Mentoring

in Dutch Careers Work

an unfulfilled promise

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Between 1998 and 2002 an estimated 250 mentor programs were started in Dutch secondary vocational education. The purpose was to decrease motivational problems and drop-out - especially among youngsters from ethnic minorities.

The vast majority of mentor programs didn't survive for more than two years.

The main reason for this seems to be lack of a theory – no explanation of how mentoring works. The result has been a marginal position for mentoring in school. Teachers, counsellors and school managers cannot see how mentoring can be related to the primary task of education – which is to enable learning.

Lack of theory is lack of thought. And that means that there is no framework for a credible account of the work. The indications here are that there will be little further progress with mentoring unless we engage in serious consideration of why it works, how it works and what it can offer.

This monograph therefore sets up an agenda for that thought and planning. It does so by posing a range of issues. Each is informed by research data. The issues are:

> *what are favourable start-up conditions for mentoring programmes?*
> *what are useful perspectives informing useful action?*
> *what are key features in the organisation of mentoring?*
> *what perspectives best supportive project coordination?*
> *what kinds of links are needed with school management?*
> *what kinds of effects are achievable.*

This monograph addresses each of these issues. It finds much that does not work well. But, in so doing, it points to what we now need to do in order to ensure that mentoring is given a fair chance of offering useful help to our students.

purposes for mentoring

In the Netherlands more than 60% of students enter vocational education programmes. They successively run from 12 to 20 year of-age. Entry is hardly voluntary: children are assigned to it on the basis of standardised test scores.

In the interests of equality of opportunity these courses have been 'generalised' in a diluted form for general secondary education. It has been largely purged of concrete, occupational content, and knowledge has been given priority over practice. This is an environment that discouraged students in the first place.

Most of these students seek to leave school and enter work as quickly as possible. Yet they lack the social-communicative, cognitive and personal competences that employers seek. And schools don't offer that learning.

Secondary vocational education has a drop-out rate of almost 35%, indicating serious student-motivation problems. There is also a substantial problem for the transfer of learning to practice - estimated at 15%. The Dutch are not the only westerners to experience the problems of what is called this 'tea-bag' model for vocational education (Bailey, Hughes & Moore, 2004).

Between 1998 and 2002 an estimated 250 mentor programs were started in Dutch secondary vocational education. Their purpose was to decrease motivational problems and drop-out rates, especially among youngsters from ethnic minorities (Vaessen, Walraeven & Van Wissen, 1993; Eimers and others, 2003).

The Dutch experiment has been distinctive. In the United Kingdom and the USA mentoring programmes are predominantly organised outside schools (Galbraith & Cohen, 1995; Colley, 2003; Philip, 2001). In The Netherlands they have been organised completely by and through the schools.

classic mentoring. Nonetheless, the Dutch programmes have used what has been called 'classic' mentoring methods. This is...

> '...a one-to-one interactive process of guided developmental learning based on the premise that the participants will have reasonably frequent contact and sufficient interactive time together. Mentors contribute their knowledge, proficiency, and experience to assist students who are working toward the achievement of their own objectives.' (Cohen & Galbraith, 1995, pp. 5-6).

The mentors are successful adults, as far as possible matched with the student for gender and ethnicity. In vocational education they ideally are adults from local business life. They use their knowledge, proficiency, and experience to support students both in their cognitive and social-emotional development.

This is not an easy assignment for either participant:

> 'For students truly to benefit from the help offered by a mentoring relationship, they need mentor participation that is based on mutual trust, accurate and reliable information, realistic exploration of their goals, decisions, and options, challenges to their ideas, beliefs, and actions, holistic support (intellectual, psychological, emotional) of their efforts, and encouragement to pursue their dreams' (Cohen & Galbraith, 1995, pp. 5-6).

The supposition is that, because mentors are successful in their work, they can build a warm relationship with their student, and – over time - act as role models for students. They are seen as bridging the gap between education and working life. The expectations is that relevance of school learning will become clear, student will develop a stable occupational preferences, and motivation will increase.

hope and disappointment. This classic model was developed in the United States during the 1970s. It has been used extensively since, both inside and outside formal education (Freedman, 1993).

