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## Mentor teachers' views of their mentees

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### ABSTRACT

Successful mentoring relationships are essential for novice teachers entering the teaching profession. The success of the mentoring process depends in large part on the diagnostic abilities of the mentor, but there is little research on how mentor teachers view their mentees. In this small-scale study, we explored how 11 mentor teachers describe similarities and differences between their mentee teachers. We found that mentor teachers' descriptions predominantly relate to differences in personal engagement with pupils, identifying as a teacher, perfectionism and self-confidence. Mentors tended to describe these differences in terms of traits and dispositions. We provide suggestions for addressing this issue in mentor preparation and for using findings in mentor training, and we provide a conceptual framework for future studies of mentor teachers' views of their mentees.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Mentoring; teacher education; practical knowledge; individual differences; novice teachers

High diagnostic ability is a distinctive feature of both successful teaching and mentoring (Schwille, 2008). In teacher mentoring, it requires professional knowledge of mentee teachers as adult learners (Reiman & Thies-Sprinthall, 1998). Successful mentoring relationships are considered essential for novice teachers to survive their initial teaching experiences, develop their teaching competencies, and define their teaching lives (Fairbanks, Freedman, & Kahn, 2000; Long et al., 2012; Marable & Raimondi, 2007). Precondition for such successful mentoring relationships is a good match between mentor and mentee. Therefore, mentor teachers are expected to attend to the different and individual needs of their mentee teachers (Bullough, 2012). These different needs may derive from mentee's different learning preferences, teaching concerns, stages of development, readiness levels regarding various teaching competencies, tensions in professional identity formation, images and beliefs about teaching, and goals and expectations concerning the mentoring relationship (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009; Rajuan, Beijaard, & Verloop, 2010; Van

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Ginkel, Oolbekkink, Meijer, & Verloop, 2016). Such knowledge of novice teachers as adult learners is considered a prominent, but still underdeveloped component of the knowledge base of mentoring (Jones & Straker, 2006). In our study, we aimed to contribute to the development of this professional knowledge base of mentoring, by focussing on mentor teachers' own, practical knowledge of their mentee teachers' learning. We did so by exploring what mentor teachers focus on most in talking about similarities and differences between their mentee teachers. Our central research question is therefore: *What attributes of novice teachers' learning do mentor teachers focus on most in describing similarities and differences between their mentee teachers?* Mentor teachers are typically in a position to have elaborate and accurate information regarding their mentees: acquaintance over a longer period, in various settings, and within the context of a close interpersonal relationship (Funder, 1995). For such practitioner knowledge to become professional knowledge, it '... must be public, it must be represented in a form that enables it to be accumulated and shared with other members of the profession, and it must be continually verified and improved.' (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002, p. 4). In our study, we assumed that by explicating mentor teachers' practical knowledge of their mentee teachers' learning we could inform efforts to support mentors in developing mentoring practices more adaptive and responsive to the needs of their mentee teachers. Three conceptual starting points informed the design of our study. First, the notion that mentor teachers' practical knowledge is connected to the mentoring conceptions that they hold. This informed our selection of respondents. Second, the conceptualisation of becoming a teacher as a process that spans across the personal and the professional domains of mentee teachers' functioning. This informed the initial themes for our data-analysis. Third, the two dimensions of social judgement along which people tend to view and judge other people. This informed the second-order analysis of our data.

### **Mentor teachers' practical knowledge**

Mentor teachers' knowledge of mentoring and learning to teach is above all practical knowledge. It is practice-oriented (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015), intimately tied up with and embedded in their teaching practice and their professional identities as teachers and mentors within their school culture (Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2010), and it derives from personal experiences with their mentees, colleagues, teaching, learning to teach, and personal life experiences in general (Clarke, Killeavy, & Moloney, 2013). At the same time, however, mentoring in Initial Teacher Education is increasingly seen as a professional practice that requires mentors to '... draw from their strategic knowledge of teaching and learning to teach and their knowledge of their novice as a learner to create appropriate learning opportunities.' (Schwille, 2008, p. 155). Such professional mentoring requires mentors to be pro-actively adaptive to novice teacher learning, while working towards a vision of good practice (Stanulis, Brondyk, Little, & Wibbens, 2014). This involves a bifocal vision: attending to immediate issues of improving teaching performance as well as to long-term goals for

novice teachers' learning and development. This bifocal vision has been connected to the mentoring conceptions that mentor teachers' hold (Graham, 2006; Norman & Feiman-Nemser, 2005; Van Ginkel, Verloop, & Denessen, 2016; Young, Bullough, Draper, Smith, & Erickson, 2005). Mentor teachers holding an *instrumental* mentoring conception tend to emphasize immediate issues of teaching performance and classroom control, to be more directive in mentoring interactions, and to view their own teaching as a model of good practice. Mentor teachers holding a *developmental* conception tend to emphasize pupil autonomy in learning of content, and novice teachers' understanding of the interplay between teaching and learning. They tend to be less directive in mentoring interactions, and to view good teaching as associated with the ability to see teaching and learning from different perspectives, including that of pupils. Given these differences between mentors, we chose to select mentor teachers with varied outlooks on mentoring. We assumed that this would allow us to maximize the variation in mentor teachers' understandings of similarities and differences within a small-scale exploratory study, and to provide a better ground for capturing common understandings across different mentoring conceptions.

### Domains of functioning in becoming a teacher

A core element of novice teachers' development is the reconciliation of the personal and professional domains of becoming a teacher (Pillen, Beijaard, & den Brok, 2013). For novice teachers this often results in tensions between on the one hand their personal images of themselves as beginning teachers, and on the other hand the expectations in the teacher education programme and norms of professional practice in their placement school. Mentor teachers, as the prime socialising agents of novice teachers (Staton & Hunt, 1992), are deeply involved in these tensions of their mentee teachers' between the personal and the professional domains of becoming a teacher. Mentor teachers have been shown to distinguish between these two domains of novice teacher development. Previous studies of mentors' views of their mentees found mentors to emphasize mostly personal attributes, such as patience, honesty, initiative, a willingness to learn, being knowledgeable and creative, and having a positive influence on the school (Allen, Poteet, & Buroughs, 1997; Reid & Jones, 1997). However, with mentor teachers more and more involved in school-based teacher education and acting as 'gate keepers' (Smith, 2001) to the profession, notions of professional practice are playing an increased role in how they view and judge their mentees. More recently, for instance, mentors in Haigh, Ell, and Mackisack (2013) reported judging teaching candidates not only according personal attributes such as actively relating to pupils and staff and being committed to the personal process of becoming a teacher, but also according to their professional practices such as planning, assessment and classroom management. Given these findings, we expected that mentor teachers' views of their mentee teachers would relate to two broad domains: a *personal*

domain, regarding the personal attributes and qualities that mentees bring to the process of mentored learning to teach, and a *professional* domain, regarding the professional practices and norms of professional conduct expected of novices. These two domains functioned as the initial broad themes for developing our analysis of the data.

