

CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY SCHOOL-BASED MENTOR TEACHERS DURING INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING IN FIVE SELECTED SCHOOLS IN AMATHOLE EAST DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

All teacher education institutions depend on school-based teachers to mentor and guide student-teachers on Teaching Practice (TP). Student teaching has been called the most challenging, critical and rewarding stage of teacher education. School-based mentor teachers have a great influence on the development of student-teachers' orientation, conceptions and classroom practice. Although there are benefits in TP for both student teachers and mentor teachers, they might be overshadowed by the conditions under which the school-based mentor teachers work. Hence, this study evaluates the challenges experienced by school-based mentor teachers in supporting Initial Teacher Training (ITT). The study adopted a qualitative case study design in which a purposeful sample of 5 school-based mentor teachers participated. Semi-structured interviews were conducted as the main and sole data collection tool. Content analysis was used to analyse data thematically. From the findings of the study the challenges seemed to outnumber the benefits of mentoring to school-based mentor teachers. Furthermore, based on the collected data, I conclude and recommend that there should be introduction of mentor training programmes, mentors be given incentives and have reduced workload in order to have an improved and effective mentoring process.

Keywords: School-based mentor teachers, Initial Teacher Training, Student-Teachers, Teaching Practice, Mentoring, Challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Challenges are the problems or dilemmas in the expectations of ITT which results in feelings of insecurity, nervousness, threat and even inadequacy (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, Tomlinson, 2009). Student-teachers work in schools during TP under the supervision of mentor teachers (Danner, 2014). A mentor is someone who is experienced and therefore leads the less-knowledgeable student-teacher in the correct direction towards professional development. Schools select mentors who have well developed interpersonal skills, demonstrate leadership qualities and are skilled, experienced teachers. Mentors are usually, but not always, specialists in their subjects (Donaldson, 2008). Mentoring means guiding and supporting the student-teacher to ease the anxieties they experience during TP and to monitor and evaluate their progress regularly (Mudzielwana and Maphosa, 2014; Kiggundu, 2007). There are a number of mentoring approaches, strategies and tactics that have been found to be effective across different contexts (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009).

Effective mentoring strategies include holding regular meetings, open dialogue, involvement in decision-making and providing emotional and psychological support. Effective

mentors provide their student-teachers with emotional and psychological support and make them feel welcomed, accepted and included (Kiggundu and Nayimuli, 2009). Research indicates that mentors allow their student-teachers an appropriate degree of autonomy to make decisions and to develop their own teaching styles (Kiggundu and Nayimuli, 2009; Shumba, Shumba & Maphosa, 2012). During the mentoring process a student-mentor's interaction emanates.

As the mentor student-teacher relationship advances, there is exploration of strengths and weaknesses (Mukeredzi and Mandrona, 2013). Through these interactions, shortcomings are rectified and suggestions made on overcoming anxiety and applying a variety of strategies to improve their teaching (*ibid*). In the process of identifying such attributes, student-teachers are nurtured into competent practitioners (Kiggundu and Nayimuli, 2009; Major and Tiro, 2012). According to Maphosa et al. (2007) mentors should be very competent in lesson preparation and lesson delivery in order to offer effective assistance to the student-teacher and lead by example. The mentor has to model learning while the student-teacher observes and takes notes.

Morris (2009) summarised the characteristics of a school-based mentor teacher as being self-awareness, sensitive and considerate. He considers this to be an important trait in a mentor. He goes on to identify more tangible skills he feels a mentor supporting student-teachers should have:

- i. Proven effectiveness in the classroom (he notes exam results as an important consideration here yet this may not be a priority for school-based mentors).
- ii. Management skills (including course design, paperwork and audit).
- iii. The ability to form and maintain effective professional relationships as this will be fundamental to the success of the mentoring relationship.
- iv. High-level communication skills (the ability to translate their knowledge in an accessible way).
- v. An ability to counsel (in terms of basic humanistic approaches), and
- vi. Strong subject knowledge (as this was recognised by government departments as more important than generic mentoring knowledge and skills).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Education in South Africa faces numerous challenges and the building of teaching capacity should top the priorities of the South African government. It is important that these challenges be addressed, as they may affect the mentor teachers and student-teachers' performance during teaching practice and their perception of the teaching profession.