> *Mentoring is a strategy for teaching and coaching, for strengthening character, improving social harmony, promoting social change, assuring quality education for all, and creating opportunities for personal empowerment' (White-Hood, 1993, p.78).*

That enthusiasm has been broadly shared in the Netherlands (Veugelers, 2000; Crul, 2001). But most of the Dutch projects ran for no more than two years. Externally funded projects came to an end soon after funding ran out. Internal funding usually dried up within a year of start-up (Eimers and others, 2003). At the time of writing only two schools in secondary vocational education have mentoring as part of their guidance and counselling programme (Meijers, 2006).

There is more than one reason for this withdrawal. It seems that the programmes didn't result in the anticipated school-success outcomes. Generally these outcomes are difficult to demonstrate, and to assign to specific causes (Johnson & Sullivan, 1995). That seems to be the case here:

> *'Both theoretical and empirical answers to these questions are lacking',* Jacobi (1991, p. 505)

More recently Philip (2001) and Colley (2003) draw similar conclusions concerning the relationship between mentoring and school success. They also raise doubts about the relationship between mentoring and integration into society.

But the 'failure' explanation is not complete. Schools put an end to their mentor programs before findings about the effects were available. In fact, most schools stopped their programs without any evaluation whatsoever (Meijers, 2001).

a closer look

Between 1999-2002 four exploratory studies were conducted to evaluate mentoring programmes in Dutch secondary vocational education.

table one:
the studies

	project	research
South Holland 1	sixteen subsidised projects	a detailed qualitative study, based on semi-structured interview, with 13 students, 16 mentors, and 10 teacher-coordinators (Meijers & Reuling, 1999).
'techno-mentoring'	twenty national government sponsored programme to link young women to engineering with 163 students	33 students interviewed twice at a six-month interval, 16 mentors and 11 teacher-coordinators also interviewed. (Kneppers, Kuijpers & Meijers 1999)
programs in technical departments of secondary vocational schools	seven schools seeking to generate a greater flow of female participants entering and qualifying	group interviews with 10 teachers, 8 teacher- coordinator, and 12 school managers, to determine school factors influencing the effectiveness (Meijers, 2001).
South-Holland 2	four 'successful' mentoring programmes	best-practice case-study based on 10 interviews held with student-mentor pairs from, looking at how successful pairs described their relationship (Meijers & Reuling, 2002)

All interviews were tape recorded. Respondents saw the transcriptions and were asked to make changes or to add to them. Only those reports were used that were approved by the respondents. The transcriptions were analysed by means of constant comparison, as described by Glaser & Strauss (1967).

the research findings

The results are analysed here by theme:

> > conditions under which the mentor projects were started,
> > perspectives which led the mentors to act,
> > ways in which mentors organised their interventions,
> > perspectives that led teachers and project coordinators (who are almost all teachers) to act,
> > contacts between project coordinators and the school management,
> > effects of the mentoring.

conditions at the start. We might expect to find a coherent plan linked to a clearly developed guidance practice. In fact projects were often started because there were enthusiastic teachers and funds were available. Some of the comments:

'Because there was money and I was enthusiastic. I was part of the network and when I heard there was money available, I said, this is a great way to get mentoring off the ground here' (teacher-coordinator).

'We started the techno-mentoring projects because we had few girls enrolling in this sector and because resources were available. We were at a crossroads (...) We were ready for something new, in other words. And when this opportunity presented itself, we grabbed hold of it. (…) In the beginning, we didn't really know what we were getting into. We didn't know what it would entail' (teacher-coordinator).

'Mentoring started with the help of funds from the Regeling Specifieke Doelgroepen (Specific Target-groups Regulation) as an emancipation project for girls. This project started to wane because of shortage of time and also because these projects are really always dependent on the enthusiasm of a few inspired people. Once those people fall away, there often aren't others who will take over the task of coordinating' (manager).

perspectives that led mentors to act. Mentors have very diverse expectations of mentoring. No 'script' dominated their answers. In response to one question asking if there were predetermined goals, 11 of 16 said 'no', two said they wanted their students to become resilient, and three said they would give information about work and working. Four other mentors from one project, mention the following:

'In the first place the student should feel understood, only after that the student becomes resilient.'

'To build a relationship of mutual trust.'

'That the student makes a better choice with regards to their field of study and training and that he finishes his training and improves his behaviour.'

'That the student gains more insight into his own actions and into his own home-situation.'

