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Sandra Ximena Bonilla  
*Universidad de la Salle, ximenabvonilla@hotmail.com*

Pilar Méndez Rivera  
*Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, pilarmendezrivera@hotmail.com*

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# Mentoring in pre-service teaching: from reflection on practice to a didactic proposal<sup>1</sup>

Sandra Ximena Bonilla/ Pilar Méndez Rivera\*

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## Resumen

Este artículo ofrece una revisión de las metodologías que sirven para orientar la práctica pedagógica de los profesores en formación en el contexto de la enseñanza de la lengua inglesa en Colombia y sus implicaciones en la formación de futuros docentes. Además, muestra un esbozo de modelos usados para coordinar prácticas docentes. Posterior a la reflexión se propone un modelo para guiar la coordinación de los espacios académicos de práctica pedagógica en los colegios de Bogotá, considerando lo que implica hablar del proceso de coordinación de práctica y los roles de los participantes. Este modelo es una recopilación de estrategias de coordinación de práctica que pueden ser extendidas a contextos con similares características.

**Palabras clave:** didáctica, práctica pedagógica, profesores practicantes, coordinador de práctica pedagógica, reflexión

## Abstract

This article offers a review of different methodologies to mentor pre-service teachers' pedagogical experience in EFL contexts in Colombia and their pedagogical implications when training future teachers. It also gives an overview of models presented for the purpose of mentoring. Finally, it proposes a model to guide the mentoring of pre-service teachers' pedagogical experiences at schools in Bogotá considering the implications of talking about the mentoring in the teaching practicum and the roles of the participants. This model is a selection of mentoring strategies that can be extended to other contexts with similar characteristics.

**Keywords:** Didactics, teaching practicum, student-teachers, mentor, reflection

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<sup>1</sup> **Origen del artículo.** Este artículo es producto de la reflexión teórica y de datos generados en una investigación en curso adelantada en la Universidad Distrital, investigación institucional avalada por el CIDC (Centro de Investigaciones y Desarrollo Científico), departamento de investigaciones de la Universidad Distrital, suscrita bajo el nombre "Diseño, implementación y evaluación de lineamientos interdisciplinarios para mejorar las prácticas docentes de los estudiantes del proyecto en educación básica con énfasis en inglés", a cargo de las autoras del artículo. Las afirmaciones consideradas aquí son básicamente el producto de conclusiones extraídas en el análisis de la información obtenida a través de encuestas recogidas en las reuniones de coordinadores de la Universidad Distrital. También es parte del proceso de reflexión como coordinadoras de práctica de las autoras en las prácticas docentes de los programas de Educación Básica con énfasis en inglés y la Licenciatura en lengua castellana, inglés y francés de la Universidad Distrital y la Universidad de La Salle respectivamente.

\* **Sandra Ximena Bonilla.** Colombiana. Magister en Lingüística aplicada a la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera de la Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas. Profesora de la licenciatura en Lengua castellana, inglés y francés de la Facultad de Educación de la Universidad de la Salle. **Correo electrónico:** ximenabvonilla@hotmail.com

**Pilar Méndez Rivera.** Colombiana. Magister en Lingüística hispánica del Instituto Caro y Cuervo. Coordinadora del Proyecto en Educación Básica con énfasis en inglés de la Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas. **Correo electrónico:** pilarmendezrivera@hotmail.com

## INTRODUCTION

Trying to bridge theory and practice has always been a matter of discussion in the professional formation of language teachers (Dewey, 1938; Wallace 1991, 1996; Richards & Lockhart, 1994, Gutierrez, 1996; Farrel, 1998; Loughran, 2002; Tsui, 2003). It is common to find Language teaching programs of different universities in Colombia to include a stage named teaching practicum. The teaching practicum is a fundamental period for every novice teacher. It is this experience that makes student-teachers face real teaching situations which at the same time can lead them to the commitment or attrition of their professional choice (Freemeyer, 2008). It is the period when students put into interaction their personal construction of what being a teacher is, the knowledge they acquired through the university training and the varied contingencies faced in teaching situations.