Although there are benefits for mentors, there are challenges as well, which can make the mentoring activity disadvantageous or even harmful. Some scholars have complained that most of the literature on mentoring in Initial Teacher Education presents an "overwhelmingly favourable" account, which fails to adequately investigate or address any potentially negative effects (Hobson et al., 2009:210). In recent years several studies have reported a number of specific disadvantages and drawbacks of mentoring, together with examples of what are regarded as poor mentoring practices (Sundli, 2007; Hobson, et al., 2009).

The following have been identified as the prevalent challenges facing teaching practice:

Dysfunctional or underperforming schools

Schools in developing countries are under resourced, overcrowded and situated in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Many of the teachers at the schools are underqualified. Moreover, the schools experience acute shortage of teachers in critical subjects as well as resources. Hence, the Department of Education rate such schools as 'dysfunctional', or 'underperforming'. The placing of student-teachers for TP experience and mentoring at schools labelled as 'essentially dysfunctional' is therefore cause for serious concern. It is alarming that a number of student-teachers at South African universities complete their practical training at substandard schools (Khumalo, 2014). Although the schools are willing to accommodate student-teachers, poor management, non-existent timetables, lack of staff and no mentoring all impact negatively on the practice, leaving some students demotivated and disillusioned (Timm, 2008; du Plessis, 2013). Furthermore, in the absence of resources, student-teachers get frustrated and that compromises their teaching career.

Poor mentoring practices

The findings from the study conducted by Zide and Mokhele (2018) reveal that teachers are not satisfied with their participation in some of the programmes due to the poor planning and lack of monitoring of the programmes, which results in the programmes being non-continuous and repetitively leaving no mark of change in the education system as a whole. Without planning, school-based mentor teachers are left to organize their own professional mentoring, which only work for those who are highly self-directed.

Challenges experienced during ITT can make the mentoring activity unfavourable or even detrimental. Scholars have brought to attention that majority of the literature on mentoring in Initial Teacher Education fails to adequately investigate or address any potentially negative effects and presents an "overwhelmingly favourable" account, which (Hobson et al., 2009:210). In recent years several studies have reported a number of specific disadvantages and drawbacks of mentoring, together with examples of what are regarded as poor mentoring practices (Sundli, 2007; Hobson et.al., 2009; Musingafi and Mafumbate, 2014, Abongdia, Adu & Foncha, 2015).

Unmanageable workloads

At times, mentor teachers fail to manage their assignments as a result of their involvement in mentoring in addition to their normal teaching roles. This can impact on mentors' work-life balance and may cause them stress (Hobson et al., 2009). Research has found that mentor teachers sometimes experience feelings of insecurity, nervousness, threat and even inadequacy at the prospect of their lesson being observed (*ibid*). Mentors have also felt isolated in their role as the university or college seemed to play lesser role and provide no guidance. Although decreased workload for school-based mentor teachers is identified as a benefit, other studies find an increased workload for school-based mentor teachers assists in supporting student-teachers.

Relationship between student-teacher and mentor teacher

The mentor teacher may also exploit an amicable relationship with the student-teachers by burdening them with an excessive workload. Some mentors assume that students have been already equipped by the university with knowledge and skills to teach. Therefore, they deem it redundant to assist them with the development of much-needed basic skills. Many studies show that inadequacy in the mentor's guidance and training reduces the effectiveness of practical teaching and can lead to a negative experience of TP. How mentor teachers behave during their mentoring dialogue is a question that has been studied from various perspectives and in differing contexts. This has led to a certain amount of confusion about the exact meaning of the terms used by researchers in describing mentor teachers' work and the mentoring dialogues they conduct.