As table two shows there is no single overriding purpose (Kneppers, Z., Kuijpers, M. & Meijers, F., 1999).

table two:
expectations with regards to being a mentor
(more than one answer possible (N=16)

expectations	times mentioned
to have conversations - especially about the training - including choice of vocational training	6
to give emotional support	5
to give information - especially about what it's like to work as a woman in a man's field	5
I don't expect anything	4
to look at the relationship between being-a-woman and working, in a broader context	3
to have conversations - especially about the meaning of work	2
to be especially a role model	1
only answer questions students ask	0
other, for example concerning social connections and the time commitment	7

Almost all the mentors were offered training in the development of communication (particular listening) skills. Bur mentors had different notions about their role:

> 'I'm a coach more than anything else.'

> 'I'm a role model',

> 'I am a guide on an informal basis.'

> 'I'm especially a coach but I don't consider myself higher than the student.'

One mentor seems to speak for all:

> 'I became a mentor because I felt that girls needed more support. Girls who are involved in the technical professions often lack the network that boys have. But the students are not really thinking about the future yet. They are especially focused on the here-and-now. I have tried to encourage my students to continue their studies. I have tried to find out if they have problems in particular areas. And that is really sociable and enjoyable, you have a coke with one another, but for the most part you remain complete strangers.'

These goals aren't contradictory. But they each require a different approach. And this is not discussed with coordinators nor with the colleague mentors.

how do mentors organise their interventions? The work and career experience of the mentor is central in these exchanges. Table three shows how.

table three:
topics of conversation between mentor and student, according to the student - N=33

Topic	% mentioning	% saying most talked of
work experience of the mentor	78	33
social relationships of the student	69	23
career wish of the student	66	16
study problems of the student	53	30
strengths and weakness of the student	50	13
study experiences of the mentor	47	7
life issues of the mentor	31	7
life issues of the student	25	7
demands with regards to career	25	3
development of the labour market segment in which the mentor is active	19	3
how the labour market works	16	3
Other topics	41	33

Mentors provided information about their particular professional experiences and cajoled the students into making more progress. Students notice that mentors make links between this progress and how students spend their free time. The relationship seems to be one of what might be called 'disciplined coaching'.

When asked whether there was a clear plan in the relationship with their mentor 81% replied that there wasn't. More than half of those who said that there was a clear plan, said that the plan came from the coordinator rather than the mentor. When asked if they prepared their discussions with their mentor, again 81% of students answered 'no'. (And 74% of mentors also replied 'no'. Only 3 mentors select discussion topics ahead of time and formulated questions in relation to them.) The work is done pretty-well without structure and no clear development-plan.

how mentors feel appreciated by school. A relatively high number of mentors said that they hardly feel appreciated by the school. The comments illustrate the points made:

> *'I see that the problems of a lot of my students are caused, in part, by the school. When I bring that up in a mentor-meeting, the school does not respond. I don't think they do anything with the information mentors give them about our experiences.'*

> *'Recently I asked for a talk with the coordinator because it went horribly wrong with my student. I didn't hear a thing. That's strange, isn't it?'*

> *'Mentoring, within this technical field is still an island. First it has to become a peninsula and only after that it can become a part of the mainland. Up until now there is no real willingness by teachers to allow it to become a peninsula and the managers lack a clear picture about how mentoring can become a part of the whole schooling system.'*

perspectives that lead teacher-coordinators to act. The enquiries found little evidence among teachers and coordinators of any coherent vision for guidance and mentoring. Like the mentors, they followed their own inclinations. Often their goals have a tenuous relationship to one another and frequently it is unclear how these relate to one another.

table four:
goals reported by teachers and coordinators in techno-mentoring project

	mentioned %
improvement school and labour market connections	71
reduction of drop-out rates	65
cultural changes	60
improved guidance at the worksite	35

Enquiry interviews showed how teachers and coordinators felt that these goals could be realised through the mentor because he or she would function as a role model. But what a role model does exactly was unclear to most of those interviewed

Teachers and coordinators were far from clear about how mentoring helps (Kneppers, Kuijpers & Meijers (1999).

table five:
responses on what should role models be able to do

	mentioned %
providing support	45%
providing information	35%
obtaining information	8%

That disagreement cropped up between two South Holland colleagues concerning how to reduce drop-out rates, why one-to-one relationships help, and what qualities a good mentor should have (Meijers & Reuling (1999). On drop out: one looks for improvements in study and career-choice processes, the other for social-emotional and communication skills and in resilience. On relationships: one looks for better communication of content, the other to dealing with organisational factors. On good mentoring: one seeks active listening, the other the ability to motivate and stimulate.