The teaching practicum process entails the direct participation of some actors to wit: a student-teacher, a supervisor, counselor, practicum director or mentor and the participation of a homeroom teacher from the school where the teaching practicum is being carried out. This paper aims to discuss especially the role of the person who is in charge of guiding the student-teacher process throughout the teaching practicum. Out of the different names given to this person (supervisor, counselor etc.) and the roles inherent to these designations, we advocate for the assumption of the concept of mentor and the process of mentoring. In order to make the case for this initiative, we will first present an overview of how teaching practicum is focused on some institutions in Colombia; later, the definition and discussion of some terms will be shown. A further part will present a didactic proposal of how mentoring programs can be implemented and finally some conclusions will be drawn. It is important to clarify that though this reflection was done in a Colombian context it can be used to understand similar practices at Licenciatura programs in other countries.

## TEACHING PRACTICUM A COMMON TREND IN COLOMBIA: BACKGROUND

The teaching practicum is conceived by us as the most important interdisciplinary stage in which student teachers face the world of their professional carrier and the moment in which they become aware of theory put into practice. In this part we will refer to how teaching practicum is be-

ing implemented in different institutions, especially in Bogotá. After surveying some language programs at different universities and observing these spaces as teacher researchers, it was found that there is a common trend that applies to almost all of them. In the majority of these institutions, student-teachers usually have the chance to approach teaching since the initial stages of their professional formation. Institutions like Universidad Pedagógica, Universidad Nacional, Universidad Distrital among others allow students to visit, develop series of activities in schools and observe during their first semesters of the program.

During the investigation, it was also commonly observed that the actual teaching practicum is often scheduled in the middle of the academic program or at the end of it. In general, the teaching practicum is begun once students have taken the methodology courses, as it is reported to happen at Universidad Nacional, Universidad de la Salle, Universidad Distrital, Universidad Javeriana, Universidad del Valle among others. The teaching practicum offered in the majority of teaching programs in Colombia involves the preparation and teaching of some lessons in private or public institutions: schools, language institutes or other communities. Depending on their major, students may carry out their practicum in languages including Spanish, English, French or German.

The dynamics of the practicum vary in every institution. In some universities student-teachers are required to attend teaching practicum settings three or four days a week either in the morning or in the afternoon, e.g. Universidad Pedagógica. Some others would require students to teach one or two classes at least twice during the week, this is the case of Universidad de la Salle, Universidad Nacional, and Distrital to name some. It is customary that in some institutions, students are assigned a teaching practicum tutor, advisor or mentor to assist them in their pedagogical growth but what also serves to help them construct and develop a monographic work usually required to obtain the bachelor's degree.

Although the teaching practice stage is generally well-structured in most of teacher education programs, there remain some problems which have been identified through enquiring programs, such as the one at the Distrital University. Some surveys used to ask students about their opinions have reflected these problems. For instance, the basis of the teaching program had centered its teaching practicum on the accomplishment of some predicted goals. Students have

been expected to reach those goals by following the procedure their teachers feel as appropriate and correct. Then, discussions to construct theory among mentor teachers and student teachers have been relegated. Also, it has been revealed that in this program classes are set up to give more than ten student teachers to a mentor and only a few hours per group to direct them. In this way, face to face interaction minimizes, both the quantity and quality of it.

Overall, the teaching practicum constitutes a space where student teachers articulate their knowledge and challenge their desire to become or not educators. It represents the closest approximation to a real life teaching situation which sheds lights on students' construction of what being a teacher is. We would like now to turn our exploration to the definition and description of some concepts related to teaching practice that will enrich this discussion.

## **TEACHING PRACTICUM: KEY CONCEPTS**

After reviewing the main characteristics of how the teaching practicum is developed in some of the institutions that prepare students to be teachers in Colombia, it is clear that the teaching practicum stage is crucial in the professional developing of student teachers. This section will concentrate on the revision of some terms such as, teaching practicum, student teacher, supervisor and mentor.

In the Colombian tertiary educational system it is common to hear the terms pedagogical practice, teaching practice, pedagogical experience and others to refer to the space of teaching practice. According to Kagan (1992) the practicum is the teaching activity that pre-service teachers carry out while they are attending their undergraduate programs. The practicum entails a group of student teachers who are observed and accompanied by a supervisor. The objective in this space is to improve and develop the students' skills and understanding about learning processes, different pedagogical circumstances in which they will be involved and the techniques and procedures for classroom management. The teaching practicum is the space where theory and practice articulates Mann (2003); Gervains & Correa (2004); Ayala (2005).

