

Regional Pedagogical Support Centres: A Strategy for Advancing Teacher Development in Slovakia

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ABSTRACT

The evolving demands of the 21st-century classroom require innovative approaches to support teachers in their professional development. In Slovakia, the establishment of Regional Pedagogical Support Centres (RPSCs) responds to this need by providing ongoing development, introducing new teaching strategies, and building stronger teacher networks. Since 2023, the RPTK system has been aligned with national educational reforms, addressing curricular updates and promoting digital competencies among educators. Out of 40 RPSCs, four bilingual centers offer tailored mentoring in Slovak and Hungarian, catering specifically to minority-language educators and reflecting broader European strategies that prioritize localized, language-sensitive support systems. This study assesses the one-year impact of these bilingual RPSCs on teaching quality and teacher development, based on feedback from participating educators. The findings highlight the effectiveness of mentoring as a crucial tool for fostering both professional and personal growth.

KEYWORDS

teacher mentoring, professional development, minority education, bilingual support, feedback analysis

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has brought a set of unique challenges to education, calling for fresh strategies, particularly in how we support teachers' professional growth. Teacher quality is directly tied to student outcomes, emphasizing the need for educators to continually evolve with new methods and technologies. One of the most effective ways to aid teachers is through well-structured mentoring programs, which foster both personal and professional development. Although mentoring is not a new concept, it has become increasingly prominent in teacher training systems worldwide as experienced teachers provide guidance, advice, and emotional support to newer or less-experienced colleagues. This process not only supports teachers' development but also fosters collaboration and a sense of community among educators.

The European Union has underscored the importance of mentoring as a part of its Education and Training 2020 strategy, highlighting the continuous professional development of teachers as essential to improving educational quality. Many European countries have implemented successful mentoring programs that contribute to improved teaching quality and better student outcomes (OECD, 2021; European Commission, 2014).

In Slovakia, recent educational reforms have made teacher development a priority. To achieve this, Regional Pedagogical Support Centres (RPSCs) were established to offer localized support and development for teachers. The aim of these centers is to provide effective, day-to-day support for educators, contributing to the overall quality of the Slovak education system.

Drawing from the annual operations of RPSCs and feedback from teachers, this study aims to assess the effectiveness of these mentoring programs and explore further areas for improvement. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis, the study presents the effects of these programs and offers recommendations to enhance future development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

MENTORING AS PART OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Teacher professional development is a cornerstone of modern education, enabling teachers to renew their knowledge, improve skills, and adapt to evolving educational demands. Research consistently shows that mentoring, as a form of professional development, effectively meets these goals. It helps shape teachers' professional identities, enhances their instructional skills, and proves particularly effective within structured support systems (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Kennedy, 2014; Richter et al., 2013).

THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF MENTORING IN TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

Mentoring offers less-experienced teachers support from experienced colleagues, sharing valuable knowledge, methodologies, and personal insights. This guidance helps new teachers integrate more smoothly into the profession while allowing experienced educators to continue their own growth through self-reflection (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Mentoring nurtures a sense of belonging among teachers and helps them navigate classroom complexities, especially in diverse environments. This creates a supportive network that enriches the educational community (Hobson et al., 2009; Kennedy, 2014; Rippon & Martin, 2003).

Mentoring is crucial for helping new teachers translate theory into classroom practice. By offering a supportive environment, mentoring builds confidence and skills, setting the stage for long-term professional success (Hobson et al., 2009). Mentoring also helps bridge the gap between theoretical teacher training and real-world classroom demands, which ultimately enhances educational quality (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Further research indicates that a three-dimensional mentoring approach—combining personal, professional, and methodological support—helps novice teachers

become more adaptable, bolstering both personal growth and practical skills (Selinenkova & Zenkina, 2024).