A lack of resolution for issues like these may help to explain why mentoring is often used as a last-resort. It is seen as a vaguely hoped-for cure rather than a well-targeted prevention (Kneppers, Kuijpers & Meijers, 1999). The following quotations from teachers and coordinators illustrate the situation.

> '"Here you have a difficult student, maybe a mentor will help". That is the response of almost all my colleague' (coordinator).

> 'These past years we have worked with students who have come to us more or less by coincidence. A diagnosis has never been made and the results have never been measured either' (coordinator).

> 'We have never really been able to properly formulate when a student does or doesn't qualify to have a mentor' (teacher).

> 'But is has become clear that mentoring only works when the right student with the right problems is selected for it. In that sense you can say that mentoring is offered as a solution to a problem. For the most part it is not something that is used to prevent problems' (teacher).

> 'The techno-mentoring project never really got off the ground well. Of those we paired up with a mentor, it appeared during the follow up that the atmosphere of these contacts was mostly friendly and social. That is was more for the social enjoyment as opposed to really offering something. Techno-mentoring died a quiet death; it died because there was no real desire for it' (coordinator).

When asked if it was clear to them what was expected of them in the first place seven (of 11) coordinators said that they did not have clear picture about what the expectations were Kneppers, Kuijpers & Meijers (1999).

contacts between coordinators and management. When asked whether their school provided sufficient support, eight of eleven coordinators answered 'no'. They report that they receive no substantive feedback on their work and that managers and colleagues showed little interest in this work. Start-up hope among coordinators is that results would attract support were not realised Many coordinators became tired and disillusioned (Kneppers, Meijers & Kuijpers (1999).

No coordinator achieved direct access to the school's policy making board, contact reached no higher than line- or middle-management. Finding a shared basis for discussion was one of the issues. As the following remarks illustrate, both managers and coordinators recognise the issue.

> 'Three times, in educational discussions, I have proposed that the management puts mentoring on the agenda and three times it was considered to be too fine-meshed an instrument. They're only concerned with a coarse-meshed policy structure and not with the fine-meshed nature of one instrument. What managers say to you is, "we warmly embrace it" but they don't attach any consequences to that statement. Therefore when the facilitation for me as project-leader is over and I have to keep mentoring from derailing – only "for the love of it" – it's because of the organisational decisions that are made which don't assign any priority to mentoring' (coordinator).'

'The problem remains that the management thinks in terms of projects, very controlling, and not in the processes that focus on the content of education' (unit manager).

'There was enthusiasm within the unit about getting started. Next the organisation says: we're not completely enthralled with "unit-management", over to cluster-management, working in a bigger context. Then it effectively evaporates; then it becomes too big to be able to engage in a discussion with those people who are responsible and who you have to motivate' (coordinator).

'In the unit lots of good things happen but not in a connected way. There is no plan. So you have to let initiatives develop from the basis, so that there is some foundation. But at the same time a much stronger policy needs to be developed. The teachers don't take on a lot of things because there is no real vision established from higher up' (coordinator).

'The Board doesn't take a stand on the use or need for mentoring, but makes it the decision of the management from the different units. Those units don't have a vision about mentoring either. The result is that the units – which are tightly regulated by the Board regarding managements tasks – allow financial needs to be given priority over content-based or educational innovation' (unit director).

'The assumption that the Board of Directors makes is that if the unit starts to direct the innovation, then that is good, especially because then the responsibilities are clear. The strange thing is that tasks are passed off to the unit while there is a great need for a central vision. Because that is missing, the process of decentralising is particularly focused on organisational-technical issues that are mentioned in the management contract' (unit manager).

'Mentoring is absolutely not part and parcel of an educational philosophy. We have never really thought about it deeply. Not only within our unit but also within the school as a whole. (…) If I had received instructions from the Board of Directors – within the framework of school development – to implement mentoring, well, then I would have delegated a couple of staff to it and aimed to have it succeed. That pressure was really not there for us' (associate director unit).

'Clearly starting a mentor project just because there are external funds available and an enthusiastic pusher, doesn't work. Mentoring is far too intense a form of guidance to be implemented "just like that". Mentoring requires far more preparation time and time for maintenance than is often thought. When the external stimulus of the funding disappears and there is (at the same time) no policy or plan developed around it, the whole project dies off quietly' (member of the Board of Directors).

