Mentorship – a pedagogical method for integration of theory and practice in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Mentorship is a method that is used in both professional education and training and in working life to introduce new employees. Previous research has shown that there is limited experience of mentorship in the parts of higher education that are outside of professional education and training. The purpose of this article is to deepen knowledge of how mentorship can be used as a pedagogic tool to integrate theory and practice in a social science programme at a Swedish university. The empirical material is obtained from a case study that includes students/mentees and contact persons/mentors. The results show that mentorship is an important contribution to the learning process for the integration of theory and practice in higher education to develop both practically applied and theoretically anchored knowledge. Besides cooperation forms and workplace-related studies in the programme, mentorship thus becomes the third component of the learning process.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to deepen knowledge of how mentorship can be used as a pedagogic tool to integrate theory and practice in a social science programme at a Swedish university.

The implementation of mentorship had its starting point in an ongoing discussion within the academic community about the transition from higher education to working life. One part of this discussion dealt with how students should be prepared for different professions while at the same time being able to face a working life that is changeable and challenging (Reid, Abrandt Dahlgren, Petocz, & Dahlberg, 2011). In the study From Expert Student to Novice Professional, Reid et al. (2011) showed how students develop during their duration of study from focusing on theoretical knowledge to trying to integrate requirements of knowledge that are formulated in working life (Reid et al., 2011).

Internationally, mentorship is above all used in professional education and training or as a means to help new employees in their introduction to the labour market. Mentorship in relation to higher education is, from a Scandinavian perspective, described as something that takes place between a professionally active person and a student. A central factor is that the mentor does not have any evaluating or appraising function (Lauvås & Handal, 2015; Lindgren & Morberg, 2012). An example provided by Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, and Tomlinson (2009) showed that mentorship is used both for student teachers during their practice in teacher education and for recently graduated teachers (Hobson et al., 2009). In Great Britain, mentorship is also used for student teachers during their practice (Heilbronn, 2008). However, several studies have been critical to the value of mentorship. Wang and Odell (2002) showed in a meta-study from the United States that neither the mentor nor the mentee experienced that the mentorship focused on the mentee’s professional knowledge; their meetings were instead experienced as an emotional support function (Wang & Odell, 2002). In a similar way, Timperley (2010) found, in a study from New Zealand, that mentees did not demonstrate personal, social or intellectual development that could be related to an implemented mentor programme (Timperley, 2010). In Sweden, mentor programmes in different forms occur frequently in both higher education and working life; for example, in economic and engineering programmes or in other programmes with placement studies (Ahlström, 2007; Wikström, 2015). Previous research has shown, however, that there is limited experience of mentorship in higher education programmes that are not programmes in professional education and training. In the present study, we want to contribute knowledge on how mentorship in a social science programme became a part of strategic work to integrate theory and practice in all courses of the programme. The context of the study is a mentor programme that was carried out at Blekinge Institute of Technology. The participants in the study were third-year students from the Programme in Social...
Mentorship builds on voluntariness, whereas the mentor definition based on the relation between mentor and mentee is equal in merit and that the responsibility is therefore also divided equally (Lindgren, 2000). There is some confusion as to the concept of mentorship, and it is not uncommon for it to become synonymous to supervision, despite the fact that the concepts describe two different phenomena. A similarity that should be mentioned is that both mentorship and supervision entail meetings between a competent and experienced person and a person with less competence and knowledge. To clarify the difference, we have chosen to bring out a few examples:

- Mentorship is constituted by reflecting and analysing discussion, whereas supervision takes place in the direct professional practice with elements of discussion.
- Mentorship builds on voluntariness, whereas supervision is compulsory during practical training.
- Unlike supervision, Mentorship does not include evaluations (Hultman & Sobel, 2013; Lauvås & Handal, 2015; Lindgren & Morberg, 2012).

A mentor is a person who contributes with her/his knowledge, experience and perspectives; the basic idea is that the mentor gives the mentee guidance in their personal and professional development (Lindgren, 2000; Nilsson, 2005; Samier & Fraser, 2000; Sawazky & Enns, 2009). Mathisen (2008) also used a two-pronged definition, where one part is career-oriented, to develop professional knowledge, and the other part deals with support in psychosocial development (Mathisen, 2008). The mentor can also be described as a sensible person who has an interest in supporting less experienced persons in their development (Lyons, Scroggins, & Rule, 1990). According to Lauvås and Handal (2015), mentorship can, in practice, be summarized as a combination of emotional and practical support (Lauvås & Handal, 2015). The central matter in definitions of mentorship is the description of the two parties, the mentor and the mentee. The mentee is seen as an actively knowledge-seeking person, who alone is responsible for her/his learning. It is the mentee’s needs, interests and questions that steer the reflecting and analysing talk. Before the first meeting with the mentor, the mentee is to formulate her/his personal goals in regard to learning and development (Ahlström, 2007; Olsson, 2008; Wikström, 2015).

Different directions can be distinguished in regard to the description of the relation between mentor and mentee. One idea is that the mentor has a position of power and is responsible for leading and correcting the mentee (Thorndyke, Gusic, & Milner, 2008). Others have suggested that the relation is equal in merit and that the responsibility is therefore also divided equally (Lindgren, 2000). An important component in the relation, according to Lindgren, is that mentorship is about emotional support, but she also provides a new dimension, namely the transfer of cultural knowledge (Lindgren, 2003). This definition corresponds well with our understanding of the relation between mentor and mentee, and at our presentations to mentees and mentors we also supplied Jacobis’ definition based on five elements – i.e. mentorship means that:

- Mentorship is based on the goals of the mentee, and the mentor has a supporting role.
- The mentor’s role can vary, but should always include at least one of the following functions: emotional and psychological support, support in career development and the function of a role model.
- The mentorship is to be developing for both mentor and mentee.
- The relation between mentor and mentee is personal.
- The mentor has more experience and more influence in an organization compared to the mentee (Jacobi, 1991).