MENTORING PROGRAMS FOR TEACHERS IN EUROPE

Across Europe, mentoring is recognized as a crucial element of induction for new teachers, playing a significant role in supporting their professional growth. The European Commission highlights the importance of mentoring in maintaining high educational standards by nurturing teachers' development (European Commission, 2014). Different countries have adopted diverse mentoring models, tailored to their unique educational landscapes. Some nations have national frameworks mandating mentoring for all new teachers, while others allow local regions and schools the flexibility to design programs that meet their specific needs (OECD, 2014).

In Finland and Estonia, mentoring is embedded within a comprehensive teacher support system that includes ongoing professional development and opportunities for collaborative learning (Sahlberg, 2011). These systems are essential for upholding high teaching standards and fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

EUROPEAN EXPERIENCES WITH TEACHER MENTORING

Across Europe, educational systems increasingly prioritize teacher support through mentoring, aiming to strengthen teacher commitment, create professional communities, and improve education quality. Notable examples include Scandinavia, Estonia, the Netherlands, the UK, France, Spain, Portugal, and Slovakia's neighboring countries.

Scandinavian mentoring systems, especially in Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, are globally respected. Finland's model integrates mentoring into teacher training, pairing novice teachers with experienced mentors to help them confidently manage classroom challenges (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015). Denmark's "Induktionsprogrammet" and Sweden's "Introduktionsprogram" offer similar support, focusing on professional guidance during teachers' early years (Jokinen & Välijärvi, 2006).

Estonia's "Induction Programme" emphasizes mentoring as part of its educational reforms, with a strong focus on digital teaching tools to help teachers adapt to technological advancements (Santiago et al., 2016).

In the Netherlands, the "Leraar in Ontwikkeling" (LiO) program provides structured mentoring, with a personalized approach that adjusts to each teacher's needs, helping them integrate smoothly into the education system (Geijsel et al., 2019).

The UK's "Early Career Framework" (ECF) is a nationwide program that supports new teachers through structured mentoring during their first two years, ensuring they receive essential professional guidance as they start their careers (DfE, 2019).

Though European mentoring approaches vary, the shared goal is to ensure teachers receive the support they need for a successful, long-term career. Scandinavia's comprehensive programs, Estonia's digital emphasis, and the personalized mentoring in Western Europe all exemplify effective support strategies.

REGIONAL PEDAGOGICAL SUPPORT CENTRES IN SLOVAKIA

Regional Pedagogical Support Centres (RPSCs) are key elements of the educational system, providing teachers with tailored support, development, and mentoring. The Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic launched the first RPSCs in 2021, and since then, 40 centres have been established nationwide. Their goal is to provide essential professional assistance to all teachers, with a particular focus on implementing the new State Educational Program.

The primary aim of the mentoring programs is to facilitate the professional development of teachers, supporting them in effectively applying new educational methods and technologies in the classroom. Mentoring not only provides professional guidance but also promotes teachers' personal growth by helping them identify and develop their strengths. RPSC mentors organize regular meetings, classroom visits, and professional discussions for their mentees.

Additionally, RPSCs organize workshops, lectures, academic discourse and professional training sessions focusing on critical educational topics such as inclusion, digitalization, and assessment of learning. These sessions are practice-oriented to allow participants to immediately apply their newly acquired knowledge (Berta, 2024).

The centres also focus on networking, connecting teachers and schools to promote the exchange of experiences and inspiration. The goal of RPSCs is to create learning environments that facilitate student development and support teachers' professional commitment.

The mission of RPSCs is to promote quality education, support teachers in continuous development, and contribute to the ongoing improvement of Slovakia's educational system. The success of these programs is essential for maintaining teachers' long-term commitment and for the continuous improvement of the educational system (Berta, 2024).

ONE YEAR OF EXPERIENCE FROM THE FOUR BILINGUAL REGIONAL PEDAGOGICAL SUPPORT CENTRES

During the 2023/24 academic year, we monitored the work of RPSCs in four different regions. We drew conclusions regarding the centres' effectiveness and their impact on teachers' work based on mid-year and end-of-year feedback questionnaires completed by teachers who utilized the centres' services. This article primarily examines the effectiveness of RPSCs and their influence on teachers' work, as well as the demand for mentors and the extent of teachers' participation in activities offered by the centres.

