



Trainee–Mentor Relations in Preschool Education: A Mixed-Methods Study of Principal and Mentor Support

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The purpose of this study was to examine how the interaction between trainees and mentors during the mentoring process is shaped by the support of principals and mentors. Additionally, by using a mixed-methods methodology, the study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of how trainees perceived the mentoring experience. A sample of 104 trainees with up to seven years of work experience in Croatia participated in the quantitative part of the study. The Mentor–Trainee Relationship Scale (Vizek Vidović, 2011) and a custom designed subscale measuring principal and mentor support were used to collect data. The findings showed that while mentor support did not provide a statistically meaningful effect, principal support was a strong predictor of the strength of the mentor–trainee relationship. Ten inexperienced trainees participated in the qualitative research method, and their answers were gathered through focus group interviews and subjected to thematic analysis. The analysis revealed significant factors influencing trainees' opinions of their internship and recommended ways to make the mentoring process better. By encouraging collegiality, cohesiveness, and a collaborative culture within preschools, engaged principals play a critical role in developing trainees' professional maturity, according to the findings. Positive working relationships and the accomplishment of common educational objectives are facilitated by such encouraging leadership. The findings provide guidance for enhancing mentoring practices, while future research should expand the trainee sample and incorporate principals' and professional associates' perspectives to deepen understanding of the mentoring process.

Keywords: mentor–trainee relationship, mentoring process improvement, mixed-methods, preschool institution, principal support

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INTRODUCTION

Upon completion of their formal education, preschool teachers are employed in early and preschool education institutions, marking the beginning of their one-year internship. During this initial year, with the support of their mentors, trainees gain experience and professional maturity for independent work. Therefore, this period is considered highly significant for their future professional growth. Mentoring is a process in which an experienced professional (mentor) transfers knowledge to an individual entering the profession (trainee) (Roberts, 2000). Pennanen et al. (2018) believe that there has been a paradigm shift in mentoring processes, and the authors argue that the transfer of knowledge has been replaced by the construction of knowledge, collaborative meaning and the joint creation of professional knowledge. The participants in their research on the Finnish model of peer group mentoring (in the Finnish model of peer group mentoring, teachers work in small groups of four to eight teachers on a voluntary basis to discuss work-related issues and experiences) positively evaluate the joint meetings as a place to seek relief, comfort, empathy, and to discuss the problems they encounter in their daily work. Such an approach to mentoring processes requires the building of a relationship between the mentor and the trainee based on mutual understanding, respect, and ongoing collaboration. Nickel & Crosby (2021) indicate that entering the profession presents numerous challenges for trainees, and some situations in practice can stimulate their learning and development, while others may lead them to leave the profession. The support that novice teachers receive in their first year affects their retention and overall quality of work (Ewing, 2021).

Carstensen & Klusmann (2021) highlight social interactions with children as a strong influence on the stress levels of trainees. The authors believe that possessing social competence is crucial for trainees to enter practice and adapt at the beginning of their careers, a view supported by the results of their research. In this sense, Damico et al. (2018) believe that trainees must have constant social and emotional support as part of their professional development to cope with numerous problems in the system, which can sometimes be discouraging and disappointing. Voss & Kunter (2019) also state that trainees often feel disappointed and stressed during their first years of work. Accordingly, the role of the mentor and their support in the mentoring process is considered a key factor for the trainee to successfully develop all the skills necessary for further independent functioning in practice. Mansfield et al. (2016) identified social competence as an important resource for (future) teachers, as it is a prerequisite for the development of positive relationships. The authors emphasize that this particularly relates to communication skills and strategies that support the establishment of supportive relationships on one hand and contribute to the successful resolution of challenging interactions on the other. Although mentorship is considered a key prerequisite for successfully integrating trainees into the workforce, its effectiveness can vary depending on the quality of support provided by the mentor and the initial professional beliefs of the trainee (Burger, 2023).

