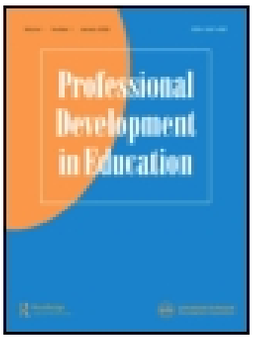

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'She never actually let you walk into a trap': exploring relational turning point events in the mentor–mentee relationship in the practicum

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ABSTRACT

The quality of the relationship between the mentor teacher and the student teacher is crucial for successful training. To date, however, little is known about how these relationships develop over time. The present study investigates this relationship formation based on the concept of relational turning point events. It presents findings of an interview study with 27 Swiss student teachers who had just completed a four-week practicum for teaching in kindergarten and primary education. They reflected on the relational turning point events that they had experienced with their mentor teacher. The results show that both positive and negative relational turning points were experienced. Appreciation and high-quality mentoring behaviour (e.g. high-quality feedback) contributed to a positive change in the relationship over time, while the reverse effect was found for a lack of appreciation and low-quality mentoring behaviour. Furthermore, the most positive relationships were experienced when 'closeness', an indicator of the interpersonal dimension of the relationship, was felt. These findings indicate that mentor teachers need strong professional and interpersonal skills in order to develop high-quality relationships with student teachers during the practicum.

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Relational turning point events; mentoring; teacher education; practicum; relationship quality

Introduction

Collaboration in the teaching profession is steadily increasing (Vangrieken *et al.* 2015). In order to prepare pre-service teachers for collaboration on the job, team teaching has been incorporated into field experience in many teacher education programs (e.g. Simons *et al.* 2018). However, effective team teaching is not a straightforward task, and certain conditions must be established in order to enable optimal learning processes for student teachers. De Zordo, Bisang and Hascher (2018), amongst others, have emphasised the importance of positive and trusting relationships for both the fellow student teacher and the mentor teacher to facilitate successful student teachers' learning and development in team teaching settings. Positive relationships are a core condition for effective team teaching and allow for productive collaboration (e.g. shared planning, teaching and evaluation of the lesson; Baeten and Simons 2014).

The focus of the present study is the relationship between student teachers and their mentor teachers (sometimes referred to as 'cooperating teachers'), school-based teacher educators who

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support student teachers in the team practicum during teacher education programs. While the crucial role that mentor teachers play in the practicum for student teachers' development (e.g. Chalies *et al.* 2019) and well-being (Clarke *et al.* 2014, Squires 2019) is recognised, little is known about how the relationship between the mentor teacher and the student teacher develops in the practicum and which factors contribute to this development. Hudson (2016), who has explored the development of the mentor–mentee relationship at a general level, concludes that 'further in-depth qualitative studies to determine the impact of the mentor's actions on the relationship' (p. 41) are needed. This is the knowledge gap that the present study fills.

On the whole, the aim of this study is to explore how mentor–mentee relationships are formed over time based on so-called 'relational turning point events' (RTPEs; Docan-Morgan and Manusov 2009) from the perspective of student teachers. The context of the study was a blocked team practicum in kindergarten and primary education (two student teachers and one mentor teacher) in initial teacher education in Switzerland.

Relationship quality between student teachers and their mentor teacher

The practicum, a significant element of teacher education programs, is typically highly valued by student teachers. The mentor teacher has a central role in shaping student teachers' experiences and learning in the practicum (Smith and Lev-Arik 2005). In recent years, the social dimension in schools has received increased attention in educational research (Liou *et al.* 2017, López Solé *et al.* 2018, Waber *et al.* 2018). The importance of relationships for teachers and mentors is evident, as teaching and mentoring are inherently relational activities (Duck and McMahan 2008).

Psychological research has demonstrated that positive and secure relationships are important for optimal human functioning (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Applied to the learning setting, which involves teaching and mentoring, positive relationships provide social security (Liou *et al.* 2017) and, thus, can be regarded as a precondition for experiencing successful cooperation in the practicum, which ultimately supports the learning of student teachers and prepares them for cooperation in the teaching profession (de Zordo, Bisang and Hascher 2018). More concretely, Hudson (2016) has found that positive relationships build a basis for constructive feedback (e.g. being able to accept feedback and experiencing it as helpful rather than as judgemental; see also Martin, Buelow and Hoffman 2016). Further, Abell *et al.* (1995) have shown (for the induction phase) that relationship quality is significant, as a strong relationship is a precondition for the successful fulfilment of the different mentoring roles in the mentoring process. Hence, if relationships lack quality, student teachers lose significant opportunities to learn how to teach and mentor teachers struggle to perform their mentoring roles effectively. It can be assumed, for instance, that student teachers are more reluctant to openly reflect on their planning and teaching experiences, or to take risks, when the relationship with the mentor teacher is perceived negatively and student teachers fear negative consequences. On the mentor side, mentor teachers might be less willing to provide constructive and sufficient feedback if they perceive the relationship negatively. It is also likely that less frequent formal and, in particular, informal interactions will occur if positive relationships cannot be established. Moreover, the quality of mentoring is frequently regarded as an important factor in reducing the attrition rate of newly qualified teachers during the induction phase (Odell and Ferraro 1992, Long *et al.* 2012, Shanks *et al.* 2020). Thus, the quality of the mentor–mentee relationship is not only regarded as an important resource for optimal learning opportunities in the practicum, but it also functions as a significantly influential factor regarding attrition and retention in the early years of teachers' careers.