Another term that derives from the activity of teaching practicum is the concept of student teacher. Similar names have been described by Kagan (1992) who uses: in-service teachers, novice teachers, teacher candidate among others. According to this author, student teachers are students who

are going through a teaching education program and see themselves as prospective teachers. A student teacher is required to take responsibility for classes. Due to this responsibility, student teachers are supervised in teaching-learning situations in which they find opportunities to implement teaching methodologies and they can grow under the supervision and feedback from their teachers and peers.

Another important word, which is relevant to define in this article, is the one referring to the person in charge of supervising the process of the pedagogical practice, this person has been given several titles like; supervisor, practice coordinator, advisor, counselor, practice director, mentor and others. In this case, special reference to the use of the word "mentor" in comparison with the term "supervisor" will be the main point of discussion. Educators of pre-service teachers have frequently been involved in the process of guiding students through different pedagogical concerns as it was explained before. However, remembering the description above taken from the surveys, the way to do this task has only been focused on the aspect of "supervising" the students' practicum as a means to check the effectiveness of their work. In other words, it has been common to make the person in charge of this task a supervisor, a person who is hierarchically superior to the student teacher.

On the other hand, the word mentor implies a more egalitarian relationship which keeps student teachers and mentors in a more balanced dialogue. The word mentor involves a different role that accounts for active interaction of two members; mentor and student-teacher. The roles of these participants involve do with participating, cooperating and taking aside authority. According to Davini (2001), mentors follow procedures in which not just knowledge acquired in student teachers careers is taken into account. Student teachers' backgrounds, experiences while they were learners, and short experiences they have acquired while they have been trained also play an important role in their teaching performance and the construction of their professional knowledge (Lortie, 1975; Alvarez, 2005, Freeman & Johnson, 1998, Gutierrez, 1996, Gatbonton, 1999). All of the elements mentioned above build students' beliefs, in this way, Richards and Lockart (1994), Wallace (1991), Johnson (1999), Schön (1983, 1987), Richards & Lockhart (1994), Farrel (1998), Johnson (1999, 2002), Freese (1999), Johnson (1998) state that teaching beliefs are the base of teaching practices and through reflecting on them teachers can make sense of classroom dynamics and make informed decisions.

Boreen et al. (2000) show that an evolution of the term mentor implies the mov(ing) away from thinking that beginning teachers should mimic or copy the methods of experienced teachers. The emphasis in mentoring today should be focused on making students become reflective thinkers who explore their own individual styles. These authors agree on including the concept of mentor with the idea of a reflective model in which student teachers become critical thinkers about their own practices. These authors also acknowledge that a mentor is a veteran teacher who works accompanying a novice teacher during the novice's early experiences in the classroom and that means a turning point of the old paradigm in which a mentor merely watched and observed the student teacher. Today, a beginning teacher is encouraged to be an active participant, inquirer and critical thinker.

Nowadays the term mentor implies a wider vision for teachers not only to supervise but also guide their student teachers through their process; looking at what happens in and outside classrooms and schools. A mentor also has the capacity to help students to evaluate themselves and be critical in selecting the choices they consider useful and appropriate in regards to what they believe in. According to the implications described in the preceding paragraphs, we can perceive that the term "supervision" is too limited to get the idea of a real accompaniment in terms of what is expected from the student teachers and that they always demand more attention and genuine guidance from their mentors.

As a next step, it is relevant to focus on the procedures that mentoring entails, its characteristics and the role of its participants. The nature of mentoring is more than supervising student teacher work, therefore, it is understood as the process of supporting student teachers in their pedagogical practice by dialoguing, negotiating ideas and giving advice on the way they can improve teaching actions. This process is supposed to help student teachers acquire reflective skills to be critical participants of their own practice and to be able to make decisions over the procedures concerned with their practicum.

Embeir (2003) says that mentoring in the practicum is characterized by having a key influence on student-teachers and a strong effect in their professional work. At the same time, student teachers develop an image of their mentors which may differ from their own in their practice. A study developed by Nina Zaragoza (1998) described the way

she perceived her mentor in her work when developing her journal. "I developed my ideology and I was observed by my mentor who followed the basis and wanted me to follow it as well". In this excerpt, Nina expressed the way she thought her mentor wanted her to follow her teaching model more than developing her own ideology which she felt she was forming. This study showed the importance of mutual critical views between mentors and student teachers since students critical observations on their mentors help the mentors to evaluate themselves at the same time (Williams and Burden's, 1999, Cooley, 1902, Castellanos, 2007, Sules & Greenwald, 1986, Higgins, 1989).