The learning that we focus on in relation to mentorship takes place in social interaction between mentee and mentor. Transferred to Lave and Wenger’s reasoning, this means that the learning is seen as participation in a community and the individual always learns something in interaction with others (Lave & Wenger, 1991). To promote the learning in the meeting between mentee and mentor, it is important to continually reflect and bring experiences from the concrete reality to higher and abstract levels (Jacobi, 1991). In Dewey’s theory, reflection was already a central concept in the definition of learning.
Thinking is, according to Dewey, a condition for learning; he called attention to the dialectical process, wherein concepts are put against each other and the approach is critical to that which is taken for granted (Dewey, 1933/1989). Molander developed the definition considering that 'reflection is to take a step back to study and reflect on oneself and what one does, in order to get perspectives on a situation' (Molander, 1996, p. 143). However, a condition, according to Molander, is that time is allotted for the individual reflection, but also for dialogue with others (Molander, 1996). Our definition of learning departs from those Dewey and Molander, but we also add that the reflection in relation to mentorship means that the goal is the seeking of knowledge, which, based on Alexandersson’s (1994) reasoning, means to articulate and to critically study one's own experiences. In relation to mentorship, the seeking of knowledge then becomes part of a learning process in which practice and theory are integrated; a learning process that departs from the idea that learning is an active process that creates meanings, which leads to the student/mentee acquiring increased comprehension of the surrounding world, increased competence and new preparedness for action (cf. Elleström, 1996; Schön, 1983). The learning process in the mentor programme is surrounded by a structure to create wholeness, common frames and thereby good conditions for the learning and knowledge development (cf. Cahill, Turner, & Barefoot, 2010).

Learning in relation to a mentor programme can thus be interpreted from a sociocultural perspective, and language and dialogue then become central (Dysthe, 2003; Säljö, 2000). Vygotskij (1934/2001) discussed how language is used to create meaning and how thought is transferred to speech. He pointed out that creation of meaning and learning require that the language use takes place in the form of dialogue (Vygotskij, 1934/2001). Others have stated that dialogue is not enough, but that space is required for many voices to be heard together with the possibility to try one's own interpretations in order for the dialogue to develop and lead to learning (Dysthe, 2003). When Molander (1996) defined the dialogue, he referred to Heidegger and Gadamer, who suggested that dialogue is a basic form of human existence and understanding – an understanding that not only concerns what is said, but that can also transfer itself to various levels of abstraction. Thus, the dialogue can, according to Molander, be described as an ‘unfinished project’, and there is always openness for a new reply and increased understanding (Molander, 1996). Good dialogue, according to Shea, presupposes that mentor and mentee become close, and that there is confidence between them. In the mentor, the mentee has a catalyst who meets the needs of the mentee and is a person who gives advice (Shea, 1994). The quality of the dialogue can only be determined by those involved. Characteristic of good dialogue is, however, that words and thoughts accompany each other and that tone of voice, vocal pitch and silence are of significance (Spritzberg & Cupach, 1984).

**Mentorship – a meeting between novice and expert**

The learning situation in a mentor programme can, from the point of view of Lave and Wenger (1991), be defined as a relation between a newcomer and an old-timer. This suggests that the learning is an active and social process taking place in a socio-cultural practice. Transferred to mentorship, learning is seen both as an active and a social process in a meeting between a newcomer and an old-timer. A central part of the meeting is talk about practical work, professional identity, artefacts and theoretical understanding (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger’s (1991) reasoning can be related to other research that has distinguished a novice from an expert when it comes to competence and skills. One hypothesis is that the expert thinks more deeply, more quickly and more in the abstract, and a central point is a categorization of the competence of individuals (Ericsson, 2006). Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) presented a categorization in the form of development in five steps: novice, advanced, competent, proficient and expert. Transferred to the mentor programme, the student is the novice who meets and talks with the contact person/mentor – that is, the expert. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) described that in the first step one finds the novice, who lacks experience and a background understanding of situations. The novice understands new situations and problems based on guidelines, regulations and context-free aspects and is, thereby, dependent upon fixed structures, clear rules and methods. The regulated behaviour leads to limited and inflexible alternatives of action. The novice is not ignorant, but finds her-/himself on a level that is reasonable following education. In the next step, advanced beginners emerge. The individual has certain experience of real situations and displays acceptable achievements. The alternatives of action increase, but the individual can still not identify aspects or identifiable characteristics in different situations. In step three, the individual is found to be competent. The individual can, after 2–3 years of professional experience, think at an analytical level, assess and critically review situations. The proficient individual, at step four, can, based on standpoints that are reflecting, conscious and well-reasoned, make choices regarding goals, methods and decisions. Finally, at the fifth step, we find the expert, who has great experience; actions here are based on a mature and well-practised experience. The expert has the
competence to understand and discern what is important and decisive in a situation (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986).

**Mentorship as process**

Previous research has shown that conditions for a mentor programme to be successful are that it is well anchored, and that mentors and mentees experience motivation and participation (Block, Claffey, Korow, & McLaughlin, 2005; Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004). We therefore introduced the mentor programme with lectures and seminars in which the purpose, content, conditions and expectations, and the importance of the participants’ own engagement, were discussed with the students. We tried to balance clear structure and steering with individual adaptation. The process continued with discussions with the students on how to match them with possible mentors in their sponsor organizations. Previous research has shown that the importance of the matching is a recurrent subject, and there is agreement that when the match is good, the learning and psychosocial development are influenced positively (Eby, Butts, Lockwood, & Simon, 2004). In the discussion about matching, differences were highlighted between traditional mentorship and functional mentorship. In traditional mentorship the relation is central, while the decisive matter in the functional mentorship is expert knowledge (Chao, Watz, & Gardner, 1999; Kay, Hagan, & Parker, 2009). Our understanding is that the contact persons can fulfil both the relation requirement and the expert knowledge requirement. The student and the contact person already know each other and the established relation is a ground upon which to build and work from. In addition, the requirement for expert knowledge can be satisfied as all contact persons have long professional experience and deep knowledge about what it means to be an official in a public organization, and, furthermore, have high positions in their respective organizations, such as administrative manager, personnel manager, information manager, HR generalist, head of a section, or strategist in health and medical care. The circumstance of a mentor having a managerial position was highlighted by Lindgren as a success factor (Lindgren, 2003).

Once the mentors had been appointed, the mentor programme continued with the mentees and mentors meeting in two separate groups. At these occasions, there was discussion about the definition of the mentee and the mentor role, and also the expectations of the mentor programme based on the literature studied. In the next step, at a common seminar, goals and expectations were clarified and the mentees submitted a written personal presentation. At the point of departure, the mentee and mentor were to meet for personal conversations once per month, for approximately one hour. Together, they had to decide upon the subjects that were to be discussed and the location for their discussion. Most met in the mentor’s office, but some met over lunch and a few chose to go for a walk together.