While there is a large volume of research regarding the quality indicators of a good mentor–mentee relationship and the outcomes of such relationships (Beck and Kosnik 2002, Kemmis *et al.* 2014), as well as student teachers' and mentor teachers' expectations of the mentor–mentee relationship (Rajuan *et al.* 2007, Izadinia 2016), we lack knowledge on how these relationships develop during interactions. One exception is the study conducted by Hudson (2016), which has

provided important insights on the formation of mentor–mentee relationships. The findings have shown that trust and respect are at the core of the mentor–mentee relationship. A high-quality relationship is expected to be supportive, with the sharing of practices and resources, as well as collaborative problem solving. Moreover, a positive relationship is characterised by high enthusiasm, high professionalism, clear expectations and shared information (Hudson 2016, p. 39).

Some studies have pointed out that relationships are accompanied by tensions and conflicts that reflect negative moments, which might lead to a decline in relationship quality over time. For example, according to Patrick (2013), tensions are likely to occur if the relationship between the mentor teacher and the student teacher is hierarchical, with the student teacher as the 'novice' expected to unquestioningly follow the advice of the mentor teacher. Typically, student teachers want to try out their own ideas and experience conflict if they are expected to completely adhere to their mentor teacher's pedagogical approach. Furthermore, they experience negative emotions if the mentor teacher does not trust in their abilities. In contrast, student teachers highly appreciate feeling welcome at school and receiving recognition for their ideas (Phelan *et al.* 2008). It is of great interest to determine whether these conflicts and tensions, in addition to the moments of recognition and respect, are significant in the development of the mentor–mentee relationship.

Researchers have suggested characterising the mentor–mentee relationship as multidimensional in nature, consisting of a professional and an (inter)personal facet (Rippon and Martin 2006, Hagenauer and Volet 2014, Hudson 2016). While the professional dimension describes the quality of the formal working relationship (i.e. being fair and supportive), the interpersonal dimension refers to the 'affective' dimension related to closeness in the relationship (i.e. opening up by providing personal information). In the literature, this distinction is described using heterogeneous terms. For example, McAllister (1995) differentiates between affect- and cognition-based trust in cooperation relationships within organisations (the first reflects the interpersonal relationship, while the second refers to the professional relationship), while Wang (2014) distinguishes between the pedagogical and the interpersonal dimension in the teacher–student relationship in higher education. In our research, we use the terms 'professional' and 'interpersonal' to describe the different facets of the mentor–mentee relationship and, in doing so, account for the complexity and multi-layered nature of the relationship.

Exploring mentor–mentee relationship development through relational turning point events (RTPEs)

As previously stated, to date little is known about how relationships between mentor teachers and student teachers develop over time based on concrete situations and interactions. According to Docan-Morgan and Manusov (2009), relationships are processual and changes that occur during the development of relationships can be described as RTPEs (see also Docan-Morgan 2011). A RTPE is defined as 'any event or occurrence that is associated with change in a relationship' (Baxter and Bullis 1986, p. 479 cited after Docan-Morgan and Manusov 2009, p. 157) and is typically experienced as positive or negative (Baxter and Bullis 1986). Previous research has explored the concept of RTPE in the context of relationships with friends, family members and spouses (e.g. Golish 2000), as well as between university teachers and students (Docan-Morgan and Manusov 2009, Wang 2014). Thus, RTPEs can be used to describe the course of both interpersonal and professional relationships. However, to our knowledge, no study has yet explored RTPEs in the mentoring context during the school practicum. Our research question, thus, is explorative, as we do not have any empirical knowledge on these specific RTPEs to date.

We aimed to explore the following research questions: What core moments do student teachers identify as RTPEs in the development of the mentor–mentee relationship? Which situations are experienced positively, and which are experienced negatively and for what reason?