AIMS, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

This study investigates the effectiveness of bilingual Regional Pedagogical Support Centres (RPSCs) in Slovakia, focusing on how native-language mentoring in these centres influences teacher development and educational outcomes. Specifically, the research addresses the following questions:

- How do mentoring programs within the RPSCs impact teaching quality and teacher development?

- Does mentoring in a teacher's native language (Slovakian or Hungarian) enhance their professional growth, classroom confidence, and instructional strategies?
- What specific aspects of mentoring in RPSCs contribute to increased teacher satisfaction and improved educational practices?

The research aimed to examine the effectiveness of educational mentoring programs and group sessions in terms of teachers' professional development and satisfaction.

METHODS

SAMPLE

The study used two questionnaires: feedback from participants of group sessions and the experiences and opinions of mentored teachers. The sample was not randomly selected; participants voluntarily took part in the program, and feedback submission was also voluntary. All teachers involved in individual mentoring filled out a questionnaire and provided feedback on this form of support at the end of the mentoring process.

QUESTIONNAIRES

The study utilized two types of questionnaires:

Group Session Participants' Questionnaire

This questionnaire measured participants' satisfaction and the usefulness of the program on a 10-point Likert scale (1 = not satisfied at all, 10 = completely satisfied). Participants also had the opportunity to provide textual feedback on the most valuable and least useful aspects of the sessions, along with further recommendations.

Mentored Teachers' Questionnaire

This questionnaire also employed a 10-point Likert scale to measure the effectiveness of mentoring and satisfaction with the mentor's work. Additionally, open-ended questions aimed to identify the most significant benefits of mentoring.

DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

Data collection was conducted via online questionnaires, allowing participants to respond quickly and easily. Feedback from group sessions was collected immediately after each session, while mentored teachers provided feedback at the end of the mentoring process.

ANALYSIS APPROACHES

In this study, we employed two distinct data collection and analysis approaches:

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

Quantitative data were gathered using a questionnaire-based methodology. The questionnaires included closed-ended, Likert-scale questions to quantify participants' satisfaction, experiences, and perceptions of program effectiveness. Based on the collected data, statistical analyses were conducted, including the calculation of means, standard deviations, and the frequency distribution of responses. SPSS software was utilized to process the data.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data collection was conducted through open-ended questions in the questionnaires, along with feedback forms. The feedback captured participants' experiences, recommendations, and any critiques regarding the programs in textual form. The qualitative analysis employed a thematic analysis method, where responses were coded to identify recurring themes and patterns. The findings helped pinpoint areas needing further improvement and highlighted positive aspects to maintain.

RESULTS

SELECTED RESULTS OF GROUP SESSION PARTICIPANTS' QUESTIONNAIRE

Table 1 reveals that participants rated the activities (lectures, facilitations, and workshops) highly, with all categories surpassing their expected completion rates. On average, participants found the programs helpful for their teaching practice and were very satisfied with the presenters.

The average satisfaction score across activities was 9.44 out of 10, with a small standard deviation of 0.3, showing consistent satisfaction across the board. Scores for usefulness and expectation fulfillment were also high, averaging 8.6 and 8.78, with standard deviations of 0.58 and 0.57, respectively, indicating uniformly positive feedback.

Each activity type exceeded its expected quantity, with lectures, facilitations, and workshops reaching completion rates of 128.33%, 139.75%, and 144.04%. Workshops attracted the most participants (3,884), followed by lectures (1,291) and facilitations (429), suggesting strong interest, especially in the more interactive formats.

Workshops received high ratings, especially for presenter satisfaction (9.5) and usefulness (8.76), highlighting participants' appreciation for hands-on activities. Facilitations also performed well, scoring 9.24 for expectation fulfillment, 9.1 for usefulness, and an impressive 9.74 for presenter satisfaction, reflecting participants' appreciation of the guidance provided.