During the implementation phase, three follow-up discussions with mentees and mentors were arranged. The goals, and how to reach these goals, constituted topics for discussion with the mentees. In the mentor group, the discussions concerned the mentors’ experiences of the conversations with the mentees, the role of the mentors and possible developments of this role.

**Mentorship as part of a strategic work**

**The context of the study**

In the present study, mentorship is to be seen as part of the strategic work to integrate theory and practice in SAGOS, the programme is a bachelor's course with sociology as the main subject. The three comprehensive learning objectives of the programme are to deepen understanding for the relation between theoretical knowledge and practical application; to create common meeting places for students, teachers, researchers, and practitioners; and to strengthen the students' professional identity. Besides comprehensive learning objectives, the programme syllabus and the course syllabi specify the general skills and competences that the student will practise throughout the entire programme and that will be assessed through formative assessment. The general skills and competences stated in the programme syllabus are:

- seek, collect, assess and critically interpret relevant information in a problem and critically discuss phenomena, issues and situations,
- independently identify, formulate and solve problems and carry out tasks within given time limitations,
- orally and in writing present and discuss information, problems and solutions in dialogue with different groups (Programme Syllabus, 2011).

A central matter in the programme, and which is illustrated in Figure 1, is the learning process for integration of theory and practice in all courses of the programme.

The definition of the learning process for integration of theory and practice rests on the concept of sustainable learning. The definition of sustainable learning departs from the Swedish strategy for sustainable development, where the focus is on respect for knowledge and democracy. Sustainable development is divided into three dimensions – economic, social and environmental. Sustainable learning is thus
related to the social dimension of sustainable development, with the central point being learning and the capacity to assimilate knowledge and tools in order to develop a preparedness for action and confidence in the capacity for lifelong learning (Government report). Sustainable learning is also related to the reasoning of Hargreaves and Fink (2008). They suggested that everything that is learnt should have both breadth and depth, and developed their thoughts by providing five main pillars on which this knowledge should be based. The first four – learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live – were obtained from the UNESCO Council’s visionary document regarding the purposes of learning. The fifth pillar – learning to live sustainably – was original (Hargreaves & Fink, 2008).

The learning process within SAGOS

The learning process for integration of theory and practice is central in the programme, where both practically applied and theoretically anchored knowledge constitute the focus. The description of the learning process for integration of theory and practice can be interpreted based on the existence of two forms of knowledge: theoretical and practical. Lauvås and Handal (2015) highlighted that theory and practice are often experienced as two separate parts. In educational contexts, theory is attributed higher status than practice. Saugstad (2006) added that the description of theory and practice can be referred to based on the dualistic and hierarchic thinking of the Western world. Grimmen (2008) also stated that education is often characterized by a dualism between theory and practice. He pointed out that theoretical and practical knowledge should instead be understood as a continuum, and not as separate parts. The dualism between theory and practice disagrees with the philosopher Aristotle’s view on knowledge. He stated that this is an overly coarse division and that knowledge should instead be defined based on its five different forms: episeme, techne, fornesis, sofia and novus. Aristotle argued for the need for all knowledge forms to recognize the existence and development of the human being. Based on this, the knowledge forms have the same value and are, essentially, interconnected (Nilsson, 2009). Transferred to the described learning process in SAGOS, episeme, techne and fornesis are primarily of interest, as these three knowledge forms are most frequently used in professional education and training and professional research (cf. Alvunger & Adolfsson, 2016; Andersson, 2015; Eriksson, 2009; Josefson, 1991). We consider such research to be relevant to the learning process in SAGOS despite it not being based on professional education and training. Our standpoint departs from the fact that the goal of the education is the same – namely, to integrate theory and practice. Aristotle’s knowledge forms related to the learning process in SAGOS signifies that episeme is the theoretical knowledge and the research connection that form part of all courses of the programme. The second and third knowledge forms, techne (practical and productive skills) and fornesis (practical wisdom and judgement knowledge) constitute the focus of workplace-related studies, other forms of collaboration and mentorship. This means that the questions that the student brings to the sponsor organizations should be discussed and transformed into concrete situations (cf. Arnesson & Albinsson, 2012). Having techne is, thus, being able to do something that departs from a real understanding of the principles that condition the practical implementation. Fornesis, finally, relates to the fact that the practical action departs from that which is morally correct in a concrete situation. Thus, it is not just a matter of knowing what principles of morals apply, but to know which principle should be the leading one in a given situation. To sum up, Aristotle’s knowledge concepts can be understood as being interconnected. Good
judgement – that is, ‘knowing what to do in a certain situation’ – is essential, but as important is knowledge about ‘how it should be done’ and ‘when it should be done’. The latter is sometimes described as ‘timing’ or ‘intuition’ forming the basis for good judgment (cf. Johannessen, 1999). To Aristotle’s concepts of knowledge, we add Kolb’s (1984) description of how theory and practice are integrated through a pendulation between theorizing and defining concepts in order to participate and observe the practice. Thereafter, the pendulation goes back and it is then a matter of integrating theory and practice through reflection at a distance.

Previous research that is particularly interesting and transferable to the mentor programme in SAGOS includes Andersson’s study, ‘När vårdande och lärande sammanfaller’ (‘When nursing and learning coincide’). Andersson (2015) studied student nurses during their entire placement. The focus was directed to the triad of student, supervisor and patient. He suggested that when theory and practice are separated at the interaction in the triad, a vacant space is created that is experienced as confusing for all three parties. In order to bridge this vacant space, he developed the didactic model of ‘nursing–learning–reflection’. The model focuses on interplay, dialogue, theoretical and practical knowledge, a reflective approach and listening to the patient’s story. Andersson’s most important conclusion was that theory and practice cannot be separated in the practice of nursing, but should be interlaced. Alvunger and Adolfsson (2015) also presented a model for integrating theory/research and practice/knowledge of experience. They named this the ‘critical dialogical model’. The purpose of the model is to ask questions, and create problems and dilemmas. It is a matter of thoroughly examining phenomena and experiences by pendulating between the study of research and theory and the observations in practice.