## Dimensions of social judgement

The third perspective that informed our study is the conceptualisation of the *big two* dimensions of social judgement. This body of research refers to the two core dimensions that people tend to use in their social judgements of others. These are ‘... agentic content, which refers to goal-achievement and task functioning (competence, assertiveness, decisiveness), and communal content, which refers to the maintenance of relationships and social functioning (helpfulness, benevolence, trustworthiness)’ (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014, p. 197). These two core dimensions have been termed agency and communion, competence and warmth, or social utility and social desirability (Beauvois & Dubois, 2009), which is how we will refer to them here. Judgments of social utility refer to reputations of being capable to occupy social positions, whereas judgments of social desirability refer to reputations of arousing positive affects in others and of acting in concurrence with other people’s motivations (Dubois & Beauvois, 2012). When people judge other people by social utility traits, they use properties such as being ambitious, efficient, skilful, strong, assertive, dynamic, and intelligent. Dubois and Beauvois (2012) found the social utility dimension to comprise three components: (a) effort/persevering, being conscientious and hardworking, (b) competence/capability, possessing abilities, techniques and problem solving capacities, and (c) ease, being ambitious and at ease with the competition. When people judge other people by social desirability traits, they use properties such as being friendly/engaging/kind, and being honest/responsible/sincere. These properties comprise the two components of sociability, and morality (Brambilla & Leach, 2014; Dubois & Beauvois, 2012). Given the prevalence of these two dimensions and their sub dimensions in social judgements of others, we expect mentor teachers’ views of their mentees will also reflect these dimensions. We therefore used these dimensions as a second-order conceptual lens for our data analysis, to explore the kinds of judgements that mentor teachers tend make about their mentees.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 11 mentor teachers, 6 males and 5 females. Age in years ranged from 26 to 59 years. Teaching experience ranged from 3 to 35 years, and mentoring experience ranged from 3 to 26 years, and from 6 to 60 mentee teachers mentored.

We selected participants using purposive sampling (Palys, 2008) to maximize the chances of finding a variety of constructs in a relatively small sample, by selecting mentors with different patterns of mentoring conceptions. We did so by selecting mentors based on their responses to a survey questionnaire distributed through 13 Dutch teacher education institutes in a previous study (Van Ginkel et al., 2016), which measured the degree to which they held a developmental mentoring conception versus an instrumental mentoring conception. We divided respondents according to the mean scores for all 726 respondents on both mentoring conception scales. We selected the 11 participants in this study from the 245 respondents that indicated a willingness to participate in a follow-up study. The final sample included five mentors scoring above average on both scales, two mentors scoring below average on both scales, two mentors scoring above average on the developmental scale and below average on the instrumental scale, and two mentors scoring the opposite combination.

### *Repertory grid interview to elicit constructs*

We conducted repertory-grid interviews (Tan & Hunter, 2002) with mentor teachers to elicit their constructs regarding differences and similarities between their mentee teachers. In this study, we define constructs as bipolar oppositions that mentor teachers use to discriminate between different attributes of their mentee teachers' learning. First, we asked mentors to recall the names of six of their mentee teachers of whom they still had a vivid recollection. Second, we gave them three of these names, on cards. We asked them to identify how two mentees had been similar to each other in some way, and dissimilar to the third mentee. For instance: 'then the keywords are, for them I think insecure, and for her fairly self-confident'. Finally, we asked them to name the terms that best described the difference, and to provide examples of how this had manifested itself in the mentoring process. This was repeated a total of eight times, each time with a different set of names, and in such a way that each name was included in four different sets. We allowed mentors to sort the same set of cards multiple times in case they could identify more than one meaningful difference. If they could not find a meaningful difference, we allowed mentors to 'skip' the set or to contrast the set of three cards with the rest of the six cards to identify a meaningful difference. As a result, some respondents made more than eight card sorts. Interviews took a half hour to one hour. We transcribed all interviews verbatim from audio files.

### *Analysis*

Interview transcripts were analysed using content analysis (Kurasaki, 2000) in four subsequent steps, with the first and second author as coders.

### *Step 1: developing the coding themes and categories*

First, to develop the main coding themes, we checked if we could meaningfully cover the data with the two domains of personal attributes and professional practices assumed beforehand. Both coders each read half of the interviews, and developed *in vivo* codes: descriptions of the data in the wording of the respondents, to stay close to the data in the initial phase of exploring the data (King, 2008). These were printed and jointly sorted into piles representing different themes. We identified two additional domains as a result, because (a) many differences referred to the process of learning to teach and becoming a teacher, and (b) a small number of differences referred to the mentoring and school context of the mentee teacher. Next, we reduced the data to a limited set of categories (Popping, 1992). Both coders read and annotated all interview fragments describing similarities and differences. They compared and discussed annotations and drafted an initial set of codes. In three rounds, they refined and adapted this set of codes. In each round, both coders separately coded a selection of interviews. Where there was disagreement on coding, they discussed code meanings and coding of constructs until they reached consensus, and revised and refined the coding scheme accordingly (Kurasaki, 2000). As a result, we further divided two of the four themes with a large number of constructs into subthemes, and described the common denominator of the constructs in each subtheme. Finally, we assigned numeric codes to each code in the coding scheme. In applying the final coding scheme to the interviews, the basic unit of analysis was an interview fragment representing one card sort. We labelled all units with numerical codes for the constructs described in that card sort, allowing multiple codes to be attached to one unit of analysis. Table 2 in the results section presents the final coding scheme.