The example above also evidences that student teachers face multiple dilemmas and tensions since they are educating others while they are being educated themselves, as expressed by Velez (2003). Many times student teachers can feel oppressed and forced to follow their mentors' ideas even if they do not agree with them. Another conclusion drawn in the surveys showed that student teachers feel their mentors are often a representation of evaluation and this fact inhibits their natural teaching actions in class. Given the fact that mentors are the symbol of authority and evaluation, their role has been limited to judging and checking what the teaching practice should be. In theory, the mentoring stage is enriched by a mentor who guides pre-service teachers and advises them, unfortunately, evaluating by means of grading under the criteria of particular beliefs has been the basis of many teacher educators' job in the teaching practicum and, many times, student teachers have been submitted to this evaluation without clear purposes.

Teacher educators committed with helping student teachers should view the idea of assessment as an ongoing work of reflection, and mentors as well as student-teachers should include in their didactics a systematic stage for that. Bearing this in mind, the aspect of reflection can be taken from the practices of research which are, in nature, a way of reflecting and understanding processes. In this sense, Alfonso (1990) criticizes teaching programs pointing out that the lack of research and continuing disagreement on the definition and purposes of supervision contributed to the weaken of preparation programs for instructional mentoring.

The role of a mentor in this mentoring stage has to change from being an advice giver and problem solver to a questioner, a listener and model for reflective thinking (Fulong & Maynard, 1995). Then, the role of a mentor is

understood as a person who is able to cooperate and guide pupils in their own process, a person who includes deliberation in which student teachers become drawn in by critically viewing their ideas and teaching actions (Viafara, 2005). In this fashion, it is clear that mentoring involves a relationship between mentors and student teachers with a more democratic view and that reflection and dialogism becomes the core of their work (Wink, 2002; Shor & Freire, 1987; McLaren, 2003).

### **MENTORING, THE STUDENT TEACHER PRACTICUM AND THE RELEVANCE IN THE LICENCIATURA PROGRAMS**

In the process of reflection that mentoring implies, other kinds of preoccupations are relevant to mention. For example, it is important to see that mentors who acts as an advisor have an effect on students' training. This reflection caused us to question what goals a teaching practicum program needs to have in order to assign a mentor. Moreover, what should be the methods mentors' priority to accomplish their mentoring task. Finally to what extent mentoring might or might not account for pre-service teachers' pedagogical competence. Having an overview of what needs to be taken into account in the teaching practicum will be discussed in the following section.

Based on our own previous experiences as pre-service teachers and our practice as teacher educators, it is apparent that the teaching practice is clearly significant in the programs for faculty of education. Through our experience as mentors, we have concluded that the practicum is a useful step to illustrate what is revealed as conception of education for any institution as well as their interest to think of the importance of this stage. The permanent idea lies on the fact that the practicum is where students face a real preparation since they face situations similar to what they encounter in the real world. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the connections involved between the practice of mentoring and the student teachers professional development.

According to Booren (2000) from the national center of statistics, the low number of beginning teachers who remain in the profession seem daunting. Despite their initial enthusiasm, far too many abandon the profession, depressed and discouraged. The issues stated by the author align with the results found in a sociological study in which the researchers identified that student teachers who felt alone in the mentor-

ing stage usually abandon their professional choice. If that stage is so important for them, it is necessary to reflect on the process actually carried out in mentoring and offer alternatives that can help overcome difficulties and increase effectiveness in the student teachers professional formation.

The mentor's job consists of giving student teachers the guidance to understand what the pedagogical experience offers them, to make them aware of the appropriate environment to benefit from their knowledge, to evaluate their own ideas and to be encouraged to be innovative. Furthermore, this process permits students to interact with the culture of the school and with expert teachers in the teaching of children or adolescents. Many authors such as Sandholtz & Shannon (2000) have recognized the teaching practicum is an essential component of EFL teacher preparation programs. During teaching practicum, student-teachers have the opportunity to make connections between the content of the courses they have studied at university (EFL methodology) and its applications in the classroom. The mentors' purpose is to help student teachers to recognize all the elements brought about in this connection.