The central matter is the individual’s own seeking of knowledge at an abstract level and the dialogue and feedback from fellow students and teachers. It is particularly interesting to note that the integration of theory and practice takes place through a pendulation that is described as a process in various steps.

Learning for the integration of theory and practice is defined as an active process that creates meaning, understanding, new knowledge and new alternatives for acting in relation to both the individual and society (cf. Arnesson & Albinsson, 2012; Elleström, 1996; Schön, 1983). According to Dewey (1933/1989), the seeking of new knowledge and new alternatives of action starts when the actor’s learnt thought patterns do not suffice (Dewey, 1933/1989). The individual active learning requires individual reflection, but also the possibility to participate in dialogue with others (Molander, 1996). Learning in relation to dialogue can be related to Vygotskij’s (1934/2001) thoughts on the importance of language for the creation of meaning and of mutual understanding (Vygotskij, 1934/2001). The learning process within SAGOS was initially structured on the basis of the two components of cooperation forms and workplace-related studies (see Figure 2). In this study the mentor programme is added as one more component. The three components create wholeness, a structure and a common frame, which, based on previous research, is understood as a condition for both learning and knowledge development (cf. Arnesson & Albinsson, 2012; Cahill et al., 2010).

Transferred to SAGOS, the structure entails that during the whole programme period – that is, in each course – the student has contact with the same sponsor organization and contact person in their workplace-related studies. The cooperation forms are organized so that, on a recurrent basis, the contact persons or other representatives from the sponsor organizations give lectures or participate in seminars, and the students are also offered the possibility to participate in various activities realized.

Figure 2. Learning process for the integration of theory and practice.
by the sponsor organization. Furthermore, each semester the contact persons are invited to open lectures at the higher education institution. The workplace-related studies ensure that the students and teachers in theoretical contexts identify interesting issues and problems, which the student seeks answers to or discusses with the contact person or a representative of the sponsor organization (Arnesson & Albinsson, 2012). Figure 2 illustrates the three components of the learning process.

Mentorship was introduced as a third component during the third study year, and was intended to strengthen the mutual learning between student/mentee and contact person/mentor – mutual learning that is deepened through their common meetings, and by them taking part of each other’s experiences, questions and perspectives.

Unlike the traditional programme, the mentor programme is individually adapted and significant requirements are placed on the student/mentee’s own motivation and commitment. Swedish literature has emphasized that mentorship builds on the idea that a student/mentee is to be given guidance in personal and professional development and is able to control her/his learning (Lindgren, 2000). On an international level, the psychosocial development and career development are emphasized instead (cf. Sawazy & Enns, 2009).

Personal development is related to all aspects of human behaviour, such as character, temperament, attitudes, values, ideas, opinions, intelligence and morals (Gage & Berliner, 1979). It is a continuous process that takes place in interaction with others, when the behaviour of others is observed and when the individual critically reflects upon her/his own actions (Billett, 2003; Eriksson, 1985/2000). In connection with mentorship, it has been pointed out that a condition for personal development is the individual’s basic sense of security, maturity, self-esteem and capacity to take responsibility and be independent (Levinson, 1978).

The professional development can, in this case, be related to deeper insights into what it means to be an employee in a public organization – a development that can be related to the fact that today’s multicultural and high-tech organizations place high and partly new demands on employees. Besides subject knowledge, demands are placed on social competence, flexibility and adaptation skills (Lindgren, 2000).

Earlier research has shown that confidence in the good effects of mentorship is high, and in research on work environments it has not been uncommon for mentor programmes to be included as a suggestion for improvement (Lundqvist, 2013; Strömbäck, 2014).

Methodological considerations

Qualitative case study

The study is a qualitative case study, where the focus is on obtaining in-depth knowledge of how mentorship can be used as a pedagogical tool to integrate theory and practice in higher education. Characteristic of our case study is that the focus is on a specific case – a mentor programme at SAGOS (cf. Bryman, 2016; Denscombe, 2014; Merriam, 1993). Case studies lead to concrete, contextual knowledge, and the researcher’s interpretation of a delimited case in relation to theory can lead to more general knowledge. To sum up, a case study can be said to be an empirically based, intensive and comprehensive description and analysis of a delimited unit (George & Bennett, 2005; Merriam, 1993). Transferred to our study, this means that we study the mentor programme from several perspectives. The study takes an empirically based approach and a direct subject–subject-related situation between the researchers and the case that is being studied. One aspiration is to assume the actor’s perspective, so as to understand her/his views and experiences (cf. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2007; Taylor & Bogdan, 2016).

An important point of departure in the case study is the researchers’ pre-understanding (cf. Corbin, 2015; Gilje & Grimmen, 2007). In our case, the researchers have both deep and broad knowledge about case study as a scientific method. Furthermore, the researchers have knowledge and experience of the mentor programme and of the content, structure and set-up of the social science programme. The researchers’ knowledge of the research field constitutes a condition for sensibility in regard to, and an understanding of, the problem area. At the same time, awareness is required so as not to over-interpret or undervalue the results (cf. Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Corbin, 2015; Gilje & Grimmen, 2007).

Another characteristic of the case study is method triangulation; in our case, this was achieved via a combination of observations and qualitative interviews/discussions (cf. Bryman, 2016; Cohen et al., 2011; Denscombe, 2014; Taylor & Bogdan, 2016). An advantage of combining these methods is that a more substantial picture of mentorship in higher education can be obtained. Method triangulation can, therefore, be seen as a way of strengthening the reliability of the study.

Procedure

We viewed the collection of empirical material as an ongoing process during the whole mentor programme, which meant that the study was carried out during one academic year. The study included eight students/mentees – five women and three men – aged 20–48. Furthermore, it included eight contact persons/mentors – six women and two men – from the sponsor organizations Blekinge Hospital, the National Board of Housing Building and Planning, the Swedish Armed Forces, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency, the
Municipality of Karlskrona, the County Administrative Board, the Swedish Police, and the Swedish National Tax Agency. At the sponsor organizations, the contact persons/mentors included a personnel manager (1), information managers (2), an administration manager (1), a development manager (1), departmental managers (2), and a personnel consultant (1). The contact persons/mentors were between 40 and 60 years old.