### *Step 2: calibrating coding consistency and scoring all interview fragments*

We calibrated consistency of coding (Kurasaki, 2000) between both coders in three rounds. In each round, both coders separately coded a set of fifteen units of analysis, and discussed and resolved sources of disagreement before coding a subsequent round. We measured inter-coder reliability using proportional agreement<sup>1</sup> and Mezzich's proportional overlap  $\kappa$  statistic, which is tailored to situations where coders may assign multiple but unequal numbers of codes to units, as in our case (Eccleston, Werneke, Armon, Stephenson, & MacFaul, 2000; Mezzich, Kreamer, Worthington, & Coffman, 1981). During the three calibration rounds, proportional agreement improved from 69% to 92%, and Mezzich's  $\kappa$  statistic improved from .51 to .85; a reliability level that is generally considered very good (Wongpakaran, Wongpakaran, Wedding, & Gwet, 2013). The first author therefore scored the remaining units of analysis alone.

### *Step 3: re-coding along dimensions of social judgement*

From the literature on social judgement, we developed definitions of the two dimensions and their sub dimensions (see Table 1). Next, both coders independently



**Table 1.** Definitions of dimensions and sub dimensions of social judgement used in this study.

Dimension and sub dimension of social judgement	Definition: constructs that reflect judgements of a mentee's reputation for ...
Social desirability	... arousing positive affects in others and for going along with other people's motivations and intentions
Morality	... being moral, sincere, honest, respectful, loyal, trustworthy, fair
Sociability	... being friendly, kind, helpful, attentive, patient, warm, sympathetic, gentle, open
Social utility	... being capable of occupying different positions in social organizations, positions ranging from the least high to the highest, without attributes that might impede this; being capable of using necessary competencies with ease
Effort	... being persevering, hardworking, conscientious, diligent
Competence	... being capable, proficient, qualified, skilful, effective
Ease	... being competitive, ambitious, calculating, at ease with competition

coded each construct according to dimension and sub dimension of social judgement, or as not belonging to any dimension. Of all constructs, 91% were coded with the same dimension, and 82% with the same sub dimension. For both agreements and disagreements, both coders discussed meaning of constructs and definitions of dimensions and sub dimensions until they reached consensus on classification of constructs according to sub dimensions (Kurasaki, 2000).

#### *Step 4: selecting and representing mentor talk about dominant constructs*

To identify dominant constructs, we tallied for each construct how many mentors used it and in how many card sorts. In addition, we tallied how many times mentors combined each combination of two constructs in their descriptions, by constructing a co-occurrence matrix indicating the frequency of each combination of two constructs. To select the attributes of their mentee teachers' learning that mentors focus on most, we selected constructs mentioned by approximately two-thirds of mentors (seven at least), and those constructs mentioned in combination by at least one third of mentors (four or more). We retrieved the corresponding interview fragments. For each fragment, we inspected how mentors talked about these constructs and how they connected constructs in their descriptions. We developed themes to summarise how mentors talk about the attributes of their mentee teachers' learning in these interview fragments.

## Results

### *Dominant constructs*

Mentors use 33 constructs to describe similarities and differences between their mentee teachers, related to four domains of mentee teacher functioning: (a) mentee teaching (*teaching*), (b) mentee development and learning to teach (*learning to teach*), (c) personal attributes of the mentee (*person*), or (d) the mentoring or school context of the mentee (*context*) (see Table 2). Approximately two-thirds of the constructs reflect social judgement (see Table 3). Most of these constructs reflect judgements of social utility, and especially judgements of competence.

The constructs mentioned most often (by at least seven mentors), are (02) personal – impersonal, (06) serious – relaxed, (15) identification – non-identification and (20) self-confident – doubting (see Table 3 and Figure 1). Mentors mention these constructs almost exclusively in combination with other constructs, and often across domains. These constructs therefore appear highly central to mentor teachers' views of their mentees. In terms of dimensions of social judgement, these four constructs reflect judgements of sociability, effort, morality, and ease (see Table 3). In Figure 1 we present these four constructs according to domain, dimension of social judgement, and most commonly combined constructs (indicated by arrows). Together, these constructs reflect the two dominant domains of (a) teaching and (b) learning to teach and the two dimensions of social judgement.



**Table 2.** Constructs expressed by mentor teachers in this study, according to domains of mentee teacher functioning.

Domain of mentee teacher functioning	Construct	Content of the construct
<i>(A) Teaching: mentee teacher teaching behaviour</i>		
A1. Interactions with pupils and classroom management		
	1. Selfless – self-centred	Being selfless, considering the needs of others – as opposed to being self-centred; preoccupied with oneself, one's own status, needs, feelings
	2. Personal – impersonal	Engaging in personal contact with and being close to pupils, having a friendly relationship with pupils and caring for their personal well-being – as opposed to remaining distant and impersonal, showing little care for pupil's personal well-being, not engaging in personal contact with pupils
	3. Pupil influence – teacher control	Providing for pupil autonomy, influence, self-expression, collaboration, interaction – as opposed to being controlling/strict, offering little room for pupil autonomy, influence, self-expression, collaboration, interaction
	4. Assertive – unsure	Having an assertive and authoritative presence in class with few problems in maintaining discipline – as opposed to having an unsure, nervous presence in class with more problems in maintaining discipline
	5. Consistent – inconsistent	Being clear and consistent towards pupils about expectations, rules and consequences, providing structure – as opposed to being inconsistent, chaotic, unclear, disorganised and not providing structure
	6. Serious – relaxed	Being serious and perfectionist about teaching, setting high standards for oneself – as opposed to being relaxed, playful, quickly satisfied
	7. Flexible – inflexible	Being flexible in executing lesson plans, deviating from lesson plans to adapt lessons to emerging circumstances – as opposed to being inflexible and sticking to the lesson plan regardless of circumstances
	8. Knowledgeable – uneducated	Being knowledgeable about content, having a deep/broad understanding/knowledge of content – as opposed to being uneducated, having a superficial/narrow understanding/knowledge of content
A2. Knowledge, beliefs & approaches towards learning, instruction & content		