Methods

Participants and context

The data reported here are part of a larger study on 'cooperation, relationships, trust and emotions in the team practicum'. A qualitative approach relying on phenomenology was used to elicit the RTPEs in the development of the mentor–mentee relationship. According to Johnson and Christensen (2004), 'the key element of a phenomenological research study is that the researcher attempts to understand how people experience a phenomenon from the person's own perspective' (p. 46). In doing so, the present study explored the experiences of 27 Swiss student teachers with their mentor teacher(s) during their final practicum. The participants were enrolled in a teacher education programme for kindergarten and primary education at the University of Teacher Education in Bern, Switzerland. Female participants dominated, as kindergarten and primary education is primarily studied by women (24 females, 3 males; mean age = 24.8 years; SD = 4.56). In most cases, one mentor teacher supervised the student teachers. In a few exceptional cases, the student teachers had two mentor teachers (if two teachers were responsible for the class).

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select the interview participants. Only student teachers who successfully completed practicum four as a team practicum were allowed to participate in the study. It was also important that the student teachers did not know each other prior to the team practicum. All student teachers were contacted via email and were asked for their participation, which was voluntary and for which they received monetary compensation. The student teachers were not students of the members of the research team; therefore, dependency issues did not occur in this study.

The student teachers reflected on their experiences during their last practicum (number four of a total of five). Practicum 4 is usually completed as a team practicum at the end of the fourth semester (of a total of six semesters). The four-week internship is completed with a focus on three main subjects. During the preparation period before the internship, the student teams plan the four-week teaching units for each subject and are accompanied by teacher educators from the University of Teacher Education. During this period, the students visit the internship class several times for observation and exploration days and discuss the planning with the mentor teacher.

Interviews and procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews relying on an interview framework. Informed consent of all participants was obtained prior to the interview, and all were informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any time and that their personal information and data would be treated confidentially. The face-to-face interviews carried out by members of the research team lasted between 32 and 90 minutes and were conducted in an informal, conversational style to encourage the interviewees to speak openly and frankly about their experiences. First, the interviewees were asked to describe the mentor teacher in general. Next, the interviewees discussed the development of the relationship over time, from their first impressions to the changes that were observed. In doing so, the student teachers were also invited to recall RTPEs that were positive as well as negative. Probing questions (e.g. 'Could you say more about it?' 'How come?') were used to draw forth elaborations of the responses, particularly for those that provided rich situational descriptions of the RTPEs from the student teachers' perspectives.

Data analysis

The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim by the researchers and student assistants, who relied on obligatory and pre-defined transcription rules. Personal information given by the participants was anonymised in the transcripts. First, the transcripts were read in full, followed by a line-by-line reading. Next, the interview material was coded based on a coding scheme that relied

primarily on an inductive approach to qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000). Only the broad main categories 'positive RTPE' and 'negative RTPE' were derived deductively, based on the distinction proposed by Baxter and Bullis (1986). The software MAXQDA was used to code the data. The analysis involved three main steps:

(1) Coding positively and negatively experienced RTPEs as descriptions of changes in relationships (deductively).
(2) Identifying triggers of positive and negative RTPEs and changes in the relationship (inductively).
(3) Merging categories into major themes. These themes serve as the basis for the presentation of the results.

The full coding scheme can be obtained by contacting the corresponding author. The categories and their frequencies are illustrated in Figure 1. Intercoder reliability was calculated for both negative and positive RTPEs. Two independent raters coded 15 positive and 15 negative situations chosen at random. The corrected Cohen's Kappa (Brennan and Prediger 1981) was 1.00 (100% agreement) for positive RTPEs and 0.84 for negative RTPEs (2 disagreements and 13 agreements).

Strategies used to promote the rigour of the research

To establish the rigour and trustworthiness of the research, several strategies have been applied (see e.g. Lincoln and Guba 1985, Johnson and Christensen 2004, p. 249ff). First, all researchers involved have regularly exerted critical self-reflection in order to minimise biases caused by subjectivity. Second, pilot interviews were conducted in order to pre-test the interview guidelines and to enhance the overall quality of the interview technique. Moreover, the researchers who contacted the interviewees received training in interviewing. Prior to and during the interviews the interviewees were encouraged to speak frankly about their experiences. For example, they were informed that there are no right or wrong answers, and that their information would be treated confidentially. Furthermore, the researchers worked independently from the participants. Third, members of the research team were experts in the field (reflecting investigator's authority) and were involved in all