In the initial stage of the study, participatory observations were carried out in accordance with the methodology advocated by several researchers (cf. Cohen et al., 2011; Patton, 2015). This meant that we at lectures, seminars and discussions about mentorship with students/mentees and contact persons/mentors participated actively. Our task was to problematize and ask questions regarding both the obvious matters and those that were difficult to understand. Observation studies can contain several sources of error, which researchers need to be aware of. First, we should think about how much we as researchers affected the situation. Our experiences from this study correspond well with our previous experiences. At the beginning of an observation, the respondent is affected by the researcher’s presence, though this changes over time and the situation develops into becoming authentic. Our active role in the observations was largely the same as in the regular teaching. Another experience from previous observations is that we cannot perceive everything that occurs. This can be compensated by writing detailed field notes, a methodology advocated by Cohen et al. (2011). They stated that as much information as possible should be written down, as everything that occurs is potentially important. In addition, that which could be understood as unimportant will not be selected during on-going observation (Cohen et al., 2011). After other meetings or discussions with students/mentees and contact persons/mentors we also wrote down our reflections in accordance with Rönneman’s (1998) recommendations. In conformity with Merriam (1993), we regard the field notes as an important aid in the analysis, though the notes also gave us the possibility to adjust the set-up during the ongoing mentor programme or give support to mentees and mentors in situations that arose (Merriam, 1993).

During the final phase of the mentor programme, individual qualitative interviews/discussions with all participants were carried out. In accordance with the qualitative approach, our ambition was to ensure the qualitative interviews resembled conversations, while our meetings with the participants were to be characterized by a subject–subject relation (cf. Cohen et al., 2011; Patton, 2015). The interviews/discussions started with contextual questions; thereafter, we carried out a conversation based on a questionnaire with themes such as the set-up and content of the mentor programme, the mentees’ and the mentors’ views on their own roles, reflections on personal and professional development, the learning process and the exchange of knowledge and experience. Our role as interviewers was to carefully lead the conversation by means of themes and to ask follow-up questions, making the respondent reflect from a forward-looking perspective, perhaps thereby deepening her/his thoughts. Audio recordings were taken of the qualitative interviews/discussions, they were thereafter transcribed in their entirety. All qualitative interviews/discussions were carried out in a calm environment on the premises of the university (cf. Bryman, 2016; Cohen et al., 2011; Denscombe, 2014; Patton, 2015; Taylor & Bogdan, 2016). Qualitative interviews/discussions have both advantages and disadvantages. One advantage, in our study, was that we followed the whole process and could therefore go deeper during the interviews into aspects with which we had come into contact during, for example, the observations or other discussions. We could thus capture aspects that might otherwise have been difficult to access had we only carried out qualitative interviews/discussions (cf. Bryman, 2016; Taylor & Bogdan, 2016). Disadvantages, which have often been discussed, include the interview effect and the fact that the empirical material becomes extensive and unstructured, which may result in difficulties in the analysis. We handled these disadvantages by drawing on our experience from a previous study that comprised the same types of material, and our long experience of carrying out and analysing qualitative interviews/talks. Because we recorded the interviews on tape and transcribed them verbatim into text, we did not have to take notes but could direct our whole attention to the respondents (cf. Bryman, 2016; Cohen et al., 2011; Patton, 2015).

Furthermore, four years later we carried out conversations with some mentees who had participated in the mentor programme. They were then free to reflect upon their retrospective ideas about participating in the mentor programme. Working reflexively meant adding yet another perspective to the mentor programme (cf. Thomsson, 2008).

The interpretation and analysis of the data from the study can best be described as a qualitative content analysis using a narrative approach. The narrative analysis meant that through the reading of the empirical material, we focused on the content in the text and on the sentences and words that carried meaning. We searched for meaningful units to be able to, in the next step, relate to theories and previous research (cf. Granskär & Höglund-Nielsen, 2012; Larsson, Sjöholm, & Lilja, 2008).
Ethics
The ethical considerations at the collection of the empirical data followed The Swedish Research Council (SRC) guidelines on ethical conduct. This involved informing the participants in the beginning about the fact that we would document the process during the entire mentor programme, and that we, in the final phase, would carry out individual conversations with everyone. Participation was voluntary and could be interrupted at any point. We also informed the participants that documentation and the data that would emerge from the conversations would be treated confidentially (cf. The Swedish Research Council, 2011).

Ethical considerations can also be related to the fact that we, as researchers, were teachers and programme coordinators and had thus a two-year teacher–student relation with the students/mentees of the study. We concluded that this did not result in any ethical dilemma. First, the mentor programme was a pilot project carried out outside the courses of the programme and, similar to all mentorship, outside any evaluation. Second, the students’/mentees’ participation in the programme was voluntary and they could cease their participation at any point.

Results
The mentor programme in the Programme in SAGOS should be seen as part of strategic work to integrate theory and practice. The mentorship became a form of quality reinforcement and a supplement to the integration that was already being carried out in the form of workplace-related studies, workplace visits, lectures and seminars with participants from the sponsor organizations. The results are presented in two parts: perspectives of the mentees and of the mentors.

Perspectives of the mentees
A common opinion among the mentees in the beginning was that it was rather difficult to understand what the mentor programme was all about, despite the mentees being aware of the fact that it formed part of the programme focus on the integration of theory and practice. The literature studies, lectures and seminars were important elements, but it was still unclear. One student expressed this as follows:

… how one would act to make this become valuable. When you don’t really know what it means or what you can expect it is difficult. (student/mentee)

The quote can be related to the fact that some mentees asked for clearer steering and also wanted the mentor to influence the content and drive the meetings forward. The follow-up discussions during the implementation phase of the programme were given as examples of how the mentees developed in talks with other mentees and how the course coordinators helped through giving advice.

Matching against the contact person was described as good by all students/mentees, and one student explained:

When the mentor programme started, we already knew each other, as we had met regularly during the first two years of the degree programme. We therefore got going rather quickly. (student/mentee)

The quote reflects a rather common understanding among the students/mentees. They still stressed the personal letter, in which the mentees introduced themselves and their plans for the future, as an important task. However, they lacked corresponding letters from the mentors. The objective of meeting the mentor once a month was difficult to attain for several people. One student said:

I’m doing my last year at the programme and the study pace is high. During the last semester, I want to spend much time on my bachelor’s thesis. At the same time, it is difficult to find available time in the mentor’s calendar. (student/mentee)

The quote shows that the students/mentees prioritized their degree programme above the mentor programme. The demands of the degree programme and the contact person’s/mentor’s pressing work situation was often used as an explanation as to why they had not met as often as had been agreed in the beginning.