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Domain of mentee teacher functioning	Construct	Content of the construct	
<i>(B) Learning to teach: mentee teacher learning to teach and development as a teacher</i> B1. Generic attributes of mentee teacher learning to teach	9. Excellent – inferior teaching/learning	Teaching with excellence, achieving deep learning in pupils – as opposed to mediocre/inferior teaching, achieving only superficial learning in pupils	
	10. Planned – ad hoc teaching	Planning for learning outcomes and various teaching strategies to achieve these outcomes – as opposed to teaching ad hoc without much planning for learning outcomes and appropriate teaching strategies	
	11. Educational values (various)	Differences in personal values, mission and beliefs regarding the purpose of teaching, schooling and the role of the teacher	
	12. Quick proficiency – hard learning	Quickly being proficient at teaching, already having or quickly developing critical skills/qualities – as opposed to having to work hard to develop such skills/qualities, having little/few of them to start with	
	13. Good – poor outcomes	Finishing teacher training with good outcomes, well up to standards – as opposed to achieving poor outcomes, not or barely up to standards	
	14. Easy – difficult to mentor	Being easy to mentor, requiring little mentor effort to achieve desired interactions and outcomes – as opposed to being difficult to mentor, requiring much mentor effort to achieve desired interactions and outcomes	
	B2. Mentee teacher professional commitment and identity	15. Identification – non-identification	Identifying with the tasks, responsibilities and role boundaries of being a teacher, knowing and performing these – as opposed to not identifying or having much difficulty doing so, not knowing or performing these
		16. Enterprising – passive	Being enterprising, taking initiative, risk, exploring teaching and widening one's experience – as opposed to being passive, avoiding risk, not exploring teaching, restricting one's experience
		17. Staying – leaving	Staying on as a teacher and pursuing a teaching career – as opposed to leaving the profession
		18. Classroom – school	Focusing on classroom work – as opposed to also pro-actively participating in and being a member of the school organisation



B3. Mentee teacher dealing with emotions in the learning process

19. Persevering – giving up  
Persevering, maintaining effort to learn and improve despite adversity – as opposed to lowering effort, giving up, walking out, and acting helpless
20. Self-confident – doubting  
Being confident, assured and secure about one's own capabilities, having a high expectation of success – as opposed to doubting and being unsure, insecure about one's own capabilities, having a low expectation of success

21. Rational – emotional  
Reacting rationally to teaching experiences, focused on the teaching/learning process – as opposed to reacting more emotionally, focused on feelings about teaching, taking experiences very personally

22. Open – closed  
Being open/willing to be mentored and to consider feedback/advice – as opposed to being closed/unwilling to be mentored and to consider feedback/advice

23. Aware/accepting – unaware/denying  
Being aware of and accepting responsibility for one's influence on pupils and lessons, attributing internally – as opposed to being unaware of and denying responsibility for one's influence, attributing externally

24. Trying out – not trying  
Trying out devised solutions and changing one's teaching – as opposed to not trying them out and not realizing changes in teaching

25. Independent – dependent  
Showing independent thought to find and solve problems in teaching – as opposed to depending on the mentor to find and solve problems

(Continued)

**Table 2. (Continued).**

Domain of mentee teacher functioning	Construct	Content of the construct
<i>(C) Person: personal attributes of mentee teachers</i>	26. Female – male	Being female or male
	27. Younger – older	Being younger or older
	28. Regular – alternative route	Regular teacher training – as opposed to following an alternative route to teacher certification
	29. Original – common	Having a unique, remarkable, individual personality – as opposed to a common personality
30. Agreeable – disagreeable	Having a positive, agreeable, sociable disposition – as opposed to having a negative, disagreeable, unsociable disposition	
31. Mature – immature	Being mature, having a well-formed sense of self, personal purpose and society, being capable of independent choice in personal life and accepting consequences of personal choices – as opposed to being immature, having limited knowledge of society, seeking a sense of self and purpose, being incapable of independent choice and/or accepting consequences of choices	
<i>(D) Context: the mentoring or school context of mentee teachers</i>	32. Match – mismatch	A good match between the mentee teacher and the school system, local school or educational culture/profession – as opposed to a mismatch
	33. Mentor (various)	Differences in mentor knowledge and experience affecting the mentoring relationship with the mentee teacher

**Table 3.** Constructs according to dimensions and sub dimensions of social judgement.

Construct	Social desirability	Social utility
<i>(A) Teaching</i>		
A1. Interactions with pupils and classroom management		
1. Selfless – self-centred	Sociability	
2. Personal – impersonal*	Sociability	
3. Pupil influence – teacher control	–	–
4. Assertive – unsure		Competence
5. Consistent – inconsistent		Competence
A2. Knowledge, beliefs & approaches towards learning, instruction & content		
6. Serious – relaxed*		Effort
7. Flexible – inflexible		Competence
8. Knowledgeable – uneducated		Competence
9. Excellent – inferior teaching/learning		Ease
10. Planned – ad hoc teaching		Effort
11. Educational values (various)	–	–
<i>(B) Learning to teach</i>		
B1. Generic attributes of novice teacher learning to teach		
12. Quick proficiency – hard learning		Ease
13. Good – poor outcomes		Competence
14. Easy – difficult to mentor		(generic)
B2. Novice teacher professional commitment and identity		
15. Identification – non-identification*	Morality	
16. Enterprising – passive		Ease
17. Staying – leaving	–	–
18. Classroom – school	–	–
B3. Novice teacher dealing with emotions in the learning process		
19. Persevering – giving up		Effort
20. Self-confident – doubting*		Ease
21. Rational – emotional		(generic)
B4. Novice teacher role in guided problem solving		
22. Open – closed	Sociability	
23. Aware/accepting – unaware/denying	Morality	
24. Trying out – not trying		Effort
25. Independent – dependent		Competence
<i>(C) Person</i>		
26. Female – male	–	–
27. Younger – older	–	–
28. Regular – alternative route	–	–
29. Original – common	–	–
30. Agreeable – disagreeable	Sociability	
31. Mature – immature		(generic)
<i>(D) Context</i>		
32. Match – mismatch	–	–
33. Mentor (various)	–	–

Notes: \* = Dominant constructs. – = Not classifiable as a dimension of social judgement. (generic) = Classifiable as a social utility construct, but not as a sub dimension of social utility.