Table1
Summary of activities

Activity	Expected Quantity	Number of Activity	Completion	Number of Participants	To what extent were your expectations met? (1-10)	How useful do you find this activity in your teaching practice? (1-10)	How satisfied are you with the presenter(s)' work? (1-10)
Lecture	41	52	128,33%	1291	8,13	7,96	9,14
Facilitations	51	70	139,75%	429	9,24	9,1	9,74
Workshops	174	242	144,04%	3884	8,95	8,76	9,5
Sum	266	364	136,84%	5604	8,78	8,6	9,44
STDEV					0,57	0,58	0,30

SELECTED RESULTS OF MENTORED TEACHERS' QUESTIONNAIRE

Quantitative Analysis of Mentoring Sessions:

The data in Table 2 highlights a very positive outcome for the mentoring sessions, both in engagement and participant satisfaction:

Mentoring hours totaled 3,885, surpassing the expected 3,120 hours by 24.62%, showing a strong commitment and delivery well beyond initial goals.

A total of 424 mentees took part in the program, with 2,728 consultations and 1,157 classroom observations.

These numbers reflect a comprehensive, hands-on approach with ample time for individual support and feedback.

Participants rated the sessions highly: the average score for meeting expectations was 9.53 out of 10 (standard deviation of 0.046), and satisfaction with mentors' work scored even higher at 9.79 (with an exceptionally low standard deviation of 0.011).

The minimal variation in both expectation fulfillment and satisfaction scores shows consistently positive feedback across all participants, reinforcing the program's effectiveness and the high-quality mentoring provided.

Table2
Summary of mentoring

	Expected Quantity	Number of Mentoring Hours	Completion	Number of Mentees	Number of Consultations	Number of Classroom Observations	To what extent were your expectations met? (1-10)	How satisfied are you with the presenter(s)' work? (1-10)
Mentoring Sessions	3120	3885	124,62%	424	2728	1157	9,53	9,79
STDEV							0,05	0,01

Qualitative Analysis of Mentoring Sessions:

The qualitative analysis of mentoring sessions, gathered in Slovak and Hungarian, reveals key themes from participants' experiences. First, regarding satisfaction with mentors, participants frequently emphasized mentors' professionalism, describing them as highly skilled and knowledgeable. Additionally, they valued mentors' personal qualities, noting their friendliness, approachability, and supportive demeanor. Practical guidance was another significant theme, with feedback highlighting the usefulness of actionable advice applicable to teaching practices. Many participants appreciated the mentors' encouragement, fostering critical thinking and professional growth. Constructive feedback was especially valued, as it allowed mentees to improve in a supportive, non-critical way.

In terms of mentoring impact, the analysis showed that participants experienced both professional and personal growth, largely due to the mentors' blend of expertise and warmth. The practical insights shared by mentors were considered highly beneficial, directly enhancing mentees' classroom methods. Furthermore, the mentors created a supportive environment that encouraged exploration and implementation of new techniques. Compassionate, constructive feedback

contributed positively, allowing mentees to evolve their practices without feeling criticized. Overall, the thematic analysis underscores a unified appreciation for mentors' professionalism, supportive approach, and practical contributions to teaching.

In Table3 is shown how the themes are organized in a matrix format to visualize the shared experiences:

Table3
Thematic matrix for question: How satisfied are you with the work of the mentor?

Theme	Examples from Responses	Frequency
Professionalism	"Professional approach," "knowledgeable," "experienced"	High
Personal Qualities	"Friendly," "kind," "supportive," "approachable"	High
Practical and Applicable Knowledge	"Useful advice," "practical guidance," "provided concrete suggestions"	High
Supportive Environment	"Encouraged me," "helped me to see new perspectives," "created a comfortable learning atmosphere"	Medium
Constructive Feedback	"Empathetic feedback," "didn't feel critical," "motivating and encouraging"	Medium

Most participants expressed being “completely satisfied” with their mentors, as reflected in high scores of 9.53 for meeting expectations and 9.78 for satisfaction with the mentors' work. Qualitative feedback often highlighted mentors' kindness, professionalism, and personalized support. Participants particularly valued the practical, applicable advice that mentors shared, which significantly enhanced teaching practices. Constructive feedback and motivational support were also considered crucial, boosting mentees' confidence and skills. Although satisfaction was generally high, a few responses mentioned a need for more frequent sessions or more tailored mentoring to meet specific needs, with one participant noting that "too few sessions" limited the ability to assess progress continuously.