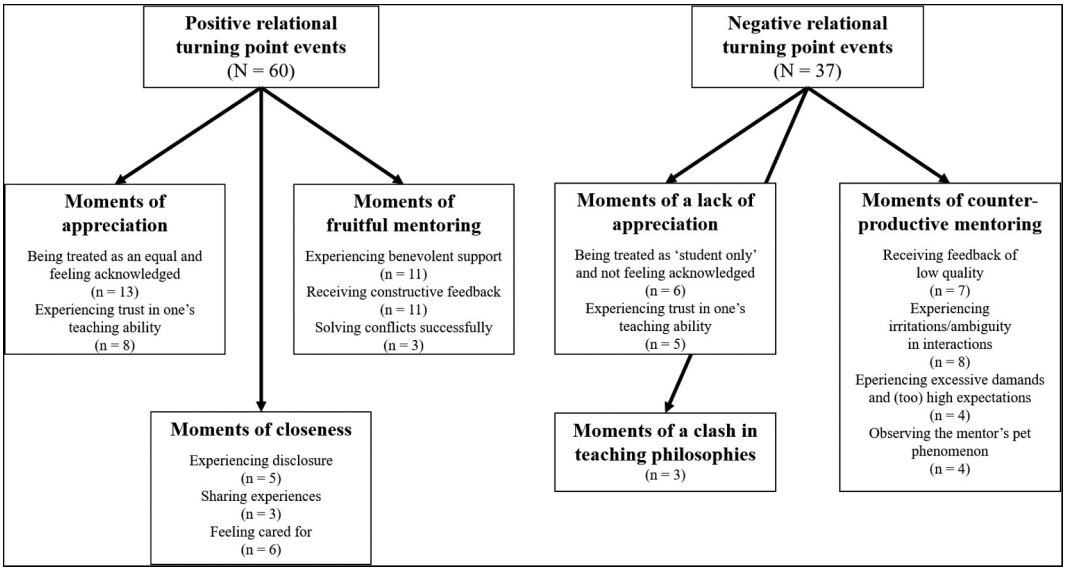

Figure 1. Positive and negative RTPEs.

steps of the research (investigator triangulation). Fourth, first results were presented to peers at relevant conferences in order to receive critical peer review. Fifth, direct quotations were used in the results in order to adhere closely to interviewees' perspectives (low-inference descriptors). Finally, as previously mentioned, two researchers coded an extraction of the interview material independently based on the developed coding scheme in order to check for coding accuracy.

Results

Overall, positive RTPEs led to an increase in affection and trust in the relationship, while negative RTPEs typically led to an increase in alienation, distance and mistrust between the student teachers and their mentor teacher(s). The major themes with regard to positive and negative RTPEs are depicted in Figure 1.

Positive RTPEs

Moments of appreciation: being treated as an equal and experiencing trust in one's teaching ability

Positive RTPEs occurred when student teachers felt valued by the mentor teacher and when they felt welcome in the classroom. For instance, a student teacher mentioned that it was important that they and their specific role during the practicum were introduced to the pupils in order to establish acceptance and a feeling of belonging in the classroom. In such cases, the mentor teacher explicitly handed over responsibility to them and that this was clear to the pupils. By doing so, they exhibited trust in the student teacher's competencies, an action that student teachers highly appreciated as it offered them comprehensive learning opportunities and ultimately positively enhanced the relationship quality from their perspective:

> A key moment? [. . .] We organised a final event, well my fellow intern and me. And there, both teachers completely handed over the responsibility to us and we could actually assign tasks to them to help us. And not the other way around. That was like a change of role. And she explained it explicitly to us, like: 'No, this is your event now. And afterwards it will also be like this. It is your credit'. (I 26, female)

Although the student teachers appreciated when responsibility was given to them, it was nevertheless important that the mentor teachers maintained a balance between stepping back and providing guidance and support. Some student teachers reported that their mentor teachers completely handed over responsibility for their classes, which they felt demonstrated a lack of appreciation. Thus, autonomy and space to try things out has to be combined with fruitful mentoring in order to achieve positive relationship development.

Moments of appreciation were also triggered if the mentor teachers were interested in the opinions, materials and ideas of the student teachers and treated them collegially. Student teachers particularly valued the establishment of reciprocity (in terms of a give-and-take between mentors and mentees) and experienced joy and pride if such situations occurred:

> So positive was certainly also – right now with the second person – that he also, um, asked me for some materials, that I used, if I could send them to him. Because he, too, would like to implement this when we are not here anymore – because he thought it was a good idea. Or so. And (.) that kind of reassured me (2) a little – well, built me up – validated that (.) we are not – that he is not, like – just is above me, but that we are both teachers and he can also learn from me. (I 1, female)

Another aspect of equal treatment was reflected in student teachers' feeling welcome in the teachers' room (conference room). Positive turns in the relationship occurred when student teachers had the impression that they were truly accepted as 'colleagues'; for example, when they were integrated into the more informal interactions and discussions during breaks outside the classroom (e.g. during lunch time). This is reflected in the following example:

> Yeah, well, a very positive situation was outside the classroom, it was in the teachers' room. The teaching staff were only women, a faculty of only women (laughs) and we were always, like, the interns in one corner and the teachers in the other corner and somehow the conversation was going on over on the one side and we did not really know exactly to what extent we were allowed to participate in it. And then, she walked in, and then we were all just together. And this was actually much more like an exchange rather than in such groups. It was such a positive situation, because you could feel that you were somehow perceived as a teacher and not just an intern. (I 17, female)