Poor quality of teacher education programs

The biggest problems facing teacher education in South Africa were: firstly, the poor quality of teacher education programs; secondly, the fact that the teacher education system was not cost effective; and, finally, the fact that policies for the supply, utilization and development of teachers were driven by the wrong incentives. There seems to be a lot of problems facing the student-teachers in the course of carrying out the TP exercise that seem to affect the effectiveness of the student-teachers. Personal experience has shown that some of these problems are student-teacher related problems while some are institution (university) related problems and some are school or TP related problems. For instance, Hobson et al. (2009) remarked that TP is beset with a multiplicity of problems and a lot of difficulties confronting student-teachers, mentors as well as the host schools and the supervisor. Some of the difficulties include psychological make-up of the trainees, pedagogical preparations, classroom adaptation, and mode and means of assessment (*ibid*). Ogonor and Badmus (2006) submitted that student-teachers are not often properly groomed to put into practice current pedagogy and interactive skills that have been theoretically learnt. Studies have also revealed some other problems that surrounds the TP exercise, for example, Ogonor and Badmus (2006) lamented that teachers of host schools did not provide specific aid to student-teachers to improve their teaching skills and strategies.

University education versus college education/theory versus practical

Major and Tiro (2012) agree with Chisholm (2009) that university education is excessively theoretical and abstract. As numerous former college students and lecturers indicated, colleges provided hands-on training, a practical education that today's universities and universities of technology do not provide. Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are often considered to be inadequately capacitated to address the needs at primary school level. They do not use or provide opportunities for experienced principals and teachers to participate in training future teachers (Chisholm, 2009). Whatever the past of the colleges, their past exists in the present in the memories of lecturers and their students. In memory, whether true or false, they are seen as having created teachers who taught students in disciplined environments and who can do so again. Higher Education Institutions have been slow to respond to the criticisms of the mismatched and poor training that they provide, often in an effort to meet departmental prescriptions (Chisholm, 2009).

Lack of effective mentoring model

Jeko, (2013) notes that there is a lack of a clearly defined framework of understanding for mentoring between the partners in teacher education, namely the schools and colleges, as mentors are reportedly neither aware of what is expected of them nor of what they should do (Butler and Cuenca, 2012). It is therefore difficult to see how mentors can provide appropriate advice, support and direction to the learning of student-teachers when they themselves are not aware of the expectations held of them. Such a situation erodes the capacity of these partners to adopt a coordinated approach to the implementation of an effective mentoring model.

School placement

School placement is a critical part of the Initial Teacher Education, which is designed to give student-teachers the opportunity to learn about teaching and learning. Furthermore, the student-teachers gain practice and experience in teaching as well as application of educational theories in a variety of teaching and learning situations. Moreover, it provides an opportunity for them to participate in school life in a structured and supported way (Abongdia, Adu & Foncha, 2015).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research paradigm: the study adopted a qualitative research paradigm as it focuses on describing individual experiences and beliefs (Cresswell, 2014). The main purpose of the study was to establish the participants' point of view regarding the challenges they experience during ITT.

Research design: A case study design was utilized for this study. The study aimed to hear student-teachers' voices on the challenges experienced by school-based mentor teachers during ITT. Cresswell (2014) further indicated that case studies allowed researchers to be close to participants and allow the participants to tell their stories.

Sampling techniques: A purposive sample of five school-based mentor teachers participated in this study. The participants selected had TP experience as they were mentoring student-teachers during the TP and are targeted as 'information-rich' resources for this study.

Data collection tools: The semi-structured interviews helped to gather qualitative data which enriched the study. The justification for this selection criteria was related to what the researcher had found in the literature that teachers with more than ten years' experience were likely to provide more insight into roles, experience, benefits and challenges of ITT (Fourie and Fourie, 2015; Segoe and Dreyer, 2015; Bukari and Kuyini, 2015; Musingafi and Mafumbate, 2014; Maphalala, 2013).

Data analysis: Content analysis was used to analyse data. Participants' responses were studied carefully, the recordings were transcribed and analysed thematically.