Specifying what the mentee had learnt during the mentor programme was not a simple, as the strands of knowledge development during an ongoing programme come together and are understood as a totality at the end of the programme. The mentor’s interest in the mentee as a person and student as a good example of mutual learning were spontaneously mentioned. Having the chance to learn from the mentor’s long professional experience and their deep knowledge about what it means to be an official in a public politician-run organization was an important part of the mentees’ own stories about their learning. They also spoke of the importance of allocating time for the individual reflection and, in the next phase, to put words to their thoughts to make them comprehensible for the mentor.

Some participants experienced it as rather difficult to govern their own learning and to take responsibility for making the mentor programme become an important part of the study programme. When they reflected upon their learning, it became clear that they had learnt other things than what they thought they would learn in the beginning. To reflect and talk about themselves, ask questions and listen to an experienced mentor was brought forth as the most important skills learnt. A common opinion among
the students/mentees was that the mentor programme was of importance for the mentees’ professional development. They had, however, difficulties when it came to giving concrete examples, and this can perhaps be explained based on their study programme not being a profession programme, which may have resulted in their difficulties specifying what they had learnt. Some mentee says that they have talked about how their theoretical knowledge can be put into practice in a profession. General knowledge and skills that they talked about, and which the mentor said are important in the role of a public official, included the capacity to seek and acquire new knowledge, the capacity to analyse and critically assess, for example, information, and to identify and find solutions to problems. Equality is another example of discussion topics, and what it is like to be a female/male manager. Other themes that the mentees considered to be important to discuss included ‘how should a personal letter be formulated?’, ‘how should I write a CV?’ and ‘what should I think about before an employment interview?’.

The mentee’s personal development was an important objective for the mentor programme. It can be exemplified through the fact that several couples, by way of introduction, worked with the lifeline to get to know each other; a method that is understood as positive and developing. The relatively short time resulted in some participants feeling that the programme had not had a very big impact on their personal development. Others expressed that their mentor’s interest and questions were important for their personal development. Together they worked in a process-oriented manner from the first until the last minute, and each meeting opened with a retrospective discussion about what had happened since last time. For the conversations to be forward-looking, some mentees were given homework for the next meeting.

During the retrospective conversations four years after completion of the mentor programme, the mentees stated that the most important thing for them was to understand what mentorship is and how it can be used in both personal and professional development. At this later point they could also understand the value of the information that the mentor imparted, which four years ago they did not find very important. Participation meant that today they would gladly become mentors to share their knowledge.

To sum up, the results show that the students/mentees felt positively about participating in the mentor programme, but that there are also obstacles for the programme to work optimally. Positive notions include the match with the contact person, which was understood as good, meaning that the pairs could start directly without having to spend time getting to know each other. The students/mentees considered that the most important aspect was benefiting from the contact person’s/mentor’s long professional experience and deep knowledge about what it means to be a civil servant in a public organization. The student’s/mentee’s own reflections and questions were also understood as important parts of the learning. In regard to the student’s/mentee’s personal development, the difficulty of defining what, exactly, the mentor programme meant was emphasized. Obstacles stressed included the lack of time for both student/mentee and contact person/mentor, resulting in them not having met as many times as the agreement stipulated. Their own lack of knowledge about what the mentor role means and what demands can be placed on the contact person/mentor are other obstacles to overcome for the mentorship to work optimally.

**Perspectives of the mentors**

The mentors were well aware of the fact that the mentor programme was to be seen as forming part of the strategic work carried out in all programme courses to integrate theory and practice. When the mentor programme began they had, in their role as contact persons, met their student/mentee in different contexts during the first two study years. They had worked together via mutual learning, which they were now to deepen through a more personal relationship. Their match with a student who they already knew was understood as good, and perhaps a condition as time was limited. Some were of the opinion that the mentor role, unlike the role as a contact person, is more about sharing each other’s experiences, questions and perspectives.

The mentor role was understood as inspiring, and the mentors considered it is exciting to meet, talk with and get insights into the situation of young people. Their close contact with the mentee contributed to their increased understanding of how complex it may be to be young in our time; an understanding that they felt facilitated their meetings with young co-workers.

The structure of the mentor programme with joint seminars and discussions with other mentors was important, but these seminars and discussions were at times difficult to prioritize in relation to the daily work. The mentor group was described as ‘a nice group that got going quickly with good talks’. They were engaged and willing to share experiences. At the meetings between researchers and mentors, the mentors were enthusiastic about their meetings with the mentees. They stated that the mentee was given much space and that they, as mentors, focused on issues and had to be careful not be too quick to share
answers. This was sometimes becomes difficult, as one mentor stated:

One really wants to give something that the mentee can carry with her/him. My long experience makes me want to give my answers too quickly, but that is not the idea. I am mostly [there] to help the mentee think further and perhaps just ask new questions. (contact person/mentor)

The quote should be seen as a recurrent notion among the mentors. Another mentor expressed this as 'holding back', just thinking about being an important party as the mentee reflects. There was agreement in regard to the need for awareness of the grounds for giving advice, and that the mentee's own solutions are the most important aspect.

Some of the mentors stated that the mentees consciously steered the content of their meetings. Further, they were motivated and took responsibility for the whole process. Others considered that the mentees were too passive when it came to formulating their wishes, and that they had difficulties knowing how much they as mentors 'should give direction'.

The mentee's professional development can be related to the mentor's capacity to share experiences and add new perspectives. One mentor said that they talked extensively about how the mentee's theoretical knowledge could be applied to practical work. She departed from her own period of studies, concluding that she then missed someone who could clarify to her how incredibly important the theoretical knowledge is in working life, and that it most often is realized implicitly. She therefore tried to tell her mentee how theoretical knowledge is put into practice in her role as an official in a public organization. Others pointed out that capacities the students had practiced during the whole period of study – such as analysis, reflection, oral presentations and the capacity to express oneself in writing – are important aspects to clarify as being important to a future profession.

The mentor programme was also seen as essential to the mentor's own professional development. Their meetings with students gave them knowledge about how young people look at work and work environments, and this knowledge could be transferred to the mentor's own workplace or to the recruitment of new personnel.