Moments of fruitful mentoring: benevolent support, constructive feedback and conflict resolution

Mentoring is a complex endeavour that requires professional and interpersonal skills. Many student teachers reported positive moments in their relationship when the mentor teacher put forth effort in order to facilitate optimal learning-to-teach processes. They valued when the teacher took enough time for the debriefing sessions and when a mentor teacher also shared their experience by giving further tips and advice to student teachers. They also appreciated the support of the mentor teacher when planning lessons. In this case, they assessed positively the provision by mentor teachers of enough freedom to try things out, but wanted mentor teachers to offer advice if they believed that particular lesson plans or real teaching situations were in danger of failing completely:

> Well, she never actually let you walk into a trap. […] And then we were on the mountain [*anonymised*]. And then she called me to see if I was watching the weather. And then I thought: 'Hm no'. And then it rained and we didn't have a gym and I didn't have it under control at all, because somehow, I didn't take the weather into account. That was nice because she said, 'It doesn't matter'. She would try to reserve the gym in the neighbouring schoolhouse. Then it all worked out […]. That really was a very nice support. (I 17, female)

However, the way the mentor teacher communicated their support was important. If the student teachers had the impression that the support was genuine and benevolent, they were happy to take the advice. Subsequently, their relationship with the mentor teacher was enhanced and trust was boosted through (mutual) reliability.

Relatedly, a core element of the mentoring process was the feedback of the mentor. Feedback moments were frequently mentioned as RTPEs, in particular if the student teachers received sincere (honest) praise from the mentor teacher, usually for their teaching style, but also for their overall suitability as teachers. Such moments boosted student teachers' self-confidence. They were interpreted as positive moments in the development of the relationship, as confirmation, acceptance and respect were experienced:

> I will start with the positive. It occurs to me, we had a conversation – well, the teacher from the University of Teacher Education and the mentor teacher – and they both said that I was very well suited for this job and that everything was going very well and this (.) confirmed, like a little, my self-awareness – that I see myself the right way and not (.) everything deferred. And I think, that way I also knew exactly what she was thinking and that (.) was a very good feeling for me. (I 19, female)

Finally, relationships were also strengthened if the mentor teacher and the student teacher productively solved (smaller) conflicts, typically by applying direct, honest and open communication.

Moments of closeness: disclosure, shared experiences and feeling cared for by the mentor teacher

Positive developments in the relationship were also triggered when student teachers got to know the mentor teacher better personally, either by sharing private information or by sharing experiences (e.g. participating in a one-day or weeklong excursion with the teacher and the pupils). The sharing of private information, in particular, enhanced closeness – a reflection of the interpersonal dimension of the relationship. Some student teachers said that they regarded it as a sign of trust and appreciation if mentor teachers revealed something about themselves:

> Yes, maybe just the (.) lunch times in the teachers' room, where she talked about herself. Or after school, when we talked about something and then she talked about her family and so on. I think that has also made a major difference – that she has told us so much about herself and we could also tell her about ourselves. Simply because it will be a bit like a friendship, and not just the internship. Like, now we have planned our things. Goodbye everybody, bye, I'm going home now. That was more like, well, more personal. I think that certainly did me good. (I 11, female)

Positive professional relationships with the mentor teachers could be established without moments of disclosure; however, the most positive valued relationships were formed through these moments. Some student teachers reported that, despite discussing private matters with the mentor teacher, the relationship remained (primarily) a professional relationship due to the hierarchy in the relationship and, sometimes, the age difference. Since mentor teachers were predominantly in a different phase of life, 'friendship' relationships (similar to those formed with fellow students) were typically not formed.

However, many student teachers noted that they highly appreciated when their mentor teacher demonstrated interest in them as a person (outside of their role as an intern). This was reflected in teachers' understanding of student teachers' personal problems and care for student teachers' personal well-being, as exhibited in the following:

> In the morning I was actually feeling quite well and then I was there [in the school] and (.) really from one moment to the next I had – so I was not feeling well at all and I – I was very nauseous and I was probably just white as a sheet (laughs a little), and the mentor teacher saw that and I told her at the beginning of the lesson that I was not feeling so well and that I might need to go out for a short time or something. And then I ended up having to go out or – well – [. . .] Not for so long and then came back, or rather she came to me and asked, 'Well, how are you feeling?' And she said: 'Poah, you cannot stay here like that'. And just, she then also organised that I could go home immediately, that someone brought me home. Uhm, and that touched me very much, because she really took care of me on a personal level, too. And not just professionally or just on a work level, in that sense, but, yeah that was not even a question: 'You are going home. You will recover until you are well again'. (I 6, female)

Negative RTPEs

Moments in which a lack of appreciation was displayed: Being treated as a 'student' and experiencing a lack of trust in one's teaching abilities