Simon & Dan (2025) examined the role of mentors in the mentoring process from the perspective of trainees, and their results indicate that female mentors were an inspiration and role models for most respondents, successfully helping them develop

many skills precisely because of this characteristic. The support that the trainee receives from their mentor and their perception of professional development positively correlates with overall satisfaction and professional commitment (Auletto, 2021). Ellis et al. (2020) and Ewing (2021) emphasize the development of a partnership between the trainee and the mentor, as they believe that such a relationship allows the trainee to feel secure in reflecting and engaging in critical dialogue to support their professional development and independence. Successful mentorship involves fostering collaboration, enhancing professional practice, and retaining teachers in the profession (Kheng and Rusli, 2025; Shanks et al., 2020), specific knowledge, skills, and capacities (Byth, 2025), and support during the entry into the profession so that trainees can cope with the challenges of the profession and develop their professional abilities (Larsen et al., 2023). Factors that influence the retention of trainees in the profession include a safe work climate, autonomy, and opportunities for developing collaborative relationships within institutions (Lindqvist et al., 2014; cited in Maloch et al., 2025), the development of trust relationships between trainees and mentors, encouraging self-reflection among interns, and enabling various work strategies (Glover et al., 2024). On the other hand, research indicates that trainees often leave the profession due to burnout associated with a lack of autonomy, a lack of connection with others, and exhaustion (Burger et al., 2021; Voss & Kunter, 2019), workload, stress, disappointment, and difficult working conditions (Halmarst et al., 2021; cited in Jacobsen, 2024), low salaries, and the quality of programs.

Besides the support a trainee must have from their mentor from the very beginning, the support of the director and professional associates also plays a significant role. Research results (Brown & Wynn, 2009) show that principals who are aware of the issues affecting new teachers, principals with a proactive approach to supporting new teachers, and principals committed to professional growth and excellence for themselves, their students, and their teachers (trainees and other teachers) retain teachers in their institutions, while Arthur & Bradley (2023) cite supportive colleagues and a feeling of being valued by school leadership as key factors influencing trainee retention. Research by Ingersoll (2017) and Sutcher et al. (2016) highlights professional status and work environment as key factors in retaining teachers in the profession. To ensure continuous professional development and a quality work environment, institutional leaders and their support are an indispensable element.

Previous research highlights the importance of mentor support and mentors' perceptions, as well as the challenges they encounter when working with trainees. However, trainees' perceptions of institutional support during the internship period remain insufficiently explored, particularly through mixed methods approaches. This study employs a mixed methods design to provide a deeper understanding of trainees' experiences and to enhance the mentoring process by considering not only mentors' perspectives but also those of the trainees themselves.

The objective of this study is to examine trainees' perceptions of the mentoring process and their experiences with institutional support in early childhood education settings, as well as to identify the key factors that shape their views of mentoring and contribute to either effective or ineffective mentoring practices. Additionally, the study aims to

illuminate trainees' suggestions for improving the mentoring process to strengthen their professional development and facilitate their integration into the profession. By integrating quantitative and qualitative findings, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the overall mentoring experience.

In the qualitative part of the research, the aim was to deeply explore the perceptions of trainees regarding their internship and to identify the factors that shape their perception. Considering the factors, it was important to identify the elements that would contribute to the improvement of the mentoring process. In line with the objective, the following research questions were established:

QR1: What are the perceptions of trainees regarding the introduction to the profession and the mentoring process?

QR2: In what ways, according to their experience, should the mentoring process be improved?

In the quantitative part of the research, the aim was to determine the effect of the principal's support and the support of professional associates on the relationship between mentors and trainees, and in accordance with this aim, the following hypothesis was established:

H1: It is assumed that there is a positive effect of the support from the principal and professional associates on the quality of the relationship between the trainee and the mentor.

METHOD

Participants and Sampling

Quantitative research was conducted among Croatian novice educators (N=104), of whom 41 have up to two years of work experience, 32 respondents have 3-4 years of work experience, and 31 respondents have 5-7 years of work experience. The age of the respondents ranged from 20 to 25 years (N=41), 26 to 35 years (N=49), 36 to 44 years (N=12), and 2 respondents were aged 45 to 55 years (Table 1).

