



LOOP Toolkit for mentoring

– how to use digital offers in German face-to-face induction programs and teacher’s trainings

In Germany, induction programs represent the second phase of teachers’ education (after university). They are well defined in all federal states and end in the second state examination (see, e. g. LIS, 2022). During this phase that lasts 18 months young teachers gain teaching experience and develop a lot of professional skills, social skills and their teacher’s attitude. Mentors play a crucial role in these induction programs because they support, consult, monitor and coach young teachers directly at their school. If experienced teachers start to become involved as a mentor the Landesinstitut für Schule (LIS) offers specific teacher’s trainings and mentor-qualification programs¹. But, up to now, those qualifications or corresponding certification programs are not mandatory to become a mentor.

At present, the German school system highly suffers from a lack of young qualified teachers. Since the beginning of the school year 2022/23 40,000 teaching positions are vacant². If qualified teachers are missing other general challenges will become even worse: socio-economic and educational inequalities or the inclusion of refugees are only a few obvious examples of typical systemic faults that need motivated and very high-qualified pedagogical staff. For example, Nairz-Wirth et al. (2012³) show that higher qualified teachers can significantly reduce the number of student’s drop outs from school. However, we observe a decrease of young adult’s interest in the teaching profession in Germany (OECD, 2022⁴). High workload and steady overload as well as a very high risk of suffering from burnout

¹ There are comparable on-site teacher’s training sessions for mentors in different German federal states. For example, the LI Hamburg offers a training course for mentors that is generally quite similar to the one of LIS Bremen (see

<https://fortbildung.lis.bremen.de/programm/kw/bereich/kursdetails/kurs/22-89007/>,

<https://li.hamburg.de/programmhefte-fortbildung/3032144/mentoren-programm/>).

² <https://deutsches-schulportal.de/bildungswesen/lehremangel-bleibt-bundesweit-ein-problem/>

³ Nairz-Wirth, E; Feldmann, K; Diexer, B (2012): Handlungsempfehlungen für Lehrende, Schulleitung und Eltern zur erfolgreichen Prävention von Schulabsentismus und Schulabbruch. Aufbruch zu einer neuen Schulkultur. Abteilung für Bildungswissenschaft, Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien.

<https://research.wu.ac.at/ws/files/19002806/handlungsempfehlungen.pdf>

⁴ OECD, 2022: Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing, Paris,

<https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en>.

could be reasons for this observation (Scheuch et al, 2015⁵). Another reason could be that many young Germans prefer to work in teams. Older teachers are often seen as 'lone wolves' who rarely work together with their colleagues (OECD, 2022).

A main aim of the LOOP project is to program and test the so-called 'Match the Mentor'-platform⁶. This platform represents an online toolkit for European teachers to enhance cooperation and qualification of teachers of all ages by the exchange of learning materials, educational resources and online teachers training sessions. On one hand, young teachers can contact mentors who support them during their professional start at school. This aim is most important for those European countries where no mandatory *face-o-face* induction program exists. In these countries, university graduates have to work as full-time teachers directly after their degree and many of them drop out during their first year at school. On the other hand, mentors can develop their professional skills, their communication, their leadership or their attitude by participating in various teacher's trainings for mentors. The German school, Schulzentrum Carl von Ossietzky Gymnasiale Oberstufe (CvO GyO), is involved in the LOOP project as one out of seven European scientific and school partners and is responsible for the following tasks during the phase of conception and test of the 'Match the Mentor'-platform:

- Role model: The CvO GyO is very experienced in induction programs. Each year more than 10 young teachers successfully complete their practical education at this school. As German teachers are already used to *face-to-face* induction programs it is very interesting to analyze their critical feedback to the LOOP project. Moreover, regular teacher's trainings are part of the school concept that also includes detailed information about the role of mentors during induction programs. For experienced teachers, it is highly recommended to take part in mentor qualification programs. Many motivated teachers already participated in these on-site training sessions. Therefore, the experienced teachers from CvO GyO can give feedback towards the educational materials and the handling of the LOOP toolkit.
- Evaluation: The CvO GyO tests the 'Match the Mentor'-platform to evaluate the attractiveness of and satisfaction about the online toolkit. The aim is to predict the interest in the online toolkit of young teachers and mentors from Germany. What are the most important strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the 'Match the Mentor'-platform compared to already existing on-site teacher's trainings?