### *Themes in mentor teachers' descriptions*

As indicated by the direction of the arrows in Figure 1, mentor teachers often combine the dominant constructs across the two domains, but not across the two dimensions of social judgements. This suggests mentors' views of these differences in their mentee teachers' learning represent two separate dimensions of social judgement. In Table 4 we provide an overview of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the analysis of mentor teachers' talk involving these constructs. In the following sections, we illustrate these themes with examples

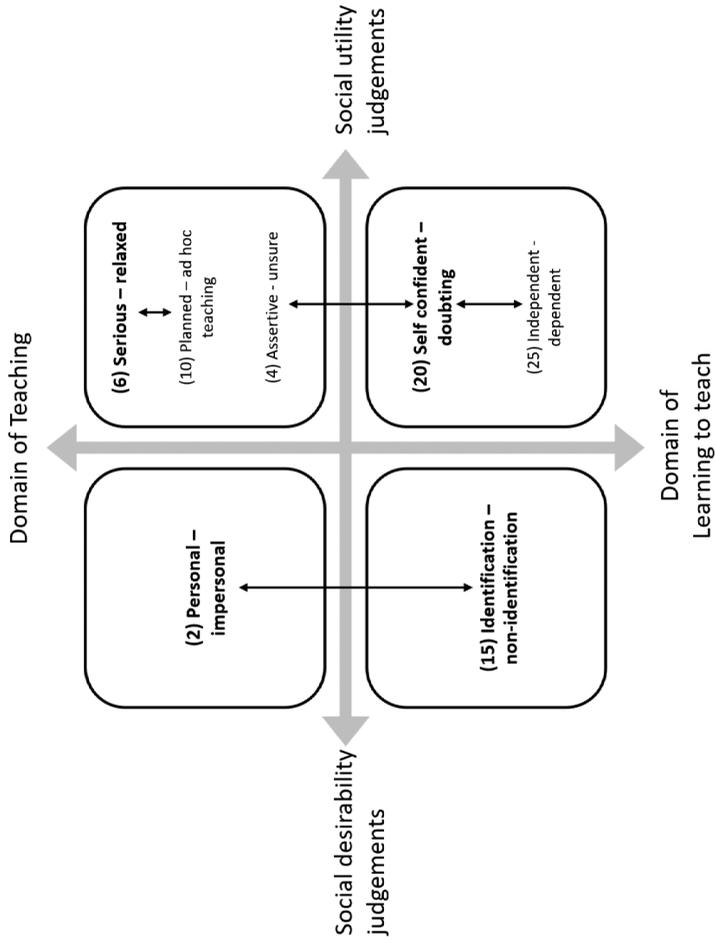


Figure 1. Dominant constructs (in bold) according to domain, dimension and dominant combinations with other constructs (see arrows).

**Table 4.** Themes identified in mentors' descriptions of dominant constructs.

Dimension of social judgement	Theme and subthemes	Domain of mentee teacher functioning
Social desirability	(1) care for pupils is a disposition (2) properly identifying as a teacher requires a balance of care and professional distance	Teaching Teaching/Learning to teach
Social utility	(3) strong novices balance ambition and playfulness (a) perfectionism hampers flexible teaching (b) perfectionism hampers reflection (4) planning for teaching is a disposition (5) strong novices have inner strength (a) assertive presence comes from self-confidence (b) independent problem-solving comes from self-confidence	Teaching Learning to teach Teaching Teaching/Learning to teach Learning to teach

from the interviews. In the interviews, the mentors often shifted into performance (Baynham, 2011, p. 69) to re-enact what they and/or their mentee teacher had said. In the interview examples, we indicate these instances of shifting into performance in bold italics (***mentor speech***) or italics (*mentee speech*).

### *Care for pupils is a disposition*

This theme identifies how mentors most frequently explain differences for the construct personal – impersonal by referring to internal traits and dispositions of mentee teachers, such as having a strong personal preference for a way of working with pupils, or (not) feeling care and concern for pupils. We provide examples in the next section, because mentors most frequently combine this theme with the second theme of properly identifying as a teacher.

### *Properly identifying as a teacher requires a balance of care and professional distance*

This theme identifies how four mentors connect the two constructs personal – impersonal and identification – non-identification in their descriptions. The mentors express that a lack of care and concern for pupils, or a lack of professional distance towards pupils, signifies a lack of proper identification with the task, role and responsibility of being a teacher. The mentors most frequently also use the reasoning identified by the theme that care for pupils is a disposition, connecting a lack of properly identifying with the teacher role to the trait/disposition of having either too little, or too much concern for pupils. We provide two examples.

An example of how a lack of care for pupils signifies improper identification with teaching is how mentor Kay contrasts Ron and Stuart with Rick. Kay is critical of Rick's lack concern for pupils. He sees that as an indication that Rick is unfit

for teaching since he does not properly identify with what is justly expected of teachers:

They have concern for the welfare of the child, and he did not have that at all, because, well it was completely the wrong profession for him to start with. So they, from the get go, have something like, *I want to do something for that child (...)* child-centred, if you will. And he was like, whether I'm laying bricks or whether I'm sitting here with pupils in a classroom that just makes no difference.

An example of how a lack of professional distance signifies improper identification with teaching is how mentor George contrasts Rose and Iris with Joan. George indicates how Joan had been too concerned with pupils, thereby transgressing the professional boundaries of the teacher role:

What struck me with these two is that they were really focused on teaching in class, so that I did not see them doing much else. Whereas Joan was also really engaged in matters outside of class, made contact with pupils outside of class. (...) at a certain point she also interested herself on behalf of the social problems of pupils (...) of which we thought, ***you think you're helping this pupil, out of some kind of compassion, but the question is whether he's really being helped, or whether it wouldn't be best to leave this to professionals.*** For instance, we had, in one of the classes where she taught a boy with a completely deranged biological rhythm, and he was unable to get up in the morning. (...) I remember that at a certain point she made a habit of, if she had to start at ten past eight she would go by his house and pick him up. Then I think, ***Joan, here you are going too far, you should not be doing this, this is ... Yes, but I still want to.*** (...) Here you could say (...) professional engagement, but no more than that. Like, you are in my class, and that is fine with me. Whereas here it is a personal involvement, she was really, with every one of those pupils she knew all about them, she talked to them, and during recess she would frequently not sit in the staffroom but in the area where pupils sit.