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 104)

| Variable | Category | <i>n</i> | % |
|-------------------------|----------|----------|------|
| Work experience (years) | 0–2 | 41 | 39.4 |
| | 3–4 | 32 | 30.8 |
| | 5–7 | 31 | 29.8 |
| Age (years) | 20–25 | 41 | 39.4 |
| | 26–35 | 49 | 47.1 |
| | 36–44 | 12 | 11.5 |
| | 45–55 | 2 | 1.9 |

In the qualitative part of the research, 10 trainees voluntarily participated in a group interview that was held in October 2024. The respondents were also participants in the quantitative research and, according to the principle of voluntariness, which was the only criterion for participation, were asked to participate in the group interview.

Data Collection Methods

For the quantitative part of the research, a survey was conducted to gain insight into the experiences of novice preschool teachers regarding their relationship with their mentor and the support of principals and professional associates during their internship. A link to the questionnaire was sent to principals and professional associations of preschool teachers in Croatia, which they forwarded to the preschool teachers. The questionnaire was created in Google Docs format, the introductory part stated the aim of the research, respondents completed it anonymously and could withdraw from completing it at any time. It consisted of 30 statements on which respondents expressed their degree of agreement with the stated statement, ranging from Strongly disagree to Strongly agree. The questionnaire consisted of three subscales: the Relationship with the Mentor, composed of 18 variables measuring their relationship (example variables: V6: The behaviour of my mentor significantly encouraged me to engage in independent learning and personal development; V9: My mentor often prompted me to critically reflect on my own actions at work; V13: My mentor motivated me to improve my professional competencies with her comments; V15: I felt safe working with my mentor), the subscale Support from the Principal, which consists of six variables (V19: During my internship, I had the support and assistance of the principal; V22: The principal treated me as an equal partner during my internship; V25: The principal monitored and supported all activities in the kindergarten during my internship; V29: The principal was a help and support to my mentor during my internship) and the subscale Support from Professional Collaborators, which consists of six variables (V20: During my internship, I had the support and assistance of professional collaborators; V21: Professional collaborators treated me as an equal partner during my internship; V30: Professional collaborators were a help and support to my mentor during my internship). The reliability of the questionnaire was measured using the internal consistency method (alpha model), with the subscale Relationships with the Mentor scoring $\alpha=0.979$, Support from the Principal scoring $\alpha=0.940$, and Support from Professional Colleagues scoring $\alpha=0.933$, indicating high reliability.

The participants of the qualitative research were informed about the purpose of the research and data processing and were guaranteed anonymity. The interview took place via the Zoom platform and lasted 90 minutes. In the group interview, structured questions were posed that were closely related to the objectives of the research and the established research questions.

The questions were open-ended in order to gain a deeper insight into their perception of the entire mentoring process (example questions: What experience/event in working with your mentor could you describe as particularly stimulating for the acquisition of educational competencies (briefly describe this situation)?; What do you think could be done to improve the organization of the trainee period in mentoring work in kindergartens?; What would you advise principals and professional associates to strive to achieve in their work to improve the trainee internship of trainee educators?)

Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded in audio format, after which a transcript was created. Data analysis and coding were performed according to the Braun and Clarke (2006)

method. Based on the transcripts of the respondents' conversations, codes were generated and then grouped into themes according to their interconnectedness. The themes were named and supported by relevant participant narratives that ultimately provide insight into the research findings.

To validation, each participant was sent a transcript in which there were no changes made by the participants. To ensure reliability, critical reflexivity (Bettez, 2015) was applied by conducting a joint reflection after the interviews, followed by individual reflections, and then a collective data analysis, in both cases involving mutual examination of perceptions and assumptions. After individually reviewing the data, each researcher separately identified key themes, and then the jointly defined themes are presented in the following sections of the paper.