'I have asked project coordinators whether there are other guidance strategies that are effective but cost less than mentoring. They weren't able to give me an answer to that' (unit director).

'There are lots of forms of guidance. Why would you grab mentoring? That instrument will probably cost you more time and energy then if you let someone just do a career-choice test' (unit manager).

A clear view of student guidance is still under-development in all the schools that were studied. Policy-making for mentoring is *ad-hoc* trouble shooting. There is no operational sense of need, provision, or direction. That lack of sense of the value of educational innovation results in 'maintenance-management' and not 'innovation management'. As a consequence mentoring can only be examined from a financial perspective.

the effects of mentoring. The enquiry into techno-mentoring interviewed young women twice: forty were contacted at the start of their participation in the mentor program A picture of their thinking emerged in the twelve areas set out in column one of table six (following page). Thirty-three were contacted six months later, and they were asked what changes there had been in their thinking (column two) and to what they attributed that change (column three) (Kneppers, Kuijpers & Meijers,1999).

table six:
learning effects between the first and second interview

thinking concerning ...	effect	attributed to
...specific vocational choices or wishes	more vague	personal experience - e.g. visits to open house
...plan to realise actual vocational choice	more vague	personal experience in combination with the job experiences of the mentor
...shift in values relating to work	shift towards working conditions and independence	personal experience - in part through work placement
...balancing work-children	growing preference for part-time work in combination with caring roles	personal experience - e.g. dating)
...meaning of work in relation to others	slow development of feeling for direction and identity	personal experience
...anticipation of specific position in which one would like to work later	increased somewhat	work-placement experience
...anticipation of the kind of company/firm where one would like to work	increased somewhat	work-placement experience
...anticipation with regards to developments in companies	increased somewhat	through work-placement experience
...personal weaknesses	mentioned cognitive skills more often	feedback from teachers
...ability to function during the work-placement in the company	positive and negative in equal measure	mentor
...confidence at school	increase among those who felt insecure at the beginning	mentor
...feeling of having some sense of control over their own situation	increasing ambivalence	unclear

As the table shows there was plenty of change, but little of it was attributed to mentoring – and, even then, not always positively. Most change was attributed to life experiences. Sadly, after six months in a mentoring programme students' feelings of control over their

own situation decreases rather than increases – although they were unclear about why this was so.

The South Holland 2 'best practice' research helps to explain why the influence of the mentor is so limited (Meijers & Reuling (2002). The most important element in the relationship is trust. Students and mentors are aware that their relationship has a goal:

> *'it's not just about friendship'.*

They also know that sooner or later their relationship will come to an end:

> *'When I can completely do it myself, when I have my diploma.'*

There is an issue here: the relationship is time limited but trust is built slowly. A good relationship and mentor training may help. But the young people are looking for trustworthy qualities in the mentor. And being compelled to see the mentor, as some participants were, does not help in the establishment of trust.
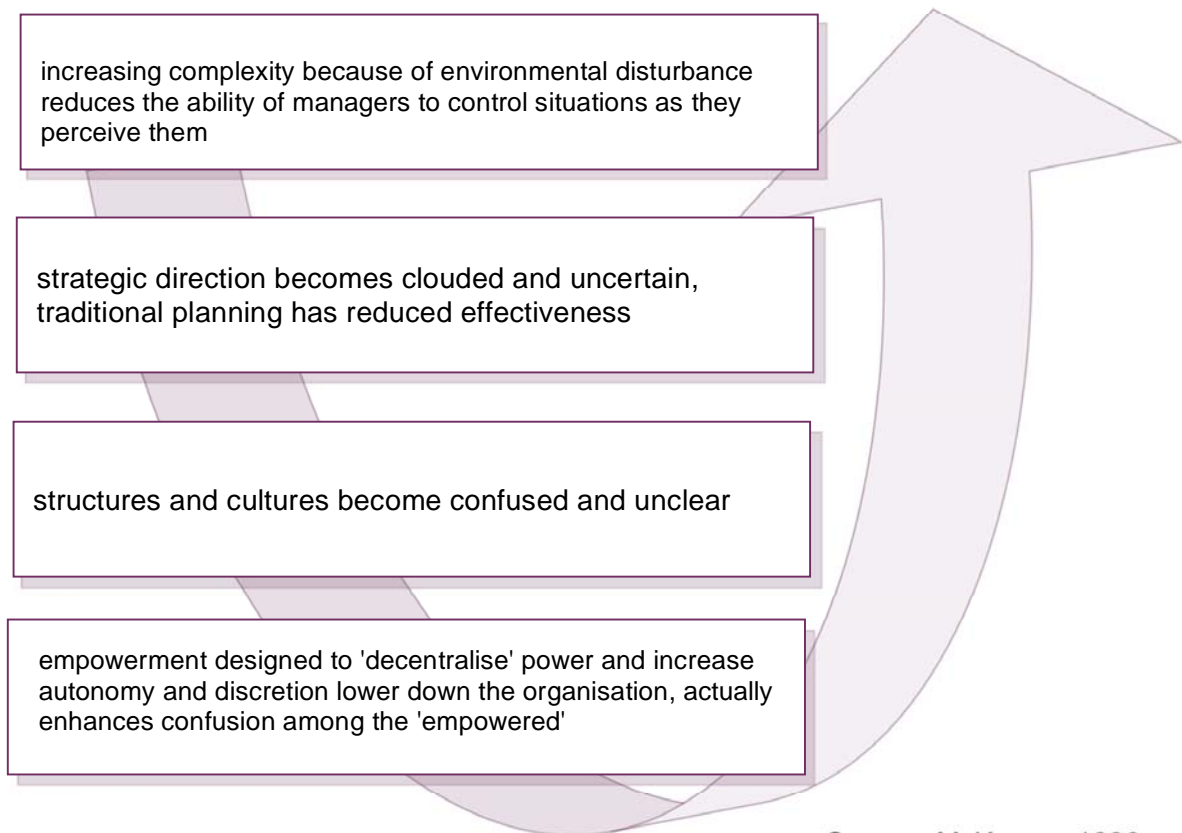
where can we go from here?

How can we explain the rapid disappearance of mentoring in Dutch secondary vocational education? There seem to be two reasons:

> **>** **marginal position:** Mentoring was not recognised as having a significant part to play in core educational learning processes. Teachers therefore found it hard to see the point. And managers worried about the cost and the reliability of external funding.
> **>** **vague conceptualisation:** Project leaders had good intentions, but few clear ideas about what types of learning processes they were setting up. There was no perception of a strong learning environment - for mentors or students.

The Netherlands is experiencing a paradigm-shift away from a traditional model – where learning theory is important. The shift is towards a career-centred model - in which practical thinking and student attitudes are important (Geurts & Meijers, 2007). The idea of a school as a developing learning organisations has lost ground.

A body of background evidence indicates that an organisation learns when its members share a view of the challenges faced, and when suggested action is in the direction in which the organisation should move (Argyris, 1992; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Senge, 1990; Watson, 1994; Krogh, Ichijo & Nonaka, 2000). This needs a strategic vision in senior management, and a problem-solving ability on the shop-floor. Top-down strategy and bottom-up tactics - both come into play. Without both a negative feedback loop – shown in figure one (following page) - results in stress between the different levels of power within the organisation (Senghaas-Knobloch, 1999).

figure one:
negative feedback loop of complexity

increasing complexity because of environmental disturbance reduces the ability of managers to control situations as they perceive them

strategic direction becomes clouded and uncertain, traditional planning has reduced effectiveness

structures and cultures become confused and unclear

empowerment designed to 'decentralise' power and increase autonomy and discretion lower down the organisation, actually enhances confusion among the 'empowered'

Source: McKenna, 1999

There appears to be such a negative feedback loop in this account of mentoring. This because management boards have no strategy for mentoring programmes - they depend solely on incoherent initiatives, from set up at shop-floor level. Lack of any strategic or tactical clarity means that there is no operational picture of how learning is developed. Coordinators have little idea of what learning processes they would like to initiate. They focus solely on organisational matters:

'where do I find mentors?'

'how do I make a good link between mentors and students?'

Meanwhile, both teachers and management wait passively. They may be in agreement about the goals of the mentor project but, like the initiative takers, don't know how to translate these goals into a concrete plan of action. Passivity also means that mentoring doesn't impact the daily activities at the school. It is therefore impossible to evaluate the projects. Evidence of effectiveness is anecdotal. Management needs systematic accounts of cost-effectiveness.

To establish mentoring success we need a theory which explains the conditions in which specified results can be expected. Only then will be able to show whether and how mentoring can help realise the strategic goals of the school. No such theory has yet been formulated (Philip, 2001).

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