Data trustworthiness: in order to ensure trustworthiness of qualitative data the following elements were considered; credibility, dependability and transferability. After analysing data, participants were asked to verify accuracy of their responses.

Ethical issues: The researcher attended to all ethical issues consistent with the carrying of qualitative research. Informed consent was sought from and granted by participants after the purpose of the study was explained to them. Confidentiality of participants' responses was guaranteed and participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any stage and for whatever reason.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Of the five (5) participants, two (2) were males and three (3) were females. Furthermore, two (2) school-based mentor teachers taught in rural schools and one (1) in a town school while the other two (2) taught in a township school. All participants were Africans with IsiXhosa as their home language. None of them received any formal mentorship training. The participants' ages were over forty years.

This is an indication that the researcher sampled qualified educators with relevant experience regardless of lack of mentor training. With regard to their qualifications, all of them held higher degrees and both the male participants were principals of the schools, one female was an HOD and two females were senior teachers. All of them have mentored more than twenty student teachers. The participants were given pseudonyms Mentor Teacher (MT) 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 to promote confidentiality and anonymity. From the semi-structured interviews held with five mentor teachers they voiced out the following as key challenges.

Workload

At commencement of their teaching experience, student-teachers are filled with fear and self-doubt. A supportive network, which promotes open lines of communication, encourages preservice teachers to discuss their concerns, thoughts, challenges and needs with their mentors assistance subside these fears and self-doubt.

MT 4 noted the following challenge and simultaneously made a recommendation concerning school-based mentor teachers' workload:

School-based mentor teachers' workload should be reduced as mentoring student-teachers is an extra load.

MT 3 also commented regarding the workload experienced by school-based mentor teachers:

At times we can blame the mentor teachers, but because of the workload they experience to help plan and prepare lessons, to be always available. That is why at times we do not even have time to hold formal meetings we don't have plentiful time because of the extra load.

Lack of formal training

MT 2 felt that mentoring in his school was a concept that was thrown into the deep end and no one wanted to be associated with it:

Mentoring is done informally, by sharing and discussing teaching challenges. There is no program in place to follow in my school because of the workload and shortage of time. It was a concept that was thrown on the deep, neglected and no follow up was made.

Among other problems is that we were not trained in mentoring.

There is lack of clarity on the actual roles of the mentor teachers. Additionally, there is no clarity on what makes schools and universities choose certain teachers as mentor teachers. In some schools, student-teachers are placed under the care of the Head of Department (HOD) as their mentors, whereas in schools where there are no HODs, student-teachers are placed under the care of Senior Teachers (Maphalala, 2013).

MT 2 applauded this:

I was elected as a mentor and a supervisor to novice teachers and student-teachers.

MT 1 also signaled:

Mentoring has challenges as well. I was not trained as a mentor; I just volunteered and used my own teaching experience.

University-school relationship

Another challenge articulated by MT 4 was the detached manner the university communicates with the schools during placement:

Lecturers from the university must not give student-teachers letters to take to schools but must visit the schools so that they can discuss their expectations with the school-based mentor teachers during the TP- mentoring process.

MT 3 also mentioned that the university lecturers seem to neglect their role as school-based mentor teachers:

When the university lecturers arrived at school they just went to the Principal's office and straight to the classrooms to assess their students ignoring the school-based mentor teachers who are doing daily job of providing guidance and support to the student-teachers. I felt annoyed and undermined after doing such a task.

This was said in the same vein by MT 5 that the communication between university and schools should be clear:

I wish that there can be clear guidelines for school-based mentor teachers on what to do during TP.

Mentoring incentives

In addition to clear guidelines for school-based mentor teachers, MT 5 desires that there could be remuneration for mentoring since it is an additional task and time consuming also.

Because mentoring student-teachers is an additional job to teaching learners I wish there can be compensation for this job as it also consumes most of our time.

MT 2 articulated his/her frustration about the preparedness of student-teachers from the university;

At university there is something seriously lacking in the way in which lecturers prepare student-teachers. Students coming from university are not fully prepared; they must learn most of the things in the classroom; I wonder what they are doing at university. I was frustrated at student-teachers' low levels of preparedness for teaching, I wish I had no student-teachers attached to me. If I continue to get student-teachers who give me such, sometimes I feel it's better for me to work alone in my class.