FINDINGS

Quantitative Findings

Data analysis was performed using the IBM SPSS Statistics 29.0 software package. Basic descriptive features of the subscales are summarized in Table 2

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of subscales

| | N | Range | | Max | Mean | Std. Dev. | | Skewness | Kurtosis | | |
|---------------------------------|-----|-------|-------|------|--------|-----------|--------|----------|----------|--------|------|
| | | Min | Stat. | | | Stat. | Error | | Stat. | Error | |
| Professional Associates (COMP2) | 104 | 2,00 | 1,00 | 3,00 | 2,2003 | ,06431 | ,65581 | -,461 | ,237 | -1,012 | ,469 |
| Principal Support (COMP3) | 104 | 2,00 | 1,00 | 3,00 | 2,2484 | ,06862 | ,69982 | -,493 | ,237 | -1,223 | ,469 |
| Mentor Relationship (COMP1) | 104 | 2,00 | 1,00 | 3,00 | 2,4530 | ,06472 | ,66002 | -,954 | ,237 | -,533 | ,469 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 104 | | | | | | | | | | |

Since it is an ordinal scale with 3 degrees, the value of the arithmetic means indicates frequent support and the quality of the relationship with the mentor. Accordingly, we are dealing with left-skewed and slightly platykurtic distributions. The coefficient of variation is up to 35%, which indicates homogeneous characteristics. The results of the one-sample t-test (test value 2) confirm frequent institutional support and a quality relationship with the mentor: COMP1 $t=6.999$, $df=103$, $p=0.000$; COMP2 $t=3.115$, $df=103$, $p=0.002$; COMP3 $t=3.620$, $df=103$, $p=0.000$. To test H1, which assumes a positive effect of institutional support from the principal and professional associates on the relationship between trainees and their mentors, a linear regression analysis (OLS) was used. The initial assumption was that a higher level of institutional support would be positively related to a better relationship with the mentor, which would indicate the importance of the overall environment in the mentoring process. The results of the analysis indicate that the model is statistically significant: $F(2,101) = 11.38$; $p < .001$, which means that the predictors significantly explain the variation in the dependent variable. The total variance explained by the model is 18.4% ($R^2 = 0.184$), while the

adjusted coefficient of determination is Adjusted $R^2 = 0.168$. The value of the Durbin-Watson test is 0.651, which may indicate a potential problem of autocorrelation of the residuals. The collinearity coefficients (VIF = 2.617) indicate that there is no significant multicollinearity among the predictors. The Mahalanobis distance, Cook's distance (max = 0.160), and studentized residuals (ranging ± 2.9) indicate a few specific cases, but none exceed the threshold that would require exclusion regarding outliers. The regression coefficients are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Mentor Relationship (COMP1)

| Predictor | B | SE | β | t | p |
|---------------------------------|------|------|---------|------|--------|
| Constant | 1.48 | 0.22 | — | 6.90 | < .001 |
| Professional Associates (COMP2) | 0.15 | 0.15 | .15 | 1.03 | .307 |
| Principal Support (COMP3) | 0.28 | 0.14 | .30 | 2.07 | .041 |

Note. Dependent variable: Mentor Relationship (COMP1). SE = Standard Error. Beta coefficients are standardized values.

Table 3 shows that the variable Principal Support is a significant predictor ($p = 0.041$), while variable Professional Associates does not have a statistically significant contribution ($p = 0.307$). The sign of the beta coefficient indicates that more frequent support from the principal predicts a higher quality relationship between the trainee and the mentor.

Figure 1 shows the scatterplot of the relationship between the actual values of the dependent variable (Mentor Relationships) and the standardized predicted values obtained from the regression analysis.