The analysis of responses revealed several ways participants benefited from mentoring. Many valued the exposure to new teaching methods and innovative techniques, which they found essential for enhancing student engagement. Increased confidence and encouragement to experiment were also frequently highlighted, as mentoring bolstered teachers' willingness to try new strategies. Additionally, the practical

application and classroom management advice was appreciated, particularly in handling challenging student behaviors. Participants noted that mentoring fostered reflective practice and perspective shifts, helping them critically assess their teaching and identify areas for improvement. Mentoring further supported teachers in curriculum development and planning, assisting them in understanding curriculum reforms and aligning with current standards.

Key themes included professional growth through new methods, which enhanced lesson interactivity; confidence building and encouragement that empowered teachers to innovate; enhanced classroom strategies for managing diverse classroom dynamics; self-reflection that enabled teachers to recognize both strengths and growth areas; and guidance in professional challenges, such as conflict resolution and adapting to reforms. Collectively, these themes indicate that mentoring played a significant role in fostering teachers' personal and professional development.

Table 4 shows how the themes are organized in a matrix format to visualize the shared experiences:

Table 4
Thematic matrix for question: In what ways has mentoring helped you the most?

Theme	Example Responses	Frequency
Professional Growth with New Methods	"I learned new innovative teaching methods," "Mentoring helped me introduce new techniques and tools that improved interactivity," "Gained ideas for interactive and practical activities."	High
Confidence Building and Experimentation	"It helped me stop being afraid to try new things," "Encouraged me to experiment with various methods," "Provided motivation for future teaching."	High
Enhanced Classroom Strategies	"Helped me work with problematic students," "Provided practical tips for immediate use," "Enhanced my classroom management skills."	Medium
Self-Reflection and New Perspectives	"It allowed me to see my work from different angles," "Helped me understand that I can't control everything," "Encouraged me to look at my teaching from an outside perspective."	Medium
Guidance in Professional Challenges	"Guided me in creating the school's education program," "Helped in understanding curriculum reform," "Provided assistance with personal and professional questions."	Medium

Overall Benefits of Mentoring: Qualitative responses reveal that mentoring offered substantial benefits in various areas of professional growth. Participants frequently noted the exposure to new teaching methods as a valuable outcome, with innovative strategies enriching lesson engagement and dynamics. Mentoring also contributed to building participants' confidence, encouraging experimentation and the adoption of fresh ideas.

Shift in Teaching Approach: Mentoring supported a transition to a more dynamic, interactive teaching style, appealing to those aiming to move beyond traditional approaches.

Reflective Practices: The responses suggest that mentoring fostered a reflective approach, enabling teachers to reassess their strengths and recognize growth areas.

Addressing Professional Challenges: Responses indicate that mentoring offered practical solutions to educational challenges, including managing classroom conflicts, navigating curriculum changes, and meeting diverse student needs.

DISCUSSION

The questionnaire results provide strong evidence of the positive impact of mentoring programs within Regional Pedagogical Support Centres (RPSCs) on both teaching quality and teacher development. High satisfaction scores across various quantitative and qualitative measures, especially for practical workshops and facilitation sessions, reflect the programs' success in meeting and even surpassing participants' expectations. The low standard deviations suggest consistent, positive engagement, highlighting the effectiveness of these professional development initiatives.

Mentoring programs contributed significantly to teachers' professional growth by introducing innovative teaching methods and providing structured guidance for implementing them. Participants frequently reported that mentoring helped them expand their teaching techniques, make lessons more interactive, and engage students more effectively. The extensive hours completed and the numerous consultations and classroom observations underscore the program's practical, hands-on approach, which fostered a collaborative environment centered around real-world skill application. These findings

reinforce the idea that structured mentoring effectively enhances teaching quality and supports teacher growth.