Time consuming

In addition to what MT 2 has said above about the lack of preparation on the part of the student-teachers, MT 1 indicated another challenge that the student-teachers might do to escape the mentor teacher.

Yes, although sometimes the student-teacher gave me the lesson while on the way to the classroom and I had to rush looking at or sometimes she gave me the lesson while busy with something else like preparing a test for another class. But I found that sometimes they intentionally gave me the lesson so that I don't have enough time to look at them.

Nearly all school-based mentor teachers were positive about the level of demand on their time. A very small number found the regularity of and preparation for weekly meetings a pressure. School-based mentor teachers in promotion posts often carried out their mentoring role in addition to their regular duties associated with the responsibilities of their promotion posts, as there were two principals and an HOD participant in this study. While they found this to be demanding, they did not perceive it to be an unreasonable burden. According to MT 2:

Student-teachers do teach as expected. The preparation of lesson notes by student-teachers, however, was less professional. Most student-teachers are often assisted in their lesson planning. Generally, the student-teachers need a lot more training to enable them to teach effectively, with some orientation and lesson observation from their mentors, they will eventually pick up the skills. It is important to provide positive and constructive feedback to the student-teacher. Gradually, this will be able to help them achieve success.

Mentor-student relationship

MT 1 articulated the following challenges that he/she experienced in the journey of mentoring student-teachers in ITT.

There are student-teachers who are difficult to work with; they do not take the profession seriously. Mentoring is time consuming as you have to be with the student-teacher during planning as well as during presentation and after that you reflect and give feedback.

Lastly, there is no remuneration for all this extra work.

To sum up this discussion, school-based mentor teachers experience challenges in mentoring student-teachers when:

- i. the school has no policy around TP,
- ii. there is limited understanding of students' level of learning in relation to the syllabus,
- iii. there is lack of preparedness to enter TP with the current curriculum knowledge,
- iv. they do not understand how to cater for individual differences,

- v. they are not informed of the arrival of student-teachers,
- vi. There is reluctance on the side of the student-teacher, and
- vii. They are not trained in mentoring.

DISCUSSION

The amount of time spent in the professional development activities like mentoring must receive consideration because professional development, by its nature, should happen while the teachers are engaged in their work and profession (Mokhele, 2011). The teachers interviewed voiced dissatisfaction with the time allocation as they point out that it creates challenges of not being able to cover other aspects whether of subject matter, content or pedagogical strategies. To be specific it creates an overload.

One way of increasing effectiveness of action is to adjust roles of lecturers and mentors. University lecturers should spend more time in schools to help mentors to become teacher educators; this enhances ownership and responsibility to the teacher development program. Lecturers should also provide support and guidance for student-teachers, assisting them in integrating theoretical and research-based ideas from university modules and contact sessions into their teaching. In this way, the university lecturers can assume a far-reaching role as prompts for change, taking their expertise to impact on the change process and enhancing schools in overcoming supervisory challenges they may be struggling with.

supervision needs serious debate within the university and the department as this is a quality issue in view of the mentor/student-teacher caring relationship. While the school-based model may be ideal for ITT, this study has shown that it can be made more effective with more involvement by the university, offering mentors incentives, embarking on an on-going mentor training and reconsideration of graded supervision.

Many teachers express dissatisfaction with the professional development opportunities made available to them in schools and insisted that the most effective development programmes they have experienced have been self-initiated (Zide and Mokhele, 2018). From the findings, the following challenges also emanated:

- i. Poor communication including lack of open communication, failure to communicate tactfully and inability to listen between the mentor teacher and the student teacher, between school and university and that is a recipe for disaster. The relationship between university lecturers and mentors is critical and can be what Russel and Russel (2013) described as a 'hit or miss'. It needs to be improved so as to make school-based mentors sure of what was to be expected of a student-teacher on ITT and such clarity may improve the smooth running and effectiveness of mentoring.
- ii. Lack of commitment: lack of time committed to the relationship or waning interest over time. Mentors did not have enough time to commit to the mentoring process due to their workload.
- iii. Personality differences : Different personal characteristics between the mentor and the student-teacher.