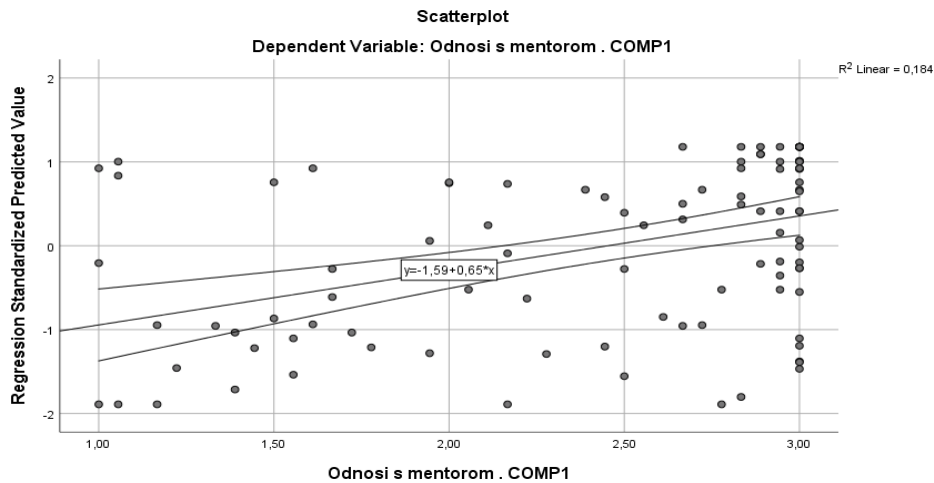


Figure 1
Scatterplot Dependent Variable

The regression line shows a positive linear trend with the equation $y = -1.59 + 0.65x$. The dispersion of points around the regression line indicates the proportion of unexplained

variance, and the frequent occurrence of the highest values of the variable (ceiling effect) suggests caution in generalizing that follow from the regression model. At the same time, a problem with the autocorrelation of the residuals has been detected. Thus, H1 is partially confirmed since the Principal Support has proven to be a significant predictor, while the support of Professional Associates does not have a statistically significant contribution to the quality of the relationship between the trainee and the mentor. This means that institutional support pertains to the role of the principal, but not to the role of the professional associates in the quality of the relationship between the trainee and the mentor.

Findings of the qualitative research

Based on the respondents' answers, a thematic analysis was conducted with the aim of identifying key themes that indicate the factors shaping the perceptions of trainee educators about their internship, as well as the elements that, according to their recommendations, could enhance the mentoring process.

In response to the question: *"What experience or event in working with your mentor could you describe as particularly encouraging for acquiring educational competencies?"*, most trainees replied that the process of reflection is extremely motivating and empowering for their future work. Reflection allowed them to gain a clearer understanding of their own learning process, as explained by Trainee 1: "In reflecting on my work after the activity, my mentor was clear and specific, providing me with examples of what I could have done instead of my 'mistakes' and emphasizing what I was good at - she encouraged me to learn how to conduct self-reflection effectively" (Trainee 1, personal communication, October 10, 2024).

In addition to their own learning process, which was realized through reflective practice during the internship, most of the trainees emphasized the importance of constructive criticism and support provided by their mentor, encouraging them in their work with children. This is particularly highlighted by Trainee 4: "Constructive criticism backed by facts was important to me as it motivated me to continue" (Trainee 4, personal communication, October 10, 2024). Trainee 5 believes that open communication is an important factor in the quality of the relationship between the mentor and the trainee: "Daily open communication with my mentor was important for my learning" (Trainee 5, personal communication, October 10, 2024).

Several trainees have emphasized the importance of independent work and encouraging self-planning of activities, which leads to stepping out of one's comfort zone, ultimately resulting in entering the learning zone. This is elaborated on by Trainee 8: "My mentor allowed me to try to resolve the situation completely on my own and supported me in stepping out of my comfort zone" (Trainee 8, personal communication, October 10, 2024). The mentioned synergy between the mentor and the intern enables the strengthening of the trainee both in professional and emotional areas of development, as evidenced by Trainee 5:

"One of the most encouraging experiences was the joint planning and implementation of activities with the children, where my mentor gave me the opportunity to take the initiative, but with her support and guidance." After the

activities, we thoroughly analysed what was successful and what could be improved. "This situation helped me develop self-confidence and gain a deeper understanding of the importance of reflection in educational work." (Trainee 5, personal communication, October 10, 2024).

Trainee 2 also emphasizes the importance of the mentor's positive approach, which played a role in shaping the professional identity of the educator: "It is precisely because of her attitude and the way she worked with me and treated me that I now believe in myself more and am capable of learning independently" (Trainee 2, personal communication, October 10, 2024).