Our experience as teacher educators has also shown that students bring along different pedagogical skills, capacities and talents as teachers before engaging in the teaching practice. This is what authors like Lortie, (1975) and more recently, Bailey et al. (1996), Johnson (1999) and Borg (2004) have called the apprentice observation, *conceptual schemata* (Wallace, 1991) or *pretraining knowledge* (Gutierrez, 1996). Yet, the knowledge students bring is enriched, reinforced or changed by the current philosophical background that the university attempts to foster in students. This implies that a university program that a purpose is to "train" teachers in English teaching as a foreign language in terms of the nature of the language and with its teaching dimension regarding methodology, didactics, pedagogy, etc. should be a space to empower student-teachers to make their own decisions over the procedures and processes carried out in a class. For this reason, it is necessary to enhance reflective skills which allow student teachers to orient their pedagogical intervention on the basis of the specific needs of the population they are working with. In this sense, mentors in the teaching practice should facilitate the articulation of the knowledge provided by the university programs and the pedagogical knowledge student teachers have constructed during the apprentice of observation.

Nevertheless, the practicum stage involves difficult situations that challenge student teachers in their professional choice and being trained in a classroom does not guarantee their success. For instance, in the surveys given to students and teachers during the research and the observations done in the practicum meetings at Distrital University and La Salle, most of the pre-service teachers stated they feel uncomfortable when their students in the classroom do not recognize them as teachers. Also, as teaching norms differ from school to school; most student teachers risk embarrassment and frustration when their peer teachers ask them to follow the same teaching models, because these models are characterized as reminders of the assertion of being part of mainstream classes. Experience in classroom observations has also shown that sometimes student teachers refuse teachers the attempts to declare their authority. That constitutes another disappointment when some pre-service teachers do not have rewarding experiences in their first encounters with a real class. Those problems in the class are the daily basis for a significant number of the beginning teachers. However, the analysis of these problematic situations and the search for solutions is the first step to developing a cooperative work of reflection with mentors that later on might be represented in successful teaching experiences.

As it was mentioned before, in order to start with the process of mentoring in the practicum, a cooperative work between student teachers and mentors to become aware of factors involved in the classroom environment is an imperative step. Some of the dimensions to be considered in this collaborative process of awareness are presented in the document "lineamientos curriculares para idiomas extranjeros" (1999) by the national education law; pedagogical competences (the ones addressed to teaching); work competences (the ones addressed to accommodate backgrounds to the conditions of the context) and socio-cultural (the ones related to conditions of the general environment of the population) and communicative competences (the ones related to the language use and knowledge). Making student teachers conscious of those aspects by dialogic conversations, more than giving them recipes in their pedagogical experiences could contribute to activating more integral dimensions of teaching in their classes. In other words, they could be able to recognize their teaching skills and styles while they understand better their pedagogical actions.

Opposite to the idea of the apprentice of observation, there are also ideas related to some talents student-teachers, as professionals, have which could be important to take into

account in the process of mentoring. For instance, our academic conversations in the meetings of the teaching practicum indicate that student teachers have a point of advantage over in-service teachers when giving their first lessons since they enter the classroom with open minds and anxious to learn. Given that, a more curious mind constitutes one of the basic characteristics of a researcher. We can say that student-teachers potentially approach their practice with some research ability. Then, mentors have an advantage to help student teachers be involved in the careful observation of their own practice. Bearing in mind this advantage, a mentor should advise, suggest and provide useful ideas that can be oriented to overcoming difficulties. Some of them can start by encouraging pre-service teachers to broaden their strategies for breaking the ice, fostering class participation, improving classroom management and arrangement, proposing syllabus contents, etc. In this sense, a mentor has a counselor role which offers a range of possibilities which help student-teachers be informed about supportive sources in their work. Afterwards student-teachers face the decision making stage by encountering an interrelation of those concepts in their own practice.

After having seen on the effect caused by mentoring in student teachers and teacher educator inter-relations, it is imperative that the mentors build up practicum teaching teams that base their work on common principles, formally published and shared by all the community. These principles can be the cornerstone to develop a more reflective cooperative work in the teaching practicum. There is a need in the EFL field for a collective body of knowledge on how the supervision of student-teaching is conducted, how it should be conducted, and how it affects EFL student-teachers performance in teaching English. As nobody can deny the powerful influence that a general teacher has on students, especially if we refer to the teacher who is teaching teachers, then knowledge built up by a group of people would reduce biases.