While positive RTPEs were triggered when students felt valued by their mentor teacher and when the mentor demonstrated trust in their teaching competencies by providing autonomy, negative RTPEs occurred when a lack of appreciation and trust were demonstrated; for example, if a teacher did not want to hand over responsibility to the interns. In the following account, one interviewee addresses this aspect:

> That is also something that annoyed me; towards us, she was also very (.) mothering. This caused her a lot of stress, because she always thought for us, too: 'Do you have this? Do you have that? Have you thought of this?', and then I also felt restricted and not so – I could not learn that much because (.) I never walked into a situation like: 'Whoops. Darn. I had not thought of that at all', because she had already thought of it. (I 15, female)

It was also difficult for the student teachers if they did not feel welcome. One student teacher was under the impression that they were an extra load for the mentor teacher and that their work was not appreciated – an impression that ultimately negatively affected the relationship:

> In the end, there was never really a thank you [. . .]. In all other internships, there was always a final get together. The teacher also said, 'Thank you for being here and – that you showed us so many new things and did this and that'. And that practically didn't happen here at all. Also, the students said goodbye as if we would see each other again the next day and with her it was actually the same. That was just the way it was, somehow – yes, it hurts a bit when you put so much effort into something like that and it is not appreciated at all. (I 15, female)

Moments of counterproductive mentoring: Lack of quality feedback, irritation or ambiguity in interactions, excessive demands and the mentor's pet phenomenon

The most frequently described negative RTPE could be traced to a lack of quality in mentorship, as perceived by the student teachers.

As an initial example, some student teachers complained about a lack of quality feedback, which triggered feelings of alienation in the relationship. Specifically, student teachers did not value public feedback when it pertained to issues that exclusively took place between the mentor teacher and the student teacher. They also did not appreciate when a mentor teacher interfered in their teaching by criticising them in front of the students. Feedback that was not comprehensible (for example, when the mentor teacher could not articulate the problem clearly and could not provide suggestions for improvement) also negatively impacted the relationship. Finally, tone was all important: if the feedback was provided with a lack of respect, student teachers felt humiliated:

> But I actually experienced it as very extreme – his reaction. Yes. And then he also said (.). Yes, it would have been better if he had calmed down first somehow. […] But I had the feeling that the lesson wasn't as catastrophic as he presented it. I couldn't quite understand why his reaction was so extreme. (I 2, male)

Student teachers also became further alienated from the mentor teacher if an irritation or ambiguity could not be explained. More concretely, one student teacher was irritated by a constant switch between friendliness and rejection on the part of the mentor teacher. Another student teacher was confused because the mentor teacher always spoke with a fellow intern, whilst he was seldom addressed directly. A third student teacher was irritated by the constant self-praise of the mentor teacher. Finally, some student teachers could not solve tensions between themselves and their mentor teacher because they were unsure about their origins. Ultimately, these tensions unsettled the student teachers:

> The four of us [two mentor teachers and two interns] went for dinner and I noticed when he talked to the other intern, he was very relaxed, but as soon as he talked to me, he was tense. And he also had those grimaces on his face. I don't know why. (I 23, female)

If student teachers thought that they could not fulfil the expectations of their mentor teacher, they might also withdraw from the relationship due to triggered insecurity or annoyance. Interestingly, implicit (perceived) expectations took effect as well. For example, a student teacher was highly unsettled due to the high athleticism of the mentor teacher and the pupils, which she – from her perspective – could never achieve. Finally, relationships could also deteriorate if mentor teachers clearly preferred another intern; this is known as the 'teacher's' or 'mentor's pet phenomenon'. This cause is specific to paired internships. Intense negative emotional reactions (anger, helplessness, etc.) were triggered if the mentor teacher treated the student teachers unequally. One student teacher reported that – even though she had given the lesson before and attempted to incorporate the mentor teacher's feedback – the mentor teacher's attention was always on the second intern:

> And the focus really was on [*anonymised*] again, although it was still an assessment situation of mine. Well, somehow, I found that a bit (.). And I really (.) didn't feel valued at all (laughs). Well, it was just like that, yes. And in an assessment situation you might even try a little bit harder. So, for this lesson I really prepared myself enormously and tried to make everything perfect according to her ideas. And then, yes, the feedback came and the first quarter of an hour of feedback was just on how good the other one is (laughs quietly). (I 22, female)

One account reveals that it is very difficult to learn that the preference for the other intern has effects that go beyond the internship, affecting one's future professional life:

> Yes, exactly and the affinity to the other intern was also expressed by the fact that they had lunch together So, they formed a group, exactly. And that's what I learned at the end, through the other teacher, that's what the other teacher told us, that he had heard that the other student [the fellow intern] had already been asked by the mentor teacher if she could teach sports and substitute for him and so on. And he didn't behave neutrally at all, even during the internship. (I 23, female)

Moments revealing a clash between teaching philosophies

Though rare, differences in teaching philosophies resulting in contrasting views on 'good teaching' sometimes triggered negative RTPEs. Usually, student teachers emphasised a high tolerance of the mentor teachers and of themselves regarding opposing teaching styles. However, if the teaching behaviour of the mentor teacher went against the fundamental values of the student teacher (e.g. in terms of equal treatment of all students) or if the student teacher experienced adjustment pressure (e.g. having to take over the pedagogy of the mentor teacher), negative RTPEs were likely to be triggered.