The examples of Kay and George illustrate both themes, as they connect a lack of properly identifying with the teacher role to the trait/disposition of having either too little, or too much concern for pupils. In contrast, Mentor Jack deviates from this dominant reasoning. Contrasting two younger mentees with an older mentee, Jack indicates that the two younger mentees had quickly taken their role as teachers by engaging with pupils. The older mentee, due to a complex personal history, had remained distant towards pupils at first, but after a lot of trouble had finally accepted personal responsibility for relating to pupils, leading to and evidenced by pupil acceptance of him as a teacher. In this case, rather than pointing to a trait or disposition, mentor Jack points to a change that occurred over time.

### ***Strong novices balance ambitions and playfulness***

This theme identifies how mentors indicate with regard to the construct serious – relaxed, that perfectionism tends to stand in the way of successful teaching or learning to teach. In some instances mentors positively value being serious, referring to putting in the required effort and making it a priority to do well in teaching practice, as opposed to prioritising other social activities. Mentors predominantly expressed ambiguity, however. Mentors express this ambiguity differently for the

domains of teaching and of learning to teach, depending on the other constructs they combine in their descriptions. For the domain of teaching, the subtheme *perfectionism hampers flexible teaching* identifies how mentors indicate that too much perfectionism could prevent mentee teachers from being sociable or flexible in dealing with pupils. For the domain of learning to teach, the subtheme *perfectionism hampers reflection* identifies how mentors indicate that too much perfectionism could prevent the mentee from adequately reflecting on personal strengths and weaknesses. We provide an example of each subtheme.

An example of the first subtheme is how mentor John contrasts Dean with Erin and Marissa, indicating how Dean had been more spontaneous and playful with pupils, whereas Erin and Marissa had been perfectionist, but less spontaneous:

Dean really jumps out (...) his spontaneity (...) the maturity, and the perfectionism of these two (...) they both had, they come across (...) really well. (...) Sometimes you'd want, **you're both doing well, maybe sometimes a bit more spontaneous** (...) You see the lesson (...) you think, **actually nothing to criticize it for, but maybe just a bit too clean.**

An example of the second subtheme is how Mentor Sue contrasts Mary and Kate with Jane, indicating how Mary and Kate's perfectionism prevented them from having a realistic view of their competence despite being already proficient at classroom management. Whereas Jane, while still needing to learn a lot, was not hampered by being so overly perfectionist:

... both did many things well; both had presence in front of class, naturally. This is a very clever person but has problems with presence, a lady with a PhD, analyses like the best of them, and just has problems with being in charge in class, these could do that naturally. (...) That is something she did well, reflection (...) here too much self-criticism, so the balance is gone (...) perfectionism is a form of weak reflection (...) they have a lot going for them but they just don't see it.

### *Planning for teaching is a disposition*

This theme identifies how all five mentors that combine the construct serious – relaxed with the construct planned – ad hoc teaching, refer to fixed traits of mentee teachers; to just being 'a certain type of person' or having a certain style of doing or thinking. An example is how mentor Sandy contrasts Nadine and Abby with Sergio, attributing Sergio's lack of preparation to an unchangeable disposition of wanting to be carefree:

... they always did a lot on lesson preparation, and he almost not. (...) the result was therefore that with them, it was often a disappointment they had not achieved what they wanted to do in the lesson. And he doesn't have that disappointment, because he just works out what happens as he goes along. That is also that relaxed attitude, sometimes he does not even know which class he is teaching. *Oh, yes, 2 h, what are we doing, we're doing a practicum*, he dives into the cupboard, let's do a practicum. (...) I don't believe he's ever going to get that, no, he's a really good teacher but that's just not his attitude, he just wants that freedom, and he wants to bring across his subject and he'll just see what he's into doing that day (...) so I didn't succeed in that mission, no.

Sandy's example also fits in with the theme of balancing seriousness and playfulness and expressing ambiguity with regard to 'seriousness:' while she evaluates preparing for lessons as more desirable, she also notes that Nadine and Abby's more serious preparation has the downside of being often disappointed in not achieving their set plans.

### *Strong novices have inner strength*

This theme identifies how mentors most commonly express the construct self-confidence – doubting as an internal trait; as having inner strength, or being (in)secure inside. Mentors express this theme of inner strength differently, depending on the combination with the construct assertive – unsure presence in class or the combination with the construct independence – dependence in problem solving (see Figure 1). For the first combination, the subtheme *assertive presence comes from self-confidence* identifies how mentors attribute outward assertive presence in class to being inwardly self-confident, and unsure presence to inner doubt. For the second combination, the subtheme *independent problem solving comes from self-confidence* identifies how mentors associate independence in guided problem solving to inner self-confidence, and dependence to inner doubt. In several instances, mentors combine these two subthemes. Although mentors predominantly value self-confidence as a desirable trait, several also mention negative aspects of self-confidence. We provide an example of each subtheme, an example of a combination of the two subthemes, and an example where the mentor mentions negative aspects of self-confidence.

An example of the first subtheme is how Mentor Kay contrasts the insecurity of Pete and Dick with Eve's relative security. Kay describes how Pete and Dick's unsure presence resulted from their inner insecurity, which in turn originated from their personal background that made them less mature than Eve. Whereas Eve was much worldlier, more secure and had a more assertive presence:

... then the keywords are, for them I think insecure, and for her fairly self-confident. He is, pupils also say that about him, he is insecure. He just emanates that; they can tell that by looking at him, he is just insecure in front of the class. If something happens in the first lesson then he will be completely confused and upset the following hours, then he keeps pondering. And with him that was very much the case as well, just really insecure. She just had, yes, she was doubtful in the sense of, *can I do this profession*. That was a struggle for her, she was insecure about that, but she just worked that out in the course of the year, *no, I am not cut out for this right now*. It was OK for that to be a bit of a struggle, but with them it is just, every lesson they radiate insecurity. (...) and I think the parents also play a role here, with these two, don't go into the evil world out there, nice in a reformed school (...) just staying in that protected little world, and then I can imagine that you'll become insecure because, those pupils will come with all sorts of things (...) Her father works at (...) a newspaper, (...). So a family like that will also have a different position, and they have been raised super protected, and they haven't ever experienced confrontation with the world, so to speak, and the world, or the pupils (...) [she] knows about the life world of the pupils, knows about the world, just, what the world has to offer (...) they, totally not.