However, a smaller number of trainees do not have positive experiences in the internship process. The absence of direct work with a mentor resulted in a negative perception described by Trainee 6: "Unfortunately, during my internship, I did not have the opportunity to experience a supportive experience working with my mentor, which I would highlight as a key support for acquiring educational competencies." "I acquired most of my skills and knowledge through independent work, adapting to the challenges I encountered." (Trainee 6, personal communication, October 10, 2024). Unlike the trainee who did not have the support of a mentor during her internship, Trainee 5 cites a positive example of a learning model and role model: "She was a very good model for learning." It was encouraging for me to see the mentor choosing educational opportunities from her own field and interests and how she applies what she has learned in practice. "She is an excellent example for us young people." (Trainee 5, personal communication, October 10, 2024). Following the thematic analysis mentioned, Table 4 presents the factors that shape the perception of trainee educators regarding their internship.

Table 4

Factors that shape the perception of trainee educators about the internship period

| Theme | Description |
|---------------------------|--|
| Reflection & Evaluation | Discussions after activities enhanced learning |
| Communication & Support | Accessible, communicative mentors |
| Independence & Initiative | Encouragement to plan and act autonomously |
| Constructive Feedback | Calm, motivating guidance |
| Role Model Mentoring | Mentors as models of best practice |
| Negative Experiences | Lack of mentor presence or poor modelling |

Since thematic analysis identified the factors that shape the perceptions of trainee educators regarding their internship, the next research question focused on the elements for improving the mentoring process. To identify the elements that contribute to the improvement of the mentoring process, trainees were given the opportunity to express their opinions on ways to enhance the organization of the internship. One of the most frequently mentioned elements is working alongside a mentor. Respondents strongly emphasize the importance of the trainee working alongside the mentor in the same group and shift. Many express dissatisfactions when they were "assigned as substitutes" without contact with a mentor, which is particularly emphasized by Trainee 6, who had a negative perception of the mentoring process in the previous conversation: "Trainees should work with their mentors, not be left to fend for themselves." (Trainee 6, personal

communication October 10, 2024). Trainee 2 also emphasizes the importance of working together with a mentor and points out: “Only, solely, and exclusively through parallel work with a mentor for at least the first six months.” (Trainee 2, personal communication October 10, 2024.)

The respondents believe that the expertise and motivation of mentors are important elements that can enhance the mentoring process. According to the opinion of the trainees, mentors are often not formally educated for that role. They believe that mentorship must be a role earned and professionally recognized, rather than assigned administratively. Trainee 3 believes that: “Mentors should be individuals who have advanced to the role of mentor.” (Trainee 3, personal communication, October 10, 2024). While Trainee 9 emphasizes the necessity of evaluating mentors: “It is essential to check the competence and motivation of mentors.” (Trainee 9, personal communication, June 10, 2024), Trainee 7 suggests oversight by the relevant authorities in the mentoring process: “With greater control from the Agency, by sending reports to the Agency from kindergartens about the work of trainees quarterly or semi-annually, along with mandatory tasks that the trainee must complete during those periods.” (Trainee 7, personal communication, October 10, 2024).

Regarding the organization of the internship, the respondents believe that a structured internship program is necessary, with clear goals, deadlines, and tasks. Trainee 3 emphasizes: “It would be helpful to define clear goals and a work plan, including regular meetings with mentors to ensure timely feedback.” (Trainee 3, personal communication October 10, 2024).

As in the responses that point to the shaping of trainees' perceptions of their internship, several elements align with the factors. The factors of communication and support, reflection, and emotional support for trainees are the most frequently mentioned elements that could lead to the improvement of the internship experience. Respondents indicate that there is a frequent need for open, daily communication with the mentor and the professional team. Trainees want to feel that they are not alone in their challenges. Trainee 2 emphasizes that it is essential: “More collective reflection, conversation, and organization of work,” while Trainee 10 believes that “Support from mentors and honesty in communication” is important (Trainee 2 and 10, personal communication, October 10, 2024).