Discussion

In this study, we sought to explore the RTPEs (Docan-Morgan and Manusov 2009) in the development of the relationship between student teachers and their mentor teacher(s) during the team practicum. Throughout, we accounted for the increasing awareness of the role of social factors in teacher education (e.g. Liou *et al.* 2017). However, while researchers have described how positive relationships with mentor teachers and between student teachers impacts student teachers' learning in the practicum, little is known about how those relationships develop during concrete interactions.

The results of the present study have shown that relationships developed positively if and when student teachers were treated collegially and felt acknowledged and recognised by the mentor teacher(s) (from the student teachers' perspectives). Mentor actions that promoted positive relationships included demonstrating interest in the student teachers' ideas, handing over responsibility to them and integrating them in the teaching community at the school (Patrick 2013). These results align with Ferrer-Kerr's (2009) opinion that mentor teachers should 'move from traditional hierarchical ways to building relationships based on sharing' (p. 796). Similarly, Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) argue for the establishment of 'communities of practice within the professional experience context' (p. 1,804), while Patrick (2013) calls for 'teaching team kind of relationships' (p. 213) that facilitate collaboration between the mentor teacher and the student teacher (see also Beck and Kosnik 2002). Overall, student teachers genuinely appreciated opportunities to take on responsibility and when the mentor teacher trusted in their abilities, which boosted their self-confidence and, ultimately, the relationship quality. Stanulis and Russell (2000) have argued in a similar vein and identified trust as the basis for 'jumping in' (to professional practice).

Although student teachers wanted to be treated as 'equals', they were well aware of the fact that they were still learning to be teachers and consequently expected comprehensive emotional and instruction-related support from and guidance by their mentor teacher, based on (mutual) respect and appreciation. If mentor teachers fulfilled their role satisfactorily by maintaining a balance between providing support and granting autonomy (Martin 1996), positive relationships developed. If the role was fulfilled only superficially (e.g. by not providing feedback or watching student teachers while they taught) or by 'supporting' too overbearingly (e.g. by not letting student teachers try things out or by being overly protective or controlling), negative RTPEs were experienced.

It will be of core interest to further explore why mentor teachers did not fulfil their role successfully from the student teachers' perspective. Did they only want assistance for their teaching and lacked interest in the student teachers' learning and development? This explanation would reflect a motivational problem on the part of the mentors. Or did they experience tensions between being a mentor teacher and a classroom teacher and worry that the student teachers' teaching would or could endanger the pupils' learning? (Jaspers *et al.* 2014). This explanation is rooted in a mentor's role conflict. Alternatively, was it due to a work overload experienced by the mentor teacher? For example, Hastings (2004) reports that mentor teachers experienced many negative emotions during school hours because they did not have enough time to provide sufficient support for student teachers. Irrespective of the cause, a lack of support resulting from too little or overly 'controlling'

support is likely to cause a deterioration in relationship quality, as our results indicated that sufficient support is one of the major contributors to the development of a positive relationship.

Despite the wish for collegiality, the relationship between the mentor teacher and the student teacher is still a power relationship, as mentor teachers function not only as confidants but also as assessors (Hudson 2016). The mentor teacher has to evaluate the student teacher's performance at the end of the practicum and in debriefing sessions after the lessons taught by the student teachers, which might cause conflicts in the establishment of a collegial relationship. In this regard, our data revealed the importance of the quality of the feedback. Many negative and positive RTPEs related to how mentor teachers communicated the feedback to the student teacher(s). Student teachers, thus, valued mentoring as support for their learning. Specifically, they expected constructive feedback that was honest and open, combined with advice and discussions pertaining to their professional development (Stanulis and Russell 2000, Izadinia 2016). However, if they perceived the feedback as exclusively judgemental, a deterioration in the relationship quality frequently resulted (Kemmis *et al.* 2014, Hudson 2016).

Interestingly, feedback and support from the mentor teacher were perceived more positively if the relationship with the mentor teacher was good, while support of the mentor teacher was frequently experienced as interfering when the relationship was assessed negatively (e.g. intervening before or while the student teacher was teaching; see also Jaspers *et al.* 2014). The same can be said with regard to differences in teaching philosophies: if the relationship quality was good, differences in the attitudes about 'good teaching' and teaching behaviour were more easily accepted and tolerated. Thus, our findings demonstrate that the established relationship quality influenced the perception of the respective situations and the willingness to accept feedback and differences in teaching, which aligns well with the findings of Hudson (2016).