Kay's example is similar to the overall pattern in that Kay describes Pete and Dick's unsure presence as being a result of their insecurity. Kay's example is different, however, in that he identifies the ultimate cause of their insecurity in their personal background.

An example of the second subtheme is how mentor Nancy contrasts Gerald and Mary with Janice: '... those are very insecure, they also came asking for little things every time, outside of mentoring sessions, like *how do I do this, and how do I do that*, and this one found his own way more.'

An example of combining the two subthemes is how mentor Seth contrasts Jeff and Carla with Anna, indicating how Anna's worrying about her competence led to a focus on herself, an inability to engage with others/pupils, an unsure presence in class and dependence upon him for solving problems. Jerry and Carla, though both achieving a different classroom climate ('elastic' or 'tighter'), had both been internally strong, and as a result more focused on the pupils, independent and with an assertive presence in class.

... the difference is, that these two, (...) they were both strong inside, he more than her, but she totally not (...) she was not that self-assured (...). These two were busy with the pupils and their position in class, *well here I stand to help you, and you're my pupil*, but not her, (...). She was busy with herself, with her insecurity, with who is laughing and is he laughing at me (...) internally strong, less strong, busy with her inner world, busy with the pupils (...). He had almost no discipline problems with pupils, here (...) she had a few discipline problems but she can handle them herself, at least she tried to, but she was on hundred percent dependent on me (...) sometimes she left the classroom (...) *I can't Seth, look at what they're doing* (...) she just asked me to intervene in the class. (...) then it took a year, she got to work on it, graduated, finished, the last phase she taught independently.

Seth negatively evaluates Anna's initial insecurity and her resulting dependence and self-centeredness, but indicates this was a temporary issue for Anna, which she worked through successfully in the end.

The above three examples of Kay, Nancy and Seth show the mentors valuing self-confidence as a desirable trait. As indicated above, several mentors also identified negative aspects of self-confidence, but also in these cases, they described self-confidence as an inner trait. An example is how mentor George contrasts the over-assertive stance of Iris as opposed to Joan and Tonya, who had been more agreeable to work with:

... the catchwords that separate them are self-confidence as opposed to insecurity. (...) Iris stood in front of class with an incredible surety, she exuberated that she did not put herself into question, so much that the pupils also did not do that anymore. Tonya and Joan, they really had to find themselves in their learning process by feeling around (...). She came all dressed in black (...) we hadn't even talked for five minutes '*I do assume that I can just go dressed in black here in school*' I said '**yes, anyone can go dressed in black here**.' That kind of behaviour that was very uncongenial to me.

Fitting in with the dominant pattern, George uses the notion of confidence as a stable disposition of inner strength, to which he attributes Iris' extremely assertive

presence in class, which he values positively, but also Iris' disagreeable disposition within the mentoring relationship, which he values negatively.

## Discussion

### *Dispositional explanations*

The findings of our study show a dominant pattern of mentors describing attributes of their mentee teachers' learning in terms of internal traits or dispositions. Gill and Andreychik (2014) distinguish three social explanatory styles: dispositionism, historicism and control. While dispositional explanations focus on internal, stable traits and attributes of the actor, control explanations focus on internal but malleable factors such as the effort and willpower of the actor. Historicist explanations focus on external and '... formative influences that have caused an actor to become a particular kind of person' (Gill & Andreychik, 2014, p. 3). Although mentors in our study also frequently refer to biography and historical circumstances (e.g. her father works at a newspaper, they have been raised super protected), and to willpower and control (e.g. Anna worked through it), they mostly use dispositional explanations for all four of the dominant constructs (e.g. that's just not his attitude, he just wants that freedom). Such social explanatory styles help to guide actions in relating to others, by answering the question of why an actor behaved a certain way or experienced a certain outcome. Gill and Andreychik (2009) demonstrated that dispositionism as a social explanatory style affects impression formation and approach/avoidance tendencies. In contrast, historicism tends to engender compassionate responding to others, a quality that would appear conducive for mentors to provide adaptive and responsive mentoring support. Mentors with a tendency towards dispositionism over historicism could therefore potentially be less attentive to historical and formative origins of mentee teachers' patterns of behaviours, beliefs and emotions, and potentially put less effort in helping mentees to develop patterns that are more effective. As a caution, the tendency for dispositional explanations found in our study may in part be an artefact of the method used. Comparing different mentee teachers may operate at a higher level of abstractness or construal, which promotes inferring of traits (Moskowitz & Okten, 2016). However, mentors were stimulated to talk in concrete terms about their mentee teachers and did offer other explanations as well, as indicated above.

### *Implications for mentor preparation*

In various ways, mentors' practical knowledge about their mentee teachers' learning made public in this study may inform mentor preparation, to support mentors in providing adaptive and responsive mentoring support for their mentees. First, given the dominant pattern of dispositionism found in our study, we suggest that mentor preparation attends to stimulating mentors to develop more historicist

explanations. We suggest training attends to different ways to explain behaviour patterns of mentees, and especially to (models and theories for) historicist explanations of how formative influences may contribute to patterns of mentee behaviour. We also encourage mentors who are stimulated to incorporate a phase of exploring and understanding the mentees' context in the mentoring process, similar to the initial phases of the Developmental Relationship Model, i.e. 'contracting' and 'understanding the mentee' (Washington & Cox, 2016, p. 323). A third suggestion would be to use guided reflection for the mentor during the mentoring process, focussing on diagnosis of the mentee and his/her learning needs. Such guided reflection on authentic role-taking experiences promotes higher levels of conceptual complexity, which is associated with higher tolerance of ambiguity and more adaptive behaviour in helping situations and (Reiman, 1999; Reiman & Thies-Sprinthal, 1998). Similarly, Gill and Andreychik (2009) indicated historicism can be promoted by 'thinking long and hard, particularly about human behaviour' (Gill & Andreychik, 2009, p. 1049) which is associated with a lower need for cognitive closure.