- iv. Lack of experience : school-based mentor teacher may not have the relevant knowledge, skills or experience. In such occurrences, mentor teachers should link the student teacher to other mentors who can fill the gaps.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE SCHOOL-BASED MENTORING IN ITT.

Reduced workload

Based on the challenges raised and correspondingly pronounced recommendations made by school-based mentor teachers, reduced workloads can assist to improve the mentoring process.

School-based mentor teachers' workload should be reduced as mentoring student-teachers is an extra load.

As mentor teacher training has been a world-wide concern in most cases, one of the participants indicated that it was a process that was left on the table to rot. Concerning workload and time school-based mentor teachers felt that their workload should be reduced as mentoring student-teachers is an additional task.

Adequate mentor selection

With regard to mentor selection MT 5 articulated the following:

In my school, the best performing teachers were selected as mentors for the student-teachers and that is how I was selected as a mentor. Sharing the knowledge of teaching and the experience that I have were strong motivations for becoming a mentor.

Mentor teachers should make the teaching activity fun to the student-teacher so as to eliminate their fears. MT 4 articulated the following recommendation with regard to demonstration of enthusiasm.

I ensure that learning is fun by keeping students laughing and this helps to keep attention in the classroom, reduce anxiety and create a classroom atmosphere that is conducive to effective learning.

If mentor teachers can perform their role well, student-teachers can also be pronounced in their teaching. In the same vein, MT 2 agreed to this, saying:

Student-teachers performed well under supervision. Therefore, this meant that given the right assistance and guidance by school-based mentor teachers, the student-teachers could perform well on the job upon completion. I recognized the importance of the lesson plan in balancing content and time.

Good working relationship between school and university

As a link between the school placement and the university, there is a need for communication between the two to craft terms of reference and the general expectations of the two institutions. A common understanding needs to be established between the placement schools and the universities for the goal of mentoring student-teachers during ITT. Butler and Cuenca (2012) emphasized the

importance of communication and coherence between the university and school-based mentor teachers in the professional preparation of student-teachers.

Introduction of mentor training program

In order to improve the mentoring activity by untrained mentors, universities have started a training program for mentor teachers, for example a university in the United States, the University of South Africa and the University of Fort Hare. I also recommend that all universities should follow suit in order to improve our ITT and the recognition of our school-based mentoring program.

Introduction of incentives

Furthermore, there should be some form of compensation for school-based mentor teachers for the additional job they are taking on with mentoring.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, I can conclude that, it is essential for university lecturers and mentors to work hand-in-hand in order to ensure that their efforts are coordinated, thus improving the quality of mentorship in school. In addition to the above, universities should involve mentors in the assessment of students by ensuring that their input is considered in the final teaching practice assessment. Furthermore, micro-teaching should be continuously done at university so as to acquaint the student-teachers with the actual teaching even before actually practicing at placement schools. Teacher training institutions should launch in-service workshops for all school-based mentors with a focus on mentoring skills and mentor roles so that they perform their duties with expertise.

Schools should ensure that class teachers with many school responsibilities such as heads, deputy principals, principals and teachers-in-charge or teachers with other commitments such as personal studies should not be mentors so that adequate time is given to mentoring. Host schools should make efforts to minimize ITT challenges around resources by addressing concerns such as teaching resources and ensuring that school-based mentor teachers' work is supervised.

Incorporating more effective selection of teachers for mentoring and match mentors and student-teachers more effectively to avoid potential clashes of personality or approach. Each school must maintain official records for documenting mentoring experiences including, for example, the names of student-teachers even new teachers, the names of school-based mentor teachers assigned, type of mentoring activities, and the number of hours spent etc. This can improve mentoring and it an effective process with less challenges but more beneficial.

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