While the triggers of RTPEs described above primarily contributed to the positive or negative development of the professional aspect of the mentor–mentee relationship, the most rewarding relationships with the mentor teacher developed when the interpersonal dimension also came into play. The student teachers appreciated moments of disclosure, as well as mentor teachers' interest in them as individuals and their willingness to care (for them) (see also Hudson 2016). Among student teachers who reported a high-quality interpersonal relationship, hardly any negative RTPEs were reported, which parallels the findings of Wang (2014), who explored the relationship between higher education teachers and first-generation students.

These results also confirm the multi-layered nature of the mentor–mentee relationship (Rippon and Martin 2006, Bradbury and Koballa 2008, Hagenauer and Volet 2014, Hudson 2016). The student teachers were able to explicitly distinguish between these two facets (e.g. as mirrored in the following interview account: 'As for the work, the relationship was good. The interpersonal, I couldn't really figure it out'). Again, particular tensions might occur in connection with the interpersonal aspect of the mentor–mentee relationship, as the overall relationship still has to be kept within the boundaries of a 'professional relationship'.

Although our study contributes additional information to the literature on the mentor–mentee relationship in the practicum by incorporating the concept of RTPEs, the study comes with certain limitations. First, the student teachers were asked about the RTPEs retrospectively, which might have resulted in recall errors. Second, only student teachers were interviewed, but not their mentor teachers, which neglects important perspectives. Third, the findings cannot be generalised, as only a limited number of student teachers (studying kindergarten and primary education) were interviewed. Moreover, the student teachers participated on a voluntary basis; thus, a selection bias might have occurred. As teacher education differs significantly across countries and institutions, it is unknown whether the results can be transferred to other contexts.

We suggest that future studies incorporate the mentors' perspectives and the perspectives of the fellow team teaching students (Hudson 2016, Izadinia 2016). The quality of the relationships and the group dynamic are likely to be different in team practica compared to single practica (one student teacher and one mentor teacher). For example, the relationship with a fellow intern might be more important in a team practicum, while the relationship to the mentor teacher might become

more distanced (Baeten and Simons 2014). Studies that aim to gain deeper insight into the group dynamics of team practica will be important for future research.

Furthermore, longitudinal designs should be applied, as they foster a closer and more dynamic look at the development of relationships. For example, experience sampling methods or diaries could be used to report RTPEs immediately after such situations are experienced. This would greatly reduce retrospective interpretations. In addition, it would be interesting to combine the research strand on RTPEs (Docan-Morgan and Manusov 2009) and the field of emotion research in education (Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia 2014) more thoroughly. The practicum, as such, is a highly emotional endeavour (Hascher and Hagenauer 2016), and RTPEs are experienced emotionally. It would be of great interest to investigate how emotions, emotional communication and relationships influence each other over time (Parkinson *et al.* 2001).

Conclusion

The development of the relationship between the mentor teacher and the student teacher can be described through RTPEs. Respect, appreciation and constructive support as underlying principles of mentorship promote the establishment of positive relationships. Further, divulging information to some degree fosters the establishment of both positive interpersonal relationships and productive professional relationships. Thus, humanistic principles understood as 'caring for the whole person' (Cramer and Prentice-Dunn 2007, p. 771) based on high appreciation and friendliness (Beck and Kosnick 2002) are central in the development of positive relationships. To mentor effectively, mentor teachers have to master many balancing acts (Bradbury and Koballa 2008).

For example, in order to develop positive relationships, student teachers express the need to experience autonomy (Izadinia 2016), but they also want to be supported in their professional development (Martin 1996). Support, especially feedback, should be honest and open (Stanulis and Russell 2000); moreover, appreciation should be maintained in all situations. In addition, student teachers value mutual self-disclosure, but still express the need to keep the relationship within professional boundaries, as the mentor–mentee relationship is not a friendship. With regard to the team practicum, another tension comes into play: student teachers expect equal treatment, but want to be seen as individuals and desire individual support. Unequal treatment, as reflected in the teacher's pet phenomenon, is experienced highly negatively.

These results indicate that the establishment of positive mentor–mentee relationships requires high competencies on the part of the mentor teacher that entail pronounced professional and interpersonal skills. The importance of the relationship quality might be even more accentuated during the induction phase of a teacher's career (Stanulis and Russell 2000, Mitchell *et al.* 2019, Squires 2019), during which a yearlong (or even longer) and more in-depth relationship between the mentor teacher and the beginning teacher develops. As research has already indicated, the quality of the mentoring relationship is likely to crucially impact the learning opportunities of newly qualified teachers, as well as teacher attrition and retention (Long *et al.* 2012, Shanks *et al.* 2020).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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