A unique feature of the RPTK program is its bilingual support for Slovak and Hungarian-speaking teachers, allowing mentorship in their native language. This culturally relevant guidance helped mentees feel more confident in their instructional approaches, offering them a chance to discuss challenges and receive feedback in their first language. This personalization contributed to the high satisfaction and expectation-fulfillment scores, as well as positive qualitative feedback that underscored the value of mentors' supportive and empathetic approaches.

Qualitative feedback highlighted the value mentees placed on their mentors' expertise, constructive feedback, and the non-judgmental environment. Mentees appreciated mentors' practical, directly applicable advice, which helped them improve specific teaching techniques and build the confidence to experiment with new approaches.

Overall, the data demonstrates that a supportive, collaborative mentoring environment significantly enhances professional development for teachers. By upholding high standards of professionalism while fostering open, reflective dialogue, mentors created a safe space for teachers to recognize strengths and work on improvement areas. This blend of professional guidance and personal support proved essential in helping teachers develop a reflective mindset, equipping them to adapt to evolving educational demands.

The data highlights that fostering a supportive and collaborative mentoring environment greatly enhances the professional development experience for teachers. By maintaining high standards of professionalism while encouraging an open, reflective approach, mentors were able to create a safe space for teachers to identify their strengths and address areas for improvement. This combination of professional guidance and personal support proved instrumental in helping teachers build a reflective mindset, equipping them to adapt to changing educational demands.

The results of this study provide compelling evidence for the positive impact of mentoring programs within the Regional Pedagogical Support Centres (RPSCs) on teaching quality and teacher development in Slovakia.

Despite these promising results, it is essential to critically evaluate the methodological limitations raised by the study's design. The one-year analysis period represents only the initial phase of the organizational innovation cycle, where enthusiasm and immediate effects are most prominent. As organizational innovation often unfolds over multiple years, with potential fluctuations in outcomes as challenges emerge, this short timeframe may not fully capture the program's sustainability or systemic impact. Consequently, while the findings indicate high initial satisfaction and effectiveness, the conclusions should be contextualized within the early stages of the innovation process.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the significant impact of the Regional Pedagogical Support Centres (RPSCs) mentoring programs on teacher development and

teaching quality in Slovakia. Through both quantitative and qualitative analysis, the research highlights that structured mentoring programs not only met but often exceeded teachers' expectations, supporting their growth, confidence, and instructional strategies.

A key factor in the program's success is its bilingual support, which provides mentoring in Slovak and Hungarian. This language alignment has been especially valuable for minority-language teachers, allowing them to engage fully and comfortably in the mentoring process. Such linguistic inclusivity fosters a sense of belonging and enables teachers to improve their instructional methods in a culturally relevant context, aligning with European educational policies on localized support.

The positive relationship between mentors and mentees also played a critical role. Mentees appreciated the mentors' professional, empathetic, and non-judgmental approach, which created a safe space for reflection and experimentation with new teaching methods. The program's emphasis on reflective practice empowered teachers to assess their methods critically and make continuous improvements, enhancing their adaptability to classroom challenges.

The study confirms that mentoring programs in RPSCs contribute positively to both teaching quality and teacher satisfaction. By fostering a collaborative, culturally sensitive, and supportive environment, the RPSCs have set a model for effective professional development. This approach not only empowers educators but also positively impacts classroom dynamics and student engagement, suggesting that similar mentoring models could be successfully adopted in other regions to enhance educational outcomes.

However, this research also raises methodological limitations. The one-year analysis period coincides with the early stages of organizational innovation, a period often characterized by enthusiasm and rapid change. While the findings indicate high satisfaction and effectiveness, this short timeframe may not fully capture the long-term impacts of mentoring programs or the broader innovation process within the educational system. A longer longitudinal study could provide deeper insights into the sustainability and systemic effects of these innovations. Therefore, the conclusions should be interpreted with this limitation in mind, as the initial phases of innovation often do not fully represent the cycle's later dynamics.

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