Taking into account a research study done by Baniabdelrahman (2001) and his findings about different mentoring models, in the next section some mentoring models will be presented in coherence with the principle that the teaching practicum should be an on-going process of reflection and cooperation (Gonzalez, 2000) as it was presented above. Also, a brief explanation of their advantages and disadvantages considered by the authors taking into account their experiences in their mentoring stage and their reflection through the process of research analysis are shown. It is our

idea to invite readers to reflect on their role as mentors and know different methodologies, in order to choose the ones that develop this work of mentoring more appropriately.

### **KNOWING DIFFERENT MENTORING MODELS CAN FAVOR THE PROCESS ITSELF**

Any teaching practicum program can choose a method to supervise pre-service teachers according to its expectations, context, and principles. However, as it is observed at the Distrital and La Salle Universities, sometimes some programs have problems at the schools with agreements about rules, schedules, etc, which only leaves a short time to support pre-service teachers' job. Under these circumstances, it would be useful to be familiar with models for these purposes and see the way they can favor the process itself. These circumstances can differ from one university to another depending on the practicum organization.

One of the most utilized methods is *Individual Supervision and Individual Cooperating Teacher*. In this method, the pre-service teachers are supervised by the practicum supervisor and one cooperating teacher. This method implies an interaction between the programs' supervisor, the school's cooperating teacher and the student teacher. In order to start incorporating the issues discussed as the reflection stage, this interaction can focus on counseling, guidance, help on the analysis, interpretation, inference, evaluation, explanation of strengths and weakness, etc. (Pineda, 2004) of the pedagogical interventions. Given the implications of becoming a mentor and the importance of cooperative traits, a mentor should have different qualities such as team work abilities. The cooperating teacher and the student teacher can share their points of view according to their observations, perceptions and experiences. Those characteristics frame the role of critical thinking as the heart of interaction involved in all these procedures.

Another, although less common, method is *the Multi-Supervision and Individual Cooperating Teacher Method* in which the student-teachers of the practicum teaching program are guided by university mentors and two other mentors from the same institution. It is advantageous that in this method different mentors display their points of view and enrich the student teachers' pedagogical experiences. On the whole, the group of mentors should work in an interdisciplinary way to cover different aspects of the integral education and by this means, successful results are expected.

However, it would be necessary to define strategies of interaction in order to be able to balance the contradictions emerged and reach consensus. In addition, the discussion carried out by mentors must include a cooperative teacher, in order to obtain the whole picture of the classroom environment. If mentors do not react as a team with the school cooperative teacher, contradictions can emerge and they can affect not only the student teacher but the whole process detrimentally.

As a way to counteract this trouble, we observed that at La Salle as well as La Distrital teams have designed different formats to take notes (observation formats, schedule formats, evaluation formats, etc) about what mentors have to observe in order to give more precise recommendations and asses with grades. But, these formats, most of the times, become unique ways of interaction between them. In this sense, Viáfara, (2005) developed a debate where he states the significance of having student dialogic reflection through the use of conferences. He said that "offering individual or group alternatives to holding conferences seems to be a relevant issue in order to foster an honest dialogue between counselor and student-teachers". The importance of involving student-teachers in a mutual conversation which becomes the body of their reflection, becomes plain. Consequently, the teaching practicum becomes a process of accompanying instead of leaving student-teachers to face difficult situations by themselves. That is why, thought these formats are useful in the process, they can not constitute the only way to accompany students in their development and teachers' cooperative work needs to be a dialogic process which agree on making decisions every day.

Finally, in *the Multi-Supervision and Multi-Cooperating Teachers Method*, the student-teachers of the practicum teaching program work with two or three cooperating teachers. They are also mentored by several teacher educators who help their guidance process. Here, the student teachers receive attention from different sources at the school and university. When all participants have clear functions and tasks, the experience can offer multiple advantages because all of them can figure out behaviors and discover phenomena hidden in a simple pedagogical situation of the classroom environment.

Furthermore, this process of sharing ideas may create situations which can be the core for future recommendations. Like an example of this model, La Salle and La



Distrital, as well as other institutions, have created in their curriculum different subjects where the voices of teachers, who specialized in different areas, are heard. These spaces have been called different names and they have been characterized for the importance to interdisciplinarity. This interdisciplinary spaces give specific student teachers the opportunity to understand phenomena from different fields. That means, several disciplines are organized in a single subject and each teacher is a contributor for the general conceptualization that students achieve over a single object of study. Those spaces become the place where several experts converge and obtain a fruitful experience, which is expected to be represented in the place of the students' practicum experience.