The mentee's personal development was also underlined in all mentor programmes. Working with the lifeline as a method was brought out as an important part of focusing on personal development. Some mentors stated that they focused entirely on the mentee's personal development, having intended to avoid talking about performance. This therefore entailed providing support and, through questions, making the mentee note and choose alternative courses of action. Something to note, according to one mentor, is that the dialogue should not develop in the direction of therapeutic talks. The focus must instead be on helping the mentee find her/his own personal profile, work on being able to receive criticism, and strengthen self-confidence. The task was also seen as significant for the mentor's own personal development, bringing out the capacity to create a trusting relationship as a basis for good dialogue. Other participants pointed out that interaction always leads to a mirroring of one's own reactions, feelings and actions, and that the mentee's questions lead to reflection upon that which is sometimes taken for granted.

Practicing dialogue was pointed out by many as an important experience, and one mentor had a plan to transfer the method to his/her own organization in talks with co-workers. It is also a matter of practicing conversation techniques, daring to ask difficult questions and testing other methods in collaboration with the mentee, to then bring these to co-workers or, as someone put it, 'test conversations in reality'.

During discussion of the learning, some mentors stated that in addition to the knowledge exchange with the mentees, it was instructive and valuable to meet managers in the mentor group who came from other public organizations. In these meetings, there was also space for sharing professional experiences.

To sum up, the results show that all contact persons/mentors were positive about their participation in the mentor programme. They highlighted important knowledge they had acquired and that could be directly transferred to their own organizations; for example, during the recruitment of new personnel. In conformity with the students/mentees, they were satisfied with the matching. They discussed how they had to consciously relate to the fact that their role as a contact person was completely different than their role as a mentor. In the former, the focus is on asking questions and adding new perspectives to the student's/mentee's reflections, and not giving quick answers and advice obtained from the contact person's/mentor's own long professional experience. The capacity to integrate theory and practice was brought out as an important part of the student's/mentee's professional development. The direction of the mentorship towards personal development was described as the capacity to give and take criticism, strengthen self-confidence and create a personal profile. Common for the contact persons/mentors is that they stressed mutual learning as an important part of meeting with the students/mentees. This may have been about reflecting on their emotions, reactions, actions and knowledge in the student's/mentee's stories.

**Concluding discussion**

The purpose of this article is to deepen knowledge of how mentorship can be used as a pedagogical tool to integrate theory and practice in a social science
programme at a Swedish university. The results show that mentorship became an important part of attaining the three comprehensive learning objectives of the study programme, and for the work with general skills and competence. The mentor programme thereby made an important contribution to the learning process, allowing the integration of practically applied and theoretically anchored knowledge. The model shown in Figure 3 illustrates how mentorship became part of the sustainable learning.

The centre of the model contains the learning process for the integration of theory and practice, where workplace-related studies, forms of collaboration, and mentorship constitute central components.

How can sustainable learning with the integration of theory and practice be attained? This question is always of interest in higher education. The problem can be worked on in different ways. First, we need to give up what Saugstad (2006) named the established agreement of theory and practice constituting a part each of a dualistic opposition. A step in that direction, in accordance with Andersson (2015), is to replace the denomination of integration of theory and practice with the interlacing of theory and practice. This concept better reflects how the relation between theory and practice should be understood. Such interlacing of theory and practice in the SAGOS programme is based on the goal of creating meeting places for mutual learning between novice and expert through workplace-related studies, other forms of collaboration and mentorship. Aristotle’s view on knowledge is greatly helpful to bridge the dualism between theory and practice. Episeme refers to the theoretical knowledge and the research connection that students acquire during the different courses in the programme in sociology, political science, organization, leadership, economics and law. The second and third knowledge forms, techne (practical and productive skills) and fornessis (practical wisdom and judgement knowledge) are in focus in workplace-related studies, other forms of collaboration and mentorship. To attain the second and third knowledge forms, in this study we should, in accordance with Andersson (2015) and Alvunger and Adolfsson (2015), in a clearer way together with the mentee and the mentor have worked with a didactic model for learning. Of special interest is Alvunger and Adolfsson’s description of the ‘critical-analytical process’. The model can be adapted as mentorship is not an ordinary form of education; the meeting between mentor and mentee is unique in education contexts. This modification means that the student can more closely study a phenomenon: for example, motivation, conflict management, values, organization culture, work satisfaction, individual responsibility, individual decision-making, and attainment of results. In the beginning, the mentee works on the phenomenon theoretically and in relation to research. Thereafter, the mentee and the mentor reflect together on the phenomenon and the mentor adds her/his knowledge and experiences. The mentee then deepens the theoretical in order to again discuss the phenomenon with the mentor. The description can also be related to Kolb’s (1984) understanding of the pendulation between theorizing and defining concepts and the meeting with practitioners in order to then turn back and carry out reflection at a distance.

In the above model, the learning process is related to the actors, being the student/mentee, the teachers and the contact person/mentor, which are seen as
acting subjects. Their actions can be interpreted from an activity-theoretical perspective and can be put in relation to a dialectical process between individual and society. In the dialectical process, the mentee works on the basis of given objectives, but also formulates her/his own goals. The mentee’s learning can, from Knutagård’s (2003) perspective, be interpreted from routine learning to qualified learning, which requires awareness, attention, thinking and creativity (cf. Arnesson & Albinsson, 2012; Knutagård, 2003). The learning process in the mentor programme can be related to this definition, and it is, to a higher degree than other studies in the programme, centred on the individual. What is specific is that the learning process also takes place in the interaction between student/mentee and contact person/mentor (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991). The centring on the individual sets great demands on the individual mentee’s motivation, engagement and driving force. The result shows the importance of balancing between a clear structure, management and the mentee’s individual freedoms. Perhaps we exaggerated the risk that it would become too standardized and regulated, and that the individual steering of the mentorship would thereby be lost, while the similarity with other studies would then be too big. The consequence was that we, and also the mentors, steered some students too little. Here, we should have been more individual-oriented and helped the mentees when they were unable to move forward. For some students/mentees it was clear that they themselves steered the content of their discussions with the mentor by talking about their own reflections and by asking questions. The experience was that, in this way, they deepened their perspective views and their knowledge (cf. Alexandersson, 1994; Dewey, 1933/1989; Elleström, 1996; Molander, 1996; Schön, 1983).

