

As described in the chapter about Estonian beginning teachers, the situation with the new generation of teachers is critical and needs to be addressed for ensuring quality education in the years to come. The changing teacher force - teachers without qualifications entering teaching jobs and older people coming into teaching career - call for system redesign to meet new needs.

## CONCLUSIONS

Mentoring is a key component in beginning teacher induction, supporting beginning teacher retention and the continuity of teaching profession. The characteristics of the current beginning teachers in Estonia and as well as the current situation in beginning teacher mentoring in Estonia calls for mentoring system improvements.

1. The portrait of current beginning teachers includes the statistics of high drop-out at the time when teacher demand exceeds supply. It is also important to note that the average age of beginning teachers is 35, and that nearly half of Estonian beginning teachers do not have the teacher qualification at the time when they start teaching.

2. The survey of beginning teachers from 2017/18 school year at the end of their first year of teaching revealed several critical points regarding the current mentoring system. Approximately only half of the beginning teachers had mentors; and of those who had them, many did not get adequate support (e.g. limited topics covered in mentoring, 1/3 of beginning teachers claimed 0 lesson observation by their mentors). Yet close to 50% of beginning teachers found mentoring ‘very valuable’, and another 25% considered it ‘valuable’, indicating its untapped potential.

3. Taking into account the key success factors of mentoring, which include contextual support, mentor selection, mentoring strategies, mentor preparation and support, attention to the role of school leaders, and regular monitoring and evaluation, four key suggestions were developed for Estonian beginning teacher mentoring:

- a. Creating opportunities for ‘professional mentors’ to emerge and grow,
- b. Having beginning teacher mentors come into school from a central ‘pool’ rather than having them in a school.
- c. Setting the goal to ensure high quality induction to every beginning teacher in the country, allocating necessary funds for developing the necessary support structure and coordinating body / bodies.

d. Supplementing individual mentoring with group-based supervision.

It is important that the improvement ideas would be discussed further in Estonia and that the plans would be developed in the near future - to ensure the continuity of teacher profession and the high quality of Estonian education.

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