To sum up the aspects to take into account in the reflective practice of mentoring, we listed some suggestions for a methodology which may be helpful for teachers who are at this moment in the mentoring stage:

### **THE MENTORING DIDACTIC PROPOSAL: A REFLECTIVE PRACTICE ORIENTATION**

After distinguishing and understanding some of the concepts: didactics, teaching practicum, student teachers and more importantly mentors and the role of reflection involved in this stage, it is necessary to build a course of action. Our analysis leads us to wrap up this reflection with a proposal that mirrors the mentoring stage and the implications of viewing this stage as a serious moment where student teachers find links between theory and practice. Since that link is better tied with the conscious reflection, we think that mentors need to point out those links through different strategies and be able to help students teachers grow in their professional development. In order to achieve this target, we group different strategies which can be used by teachers who are leaders in this stage, in other words, have the responsibility to be mentors.

As the main characteristic of the mentoring process we recommend a *questioning stage* to elucidate this proposal. Questions are really important but they are usually misused; they are usually used as way of testing, controlling and determining students' acquisition of knowledge Shor, (1995). In order to start this process it is important that the teaching practicum program be based on common principles of predetermined, pre-constructed knowledge based on

agreements by all the members who are part of this process. Hence, a more conscious use of questions can be utilized in mentoring. The use of questions is a way to involve student-teachers in the world of inquiry, to push them to be curious, look for answers and to find possible solutions. "Authentic questioning means the pre-packaged knowledge ...needs to be actively deconstructed before they can recreate and reconstruct the knowledge to be consistent with their questions" (Berry, 1998, p. 47) This implies, the use of questions is a way to inquire background knowledge in order to learn, re-learn and unlearn (Wink, 2000) what pre-service teachers and mentors considered already acquired.

### **Permanent group discussions**

This strategy consists of sharing experiences, opinions, beliefs, of avoiding fears, coming up with hypothesis, setting oneself in a mirror to check weakness and strengths having in mind the context (school, its rules and culture) and students teachers and educators' own experience. The permanent group discussions as a cooperative learning strategy have several benefits; among them, it promotes not only social skills but also the ability to analyze teaching situations from different perspectives. This process can work as the therapy for stimulating participants' critical thinking skills. At the same time, student teachers interchange roles with their mentors, and through feedback they provide to their classmates using their own perceptions and experiences to support their ideas.

### **Individual conversations**

Mentors can have interviews with their pre-service teachers in order to give feedback, formulate and answer questions and to go deeply in the pre-service teachers' beliefs about their own practice. Encouraging a principle of democracy, conversation implies an active process in which all participants are equally important. What pre-service teachers have to say is the basis to activate a connection with the human being, the scholar, the teacher, the student and person. The creation of a sensible atmosphere is the first stage to get a future detailed analysis of different aspects; student teachers are able to produce knowledge. In this sense, Kincheloe, (1998, p. 19) says that a warm atmosphere encourages discussion and "knowledge is produced when teachers and

students confront a contradiction, when students encounter a dangerous memory, when teacher presented information collides with teacher experience” In the light of this, the conversation between mentor and student teacher leads to discussion and contradictions inducing the recognition of new issues that build up new concepts and new knowledge.

### **Complementary readings**

Some pre-service teachers can find it useful to read about another teacher’s experiences, tips, theoretical framework and reflect upon them. Some readings can be samples of activities, lessons and procedures. It is important to begin encouraging students to read with greater awareness of the texts effects on their thoughts and emotions, so as to develop their own criteria for making decisions and putting ideas into practice.

The readings that are included in this strategy can be the center of discussion in small groups in order to contextualize them, enriching them with criticisms and comments. In this sense, reading becomes an important strategy for acquiring knowledge, enriching academic knowledge with what different authors have contributed. Readings can be the source for contextualizing topics, taking Kincheloe’s (1998, p. 19) words, “when a critical teacher who doesn’t share the culture, language or socioeconomic background of students enters the classroom, he/she becomes not an information provider but an explorer who works with students to create mutually understood texts”. In other words, the written sources become the context making a bridge between the mentor and the student-teachers thoughts, increasing meaningful and theoretical understanding of their practice.

### **Multi-observation**

This mentoring strategy deals with peer mentoring for mentors and pre-service teachers. This means that there are open spaces for sharing points of view from both the mentor and the pre-service teacher with colleagues (other in service teachers and mentors) about the observations done. In this regard Gebhard (1999, p. 21) recovers the importance to observation, affirming that “one way to explore our teaching is to observe other teachers”. Observing other teachers contributes to professional development (Crookes, 2003, Angulo, 2007).