Regarding emotional support, the majority highlighted significant stress, insecurity, and emotional pressure, and suggested systems for emotional support. Trainee 8 emphasizes: “It is necessary to talk about emotions and pressure during the internship.” “Provide us with more support, do not consider us less valuable” (Trainee 8, personal communication, October 10, 2024). Furthermore, the respondents consider it important to involve a professional team (educators, psychologists) in the mentoring process and to provide additional training for mentors and trainees, as particularly emphasized by Trainee 2: “Encouraging collaboration between the professional team and mentor advisors, further training for mentor advisors” (Trainee 2, personal communication, October 10, 2024), while Trainee 1 believes that: “Introducing mandatory training for mentors could contribute to a better understanding of their responsibilities” (Trainee 1, personal communication, October 10, 2024). According to the responses provided by

the participants, Table 5 presents the key elements that could enhance the mentoring process and internship experience for trainee educators.

Table 5
Elements for enhancing the mentoring process

| Area | Recommendation |
|--------------------------|---|
| Work with Mentor | Same shift and group, not working independently |
| Mentor Competence | Formal education, evaluation, supervision |
| Internship Organization | Clear goals, schedules, and feedback loops |
| Communication & Support | Daily conversations, collaborative reflections |
| Emotional Support | Address stress and provide psychological support |
| Collaboration & Training | Include pedagogues, require training for mentors and trainees |

DISCUSSION

Mentorship is crucial for the successful integration of trainees into the workforce, but its effectiveness depends on the quality of mentoring support (Buatip et al., 2019) and the interns' beliefs about the internship process (Burger, 2023). Retention of trainees in the profession largely depends on the support of the principal (Arthur & Bradley, 2023), which is also confirmed by this research, in which respondents rate their support significantly higher compared to the support from professional associates. Support during the internship is crucial for the professional development of the trainee, as well as for the quality of their relationship with the mentor. The research by Shanks et al. (2020) also highlights the importance of support in the mentoring process, in the context of individual institutions, as well as the need to provide mentors with additional time so they can dedicate themselves effectively to the mentoring process. Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond (2017) found, because of their research, that the attrition rate was 70% in schools where support and mentoring structures were lacking. Considering that the shortage of educators and teachers is an international problem (European Commission, 2018) and that it is of great importance to ensure a smooth transition from formal education to educational practice, a high-quality mentoring process and the support needed within that process should be an essential factor. In addition to retaining beginner educators in the profession and fostering their professional maturation, efforts must be made to achieve long-term job satisfaction, so that the quality of work within the institutions aligns with all recommendations and documents regulating educational institutions, all with the ultimate goal of ensuring maximum well-being and academic development for children and youth, as well as the professional development of the staff themselves. In this regard, Toropova et al. (2020) and Nikoçeviq-Kurti (2023) points out the problems arising from teacher turnover and the lack of qualified staff. The authors state that teacher turnover not only negatively impacts the academic success of children but also adversely affects collegiality and trust among teachers, leading to a loss of institutional knowledge. In our research, the statistical significance of support from professional associates on the quality of the relationship with the mentor did not emerge, which may indicate the adaptability of the collective in functioning and fulfilling work obligations despite their lack of involvement in the educational process.

Liu et al. (2023) note that the availability of support from professional collaborators enhances cognitive and emotional changes and contributes to the development of trust

and collegial relationships. In this regard, the authors emphasize that the sense of responsibility is strengthened in all segments, particularly in establishing continuous collaborative learning. Just as support from principals and professional associates is important for interns, it is equally important for mentors. Research by Kokanović et al. (2025) on perceptions of mentors in Croatia and Slovenia shows that mentors from Croatia report a lack of support from principals and professional associates, while mentors from Slovenia have full financial and professional support. The authors emphasize that both groups of respondents found a lack of time for quality work with interns. Furthermore, the interns in this study highlighted the importance of mentors as individuals who instil trust and serve as a kind of learning model for them, as evidenced by the results of the research by Simon & Dan (2025), in which mentors were often role models and sources of inspiration, assisting the trainees in skill development.