⁵ Scheuch, K; Haufe, E; Seibt, R (2015): Teacher's Health. Review Article. Dtsch Arztebl Int. 112(20): 347–356. Published online 2015 May 15. doi: 10.3238/arztebl.2015.0347

⁶ <https://matchthementor.com/>

To test and evaluate the 'Match the Mentor'-platform the CvO GyO conducts a series of qualitative studies. During these unconferences and short surveys teachers discuss the attractiveness of the 'Match the Mentor'-platform and devise a plan how the online toolkit could be combined with existing on-site teacher's training to qualify teachers effectively. The unconferences include a tea talk (informal discussion) of mentors and young teachers, an interview with the headmaster of CvO GyO and a self-produced song. In addition to our specific aims to test and evaluate the LOOP toolkit, the unconferences deal with the contribution of the LOOP project and the 'Match the Mentor'-platform to a fruitful democratic European school culture. Overall, our results are based on mentions from 45 persons who contribute to our every day school life and our school culture.

Our first results indicate that the willingness to participate in the LOOP project and to use the 'Match the Mentor'-platform could be rather low in Germany. Out of the reasons for this rather critical attitude the language barrier seems to be most interesting and very relevant.

Overall, our studies indicate the following reasons for a critical attitude:

1. Many teachers do not perceive a link between scientific projects and their daily work routine. For example, they refer to learning lags and psychological stress symptoms that are caused by the pandemic during the last years and that still have a significant impact on lessons and learning results. Just now, the work load is becoming even higher because many students and/or teachers have to stay at home because of illnesses and quarantine periods. Especially in Bremerhaven, the lack of qualified teachers increases drastically⁷. However, those teachers who take part at the LOOP unconferences specify many positive effects of the LOOP idea and potential benefits of the 'Match the Mentor'-platform. Main advantages are
 - Teamwork,
 - Inspiration,
 - Certification.
2. Many teachers do not perceive the benefits of the LOOP project at first glance because mentoring programs are well-established during induction programs at German schools and especially at our school. Even though all teachers describe the personal communication as absolutely essential to build a positive relationship between mentors and mentees, our participants

⁷ Weshalb die Stadt unter anderem die Initiative ‚Lehrer:in Bremerhaven‘ ins Leben gerufen hat (siehe <https://www.bremerhaven.de/de/leben-arbeiten-gesundheit/bildung-forschung/schule/lehrer-in-bremerhaven.116257.html>).

perceive a lot of benefits from the LOOP ideas and tools. In their view, many motivated teachers would be very inspired by the LOOP idea. They describe the 'Match the Mentor'-platform as a very interesting complementary of *face-to-face* induction programs and on-site teacher's trainings that we are used to in Germany. We observe an extensive discussion about the opportunity to find a mentor at the 'Match the Mentor'-platform based on personal characteristics and common interests like leadership, professional skills (classroom management, assessment) and resilience. This discussion also indicates a very high interest of motivated teachers in online certification programs for mentors.

3. Many interested teachers do not participate in the LOOP unconferences because they do not want to be recorded – privacy is very important in Germany.
4. Several teachers tend to be afraid of participating in the LOOP project because they feel unwell when they are obliged to use English as the official language and during all conversations. We even observe that some of our participants had meaningful difficulties reading articles and flyers or watching videos. On one hand, they need a lot of time to get information. On the other hand, statements were rather reluctant and sometimes superficial. Some participants indicate that they had problems using the 'Match the Mentor'-platform because of language barriers. Many participants state that one of the most meaningful disadvantages of the LOOP online toolkit could be that users have to handle materials and conversations in English (read, write, listen, talk).

Besides, the results indicate that role models or opinion leaders like the headmaster of the school, have the most significant and lasting effect on learning motivation, involvement in school development and attendance at teacher's trainings. All participants take the headmaster's statements very seriously and many reproduce the headmaster's opinion. The student's interest in the Erasmus+ project is very positively affected by the LOOP song. Probably, it is more habitual for younger people to understand abstract and nonverbal information as given by the music video. Therefore, more young participants associate common European ideas as well as the motivating and innovative character of the 'Match the Mentor'-platform. Students expect a positive effect of the online toolkit on the school culture and their learning success.

Overall, it becomes obvious that the aims and advantages of the LOOP project have to be disseminated and explained clearly to motivate teachers to participate and train. The motivation of German teachers tends to depend significantly on their respective English skills. The relevance of student's language skills in learning

processes is obvious for many teachers and in all subject (Leisen, 2015⁸). But some teachers seem to accept their own learning constrains that are caused by their language barriers. A very important further research question is how more teachers can be motivated more to further develop their language skills. Furthermore, could it be possible to improve the situation of schools and teachers by becoming an Erasmus school? For example, how much can the school culture of CvO GyO, the workload and the lack of teachers be positively affected by deepening the cooperation with other European schools?

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⁸ Leisen, J (2015): Fachlernen und Sprachlernen! Bringt zusammen, was zusammen gehört! From Bildung und Wissenschaft. MNU 68/3.
<http://www.josefleisen.de/downloads/sprachbildung/01%20Fachlernen%20und%20Sprachlernen%20-%20MNU%202015.pdf>