In the model (see Figure 3) the learning process is surrounded by a structure consisting of mutual learning, pedagogic competence and a delimited problem.

**Mutual learning**

Arnesson and Albinsson’s (2012) definition of mutual learning is based on Dewey’s (1933/1989) ideas about the actor actively seeking new knowledge and new alternatives for action when the individual’s knowledge does not suffice. They also added Engeström’s et al. (1999) ideas on the collective learning and the sociocultural perspective, which means that the learning takes place when student, teacher and contact persons meet (Arnesson & Albinsson, 2012). The definition can be transferred to the mutual learning in the mentor programme, and relates to the fact that the concept of mentorship, similar to Dreyfus and Dreyfus’s (1986) concept, includes a supposition about the circumstance in which a novice in dialogue meets an expert. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) used these concepts to describe the development from novice to expert in five steps. This line of reasoning is not entirely transferable to our study, as this research is often related to professional education and training. However, we consider the concept pairs interesting, and use them to understand what happens when the novice and expert meet. The mentee, here interpreted as the novice, expresses the value of having the chance to reflect upon her-/himself, to formulate her/his own questions, try her/his own thoughts and benefit from the expert’s/mentor’s knowledge. The mentors pointed out that in the meetings with their mentees they developed both personally and professionally, and that it was easy for them to see the value of accessing the thoughts and questions of young people, but they also pointed out the importance of being able to offer experiences and knowledge to the mentees. In their meetings with the mentees, the mentors wanted to convey the professional knowledge that they had acquired as officials in public organizations. Their examples showed that they wanted to create understanding for both theoretical and practical knowledge. They reflected upon the fact that professional development for them signified that their actions could often be described as an unconscious integration of theory and practice.

In the interpretation of mutual learning, we cannot use the concepts offered by Reid et al. (2011) in From Expert Student to Novice Professional to understand the mentee’s statements in regard to their own development. The mentees were, during their last year of study, still oriented towards their studies; a common explanation as to why they were not been able to meet their mentor as often as agreed was that they wanted to concentrate on their degree programme. The mentors’ opinions about preparing the mentees in different ways for working life can, on the other hand, be understood as a wish to help the students to become novice professionals, thereby facilitating the transition from education to working life.

The mutual learning was, in the retrospective conversations, related to the fact that the mentees, after years in working life, better understood the significance and value of the conversations with their mentors. This can be interpreted as them being ‘on their way from novice to expert’, having deepened their knowledge and understanding. The mentees also pointed out that the mentors attached great value to meeting with them, and that they understood the common value of their meetings. Their strongest wish, however, was to enter the role of mentor – something they looked forward to. In their development from novice to competent, they were able to see that they could now share their knowledge.

**Pedagogic competence**

The teacher’s pedagogic competence is, according to Arnesson and Albinsson (2012), central for the
student in regard to seeking new contexts, but also to seeing new problems and solutions. The task is to lead the learning with the point of departure via an outlook on people, where the student is seen as an active actor who is creative, engaged and questioning (Arnesson & Albinsson, 2012).

In the mentor programme, our pedagogic task was to create a structure, but also to be supporting, inspiring and sensitive. Our contact with both mentees and mentors was important for the programme to be forward-looking. The pedagogic competence can also be related to the mentor’s role. In our conversations with the mentors they often referred to their pedagogic competence to create a connection with the mentee. They spoke of leading through problematizing and questioning to promote the mentee’s and their own capacity for reflection and fresh ideas. This concurs with the line of reasoning by Lave and Wenger (1991) about how learning takes place in interaction with others. The relation and dialogue between mentor and mentee then becomes the central matter, and, transferred to Shea (1994) and Molander (1996), this is a fundamental condition for human understanding. Both mentees and mentors also reflected upon the importance of language for learning. They spoke of putting words to thoughts and to, in a comprehensible manner, expressing these to each other. The importance of language can, from the perspective of Vygotskij (1934/2001), be interpreted as decisive to creating meaning. The addition of the ideas of Dysthe (2003) about the importance of developing knowledge through dialogue deepens understanding of how the mentor programme became important to the development of both mentee and mentor.

Delimited problem

Arnesson and Albinsson (2012) stated that students, during each course and through a researching and investigating means of working, take on delimited problems, where both practically usable and theoretically anchored knowledge make up the focus. The problem areas or questions are formulated by teachers, students and in some cases contact persons (Arnesson & Albinsson, 2012).

In the mentor programme, the mentees determined more clearly which delimited problems to discuss. Most of them chose to work with their personal development, but their professional development towards becoming an official in a public sector was also in focus. Some students would have needed more support from both teachers and mentors to be inspired in their learning.

The most important conclusion of the study is that the mentor programme, forms of collaboration and workplace-related studies are three important components in higher education that supplement each other in the work with developing practically applied and theoretically anchored knowledge. The fundamental condition is a clear structure consisting of mutual learning, pedagogic competence and delimited problem areas. In the meeting between mentee and mentor, the practical situation and the importance of experience are brought out, and nuanced and refined, in relation to theories and concepts. The theory can also guide the mentee in the formulation of questions. The conclusion leads us to new formulations of questions regarding how to work in higher education, without sedimenting the idea of a dichotomy between theory and practice and instead deepening understanding of the dialectic, and of how theory and practice are integrated parts of a complex totality.

Another conclusion is that a didactic model of learning should permeate the mentor programme. A modified form of Alvunger and Adolfsson (2015) ‘critical-analytical process’ is an example of how the mentee gets help with phenomena that can be worked on in the meeting with the mentor in order to attain the interlacing of theory and practice.

We also conclude that a change of roles between mentee and mentor is one possible way forward in the mentor programme if we, in conformity with Reid et al. (2011), wish to help the student in her/his development from ‘expert student to novice professional’. This would mean that the mentor gets a more active leading role in the meeting with the mentee. In a degree programme that does not lead to a specific profession, the results show that the mentees did not have sufficient knowledge about what mentorship could contribute in regard to professional development. The mentors’ statements also show a similar understanding. The change of roles means, for example, that the mentor, from her/his professional experience and everyday working life, chooses cases for the mentee to reflect upon, while also getting assistance in doing this. The result thus leads us to a suggestion for further research; namely, the study of how the change of roles between mentee and mentor can be developed and researched from an interactive research approach.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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