Auletto (2021) emphasizes that the support of mentors and the perception of professional development positively influence the satisfaction and commitment of interns, which is also confirmed by the results of this research, as most interns stated that their mentors provided them with autonomy in their work, thereby encouraging them to approach working with children independently. This strengthened their mutual connection and led to partnership relationships, as discussed in the findings of the research by Ellis et al. (2020) and Ewing (2021). The authors emphasize that the importance of the partnership between mentors and trainees provides a safe space for critical reflection and supports professional development. This critical thinking also results in the development of reflective practice. The trainees highlighted the importance of reflection and encouraging the mentor to engage in self-reflection, which ultimately facilitated the development of self-confidence and reflective practice that, according to the trainees, enabled positive experiences during the internship process. However, in addition to the positive experiences, two interns also highlighted negative experiences related to the lack of support from their mentor or the absence of working with a mentor. The results of the research by Damico et al. also point to a similar issue. (2018) which emphasizes the importance of continuous social and emotional support for trainees to more easily overcome challenges within the system.

Voss and Kunter (2019) add that trainees often experience stress and disappointment in the early years of their careers. In this context, mentoring support is considered crucial for successful professional development and the acquisition of the necessary skills for independent work. The retention of interns in the profession depends on a safe working climate, autonomy, opportunities for collaboration, as well as a trusting relationship with the mentor and the encouragement of self-reflection. On the other hand, trainees often leave the profession due to burnout, stress, poor working conditions, low salaries, lack of support, and excessive workload, as confirmed by research findings (Lindqvist et al., 2014; cited in Maloch et al., 2025).

However, the respondents in this study consider the relationship with the mentor to be more important than salary or working conditions. The results of the thematic analysis related to the elements of improvement primarily highlight the importance of emotional support, open communication, a collaborative relationship with the mentor, and training that would further empower both mentors and trainees in the mentoring process. These findings suggest that relational and socio-emotional dimensions of mentorship may play

a more decisive role in trainees' professional adjustment than structural or material factors. Moreover, the data indicate that effective mentoring extends beyond technical guidance and requires a supportive interpersonal climate in which trainees feel acknowledged and professionally valued.

The introduction of trainees into the profession is a significant period during which they develop professionally and prepare for independent work (Kheng & Rusli, 2025). Thus, the role of the mentor and the mentoring process is particularly significant, as it will positively or negatively influence the development of the trainee and their professional maturation (Nopriyeni, Prasetyo & Djukri, 2019). In interpreting the results, it becomes evident that the mentor's behaviour and the institutional culture in which mentoring is embedded shape not only trainees' competence development but also their sense of belonging within the profession. This study therefore reinforces the view that mentoring should be conceptualised as a relational practice situated within a broader organisational context.

The limitation of this research is the relatively small number of respondents and the examination of the issue solely from the perspective of the trainees, which means that generalisation cannot be applied. However, the research has yielded valuable results that may indicate directions for improving mentoring processes. As authors, we acknowledge that expanding the scope of inquiry to include mentors, principals, and professional associates would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the institutional dynamics shaping the mentoring process. Future research could involve a larger number of trainees and further investigate the perceptions of principals and professional associates regarding mentoring processes to gain insight from their perspective. Such an approach would allow the field to better capture the complexity of mentoring relationships and the multiple levels of support required to ensure high-quality induction into the profession.

CONCLUSION

A successful mentoring relationship can increase the motivation of trainees and their commitment to the profession, as confirmed by the results of this research, since the interns emphasized that they are motivated to work precisely because of the mentors who serve as their role models. A mentor does not only impart professional knowledge to the trainee but also values, attitudes, and professional standards. Trainees who have the opportunity for reflection and constructive feedback more easily develop self-confidence and professional security. Institutional support for the mentor and clearly defined mentoring goals further contribute to the success of the process. When trainees are involved in a supportive and collaborative work environment, they are more likely to remain in the profession in the long term. The results of our research indicate the need to redefine the entire process so that beginners, in addition to professional learning with the help of mentors, receive expert support from all key stakeholders in preschool institutions. In this way, mentoring would be improved and educational mentorship established, focusing on quality collaborative relationships that would contribute to mutual professional development and the establishment of continuity even after the beginner completes their internship. Only in this way can a shift be made from individual to collective empowerment of the professional community. Implications for

future research include potential studies and comparisons with other neighbouring countries and their experiences in the mentoring and internship process.

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