Second, mentor preparation can make use of the method of our study. The sorting task used in this study provides a structured way for mentors to talk about individual differences and adequate responses. Mentors with experience of several mentoring relationships may perform this sorting task to become aware of the constructs they tend to use in looking at their mentee teachers, and how they tend to respond to different mentees. Our experience in this study and in subsequent workshops indicates that it provokes much more specific and explicit talk about individual differences, connected to concrete experiences with a mentee teacher, than discussing general perceptions of differences between mentee teachers. It also tends to provoke more talk on how to respond differentially. Performing the sorting task in the presence of beginning mentors may provide them access to the practical knowledge of their more experienced colleagues. Again, we suggest such activities should also attend to how mentors explain differences and to potentially different ways of explaining.

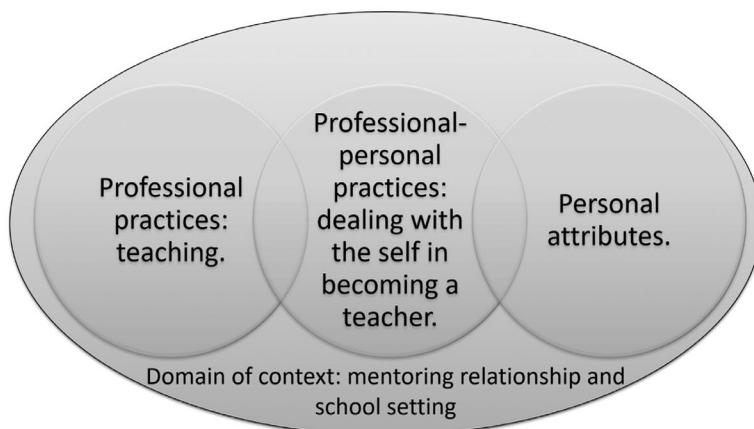
Finally, mentor preparation can make use of the materials from our study. Both the list of constructs in Table 2 and the themes identified in mentors' descriptions can serve as a starting point to discuss how to respond to certain attributes of a mentee teacher, and what would be challenging to deal with. The list can help beginning mentors orient themselves toward what differences they may encounter. Discussing the themes and possible alternative explanations of mentee teachers' patterns of behaviours may help develop awareness of different social explanatory styles. The mentors in our study especially recollect mentees who experience tensions in relating to pupils (whether in terms of warm contact or assertive presence), and connect these tensions to their process of properly identifying as a teacher. Pillen et al. (2013) stated that novice teachers require guidance to bring such professional identity tensions to the surface, make them visible and observable, and work them to give meaning to the negative feelings

they may generate. It is likely that mentors most vividly recollect mentee teachers experiencing such tensions because they are challenging to mentor within the constraints of mentoring practice. These constructs would therefore especially provide a good starting point for discussion with beginning mentors; how these may surface in the mentoring relationship, what the mentor could do to actively probe where the mentee stands, and what the mentor could do to respond adequately. For training purposes, translating constructs into vignettes or cases of mentee teachers may provide more vivid examples to work with. The interview examples may help to construct such vignettes. Given our findings that mentors tend to combine constructs in talking about differences, such cases should also reflect construct combinations, such as depicted in Figure 1, and similar to the complex 'typical' novice teacher cases described in Stanulis et al. (2014). Given our findings that mentors tend to identify both positive and negative aspects of constructs, discussion of such cases should include considerations of how 'too little or too much' could hamper mentee's learning or teaching performance and what options mentors could have to respond.

### *Implications for further research*

Previous researchers have conceptualised mentor teachers' views of their mentees as reflecting only personal attributes of the mentee (Allen et al., 1997; Reid & Jones, 1997) or a combination of personal attributes and professional practices (Haigh et al., 2013). Our findings suggest that a conceptual model describing the components of mentor teachers' practical knowledge of novice teachers should include a third component regarding novice teacher learning to teach. Such a component or domain is one that *bridges* the domain of personal attributes and professional practices: a personal-professional domain located in between these two domains. In Figure 2 we present such a conceptual model based on our findings. We found the majority of mentor teachers' descriptions to reflect the two domains of professional practice and the personal-professional domain, and the social utility and social desirability dimensions of social judgement. We therefore suggest that future studies into mentor teachers' views of their mentees should explore the possibility of capturing mentor teachers' views of differences between their mentees using this framework of two domains by two dimensions. This would provide the benefits of parsimony and comparability in studying how mentor teachers view mentee teachers.

A limitation of our study is the focus on dominant constructs, rather than on individual differences between mentors, and we suggest future research attend to this topic. There were indications that such differences are present. Some mentors for instance attributed differences in self-confidence and rationality to differences in gender, especially one less experienced mentor. Less experienced mentors may be more inclined to use social categories of assessment that require less cognitive



**Figure 2.** Conceptual model of the domains of mentor teachers' knowledge about their mentee teachers' learning.

effort. Using such categories may have negative effects on accurate perception and diagnosis of mentee teachers' learning (Krolak-Schwerdt, Böhmer, & Gräsel, 2013). We also saw indications of differences in the use of dispositionism, historicism and control. Our data-set is too small to explore individual differences in use of constructs, domains, dimensions or social explanatory style, in relation to mentoring experience or mentoring conception. We suggest that future research explore these differences in studying mentors' diagnostic ability and its antecedents and consequences. Not only within the realm of teacher education, but also in other realms where professional mentoring is an important part of the preparation of future practitioners in the profession.

## Conclusion

Our aim in this study has been to contribute to the development of the professional knowledge base of mentoring, drawing on mentor teachers' practical knowledge of their mentee teachers' learning. Our study suggests that mentors consider a large variety of differences between their mentee teachers, and focus most on differences in personal engagement with pupils, identifying as a teacher, perfectionism and self-confidence. Mentors explain these differences predominantly in terms of mentee dispositions. Such dispositional explanations may hamper mentor insight into how past formative experiences affect current performances of mentee teachers. This suggests a challenge for mentor professional preparation. Meeting novice teachers where they are in their development requires an understanding of novice teachers as adult learners, which includes consideration of the learning trajectories of novice teachers that have led them to where they are now.

## Note

1. For example, if coder A assigns codes 1, 2 and 3 to a unit, and coder B assigns codes 2, 3 and 4 then the proportional agreement is 0.50 because two actual agreements (2, 3) were made out of four possible agreements (1, 2, 3, 4).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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