Garmston (1989) describes three assumptions that underlie peer mentoring. The first refers to the feasibility of getting better at what we are doing. Second, he argues that mental processes that we use before, during, and after our teaching drives teaching performance. The third assumption is that teaching is a continuous decision-making process. When we keep in mind these assumptions, we notice that the multi observation process should take into account different factors that may affect teaching. The multi-observation method presents advantages for working with large groups and facilitates different types of interaction. At the same time, it develops collaborative work which makes the mentoring process more memorable and significant.

### **Writing exercise**

Mentors are motivators for students to be committed to writing; making them aware of the fact that reading is a relaxing exercise, using one’s opinions and thoughts. Students can have the power to handle ideas and they can also be explicit in their discourse; it implies not only cognitive and motivational processes but affective aspects which help them become their ideology administrators. This power involves the “feeling of satisfaction of successfully exploring, investigating a topic alone and bringing it under control” (Goodson, 1998 p. 37).

Taking into account what was said above, reflective journals and portfolios can be important tools to develop pre-service teachers’ pedagogical competence. “Writing to learn”, then, becomes a rich motto to make reference to reflective and critical approaches to knowledge since it takes into account socio-cultural perspectives and can explore pedagogical innovations. This strategy focuses on writing processes as a form of study. Student teachers committed to the exercise of writing can be instructed to be part of a knowledge community, learning to reflect upon their practice, register and share the knowledge revealed in a written artefact. Castellanos (2007) cited different authors to say that the process of writing for reflection engages pre-service teachers in three stages:

First, *reflective practitioner* (Schön 1983, Valli 1992, Laboskey 1994, Louhgran 1996) a teacher engaged in a process of reflecting upon events in the classroom in order to improve practice; second, *reflexive subjects* (Elliot 1993, Hall 1996) that involves reflection upon classroom practice, the effect of institutional structures on teaching, and

on the self in action in terms of interrogating one's beliefs attitudes, assumptions, prejudices and suppositions that inform teaching; and third, *critical practitioner* (Carr & Kemmis 1986, Kincheloe 1993, Zuber-Skerritt 1996), which involves interrogating political, ideological and social processes that frame educational work in order to expose.

The three stages described constitute a significant reason to insist in the idea of mentoring students directing to be committed with an ongoing reflection and helping them to have a contribution for their professional development.

## CONCLUSIONS

Mentoring is a central process which includes more than simply supervising student teachers' tasks. The mentors' responsibility deals with understanding pre-service teachers' needs and environment, and helping them understand the realities they are facing in their experience. Therefore, reflection and mutual dialogue becomes a priority in this stage and it becomes a powerful strategy to be aware of aspects involved in the nature of teaching itself. For instance, student teachers' inherent abilities and their own background knowledge can be the basis for building up an individual teaching style.

Mentoring is a requirement of every teaching program whose mission entails the desire to educate more qualified teachers. Education is facing new challenges and qualified teachers are in charge of facing those challenges and consolidating a critical perspective to solve problems by generating innovations. Mentors should have the sensibility to make students the creators of knowledge and have them improve their skills to identify and respond to their own needs. Furthermore, student teachers and mentors can create a collegial community that positively engages participants in understanding the school phenomena. Those procedures may be useful as a means to overcome fears and weaknesses and to offer the country responsible teachers aware of what educating new generations means.

Incorporating the aspect of reflection in all the strategies involved in the mentoring for student teachers may contribute to enrich their experiences in the stage of professional formation. Cooperative work, dialogue, writing to learn, individual conversations, observations, questioning are the spaces to reinforce reflection. This process might help student teachers become better professionals, able to

understand complexities of their realities and foster a propositional attitude for alternatives of change.

A conclusion for the Colombian context can be addressed by the fact that most of the primary public schools do not have English head teachers; instead pre-service teachers take the role of those absent teachers. Then, teaching education programs which offer pre-service teachers, have become an alternative to give these children the opportunity to learn English. Schools are confident that pre-service teachers are with skilled teachers for this important task. This is another reason why, mentoring is an essential activity to orient pre-service teachers to reflect upon their practice in a critical perspective, to analyze and implement activities that reinforce their whole experience and offer children more opportunities for learning and growing.

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