

The Importance of Mentoring: Findings from Students Doing Post Graduate Diploma in Education at Zimbabwe Open University, Bulawayo Region

Mr John Mpofu, Dr Sylod Chimhenga,

¹Senior lecturer Department of Media and Journalism Zimbabwe Open University

²Senior Lecturer, Center for Student management, Zimbabwe Open University

Abstract: *This study examines the perceptions of student teachers on the importance of mentoring, in teacher education programme at Zimbabwe Open University, A total of 50 student teachers doing Post Graduate Diploma in Education in the Department of Teacher Education during the 2015-2016 academic year participated in the study. A researcher-designed questionnaire was utilized to collect data. The results indicate that participants perceive high disagreement toward the effectiveness of mentor teachers. They express that they wish mentor teachers to be understanding, good models, to treat them as a teacher candidate not as a student and to give constructive feedback. The study concludes by offering a number of practical and theoretical implications for the field of study.*

Keywords: *Mentoring, mentor teachers, teacher training program, practicum*

I. Introduction

According to Bray and Nettleton (2006) mentoring is one of the most effective ways of developing student teachers quality during teacher training. Mentoring has been found to be an effective way of developing professionals and it has been applied in the areas of medicine, building and the military with effectiveness (Strong & Baron, 2004). Researches related to teacher education have shown that student teaching practice in the school serves as the most significant factor in the shaping of student teachers' experience of training to be a teacher (Tang,2003). In line with those researches, the great bulk of literature in teacher education point out that mentoring plays a significant role in the development of student teachers within teacher education programs. According to Posner (1987) the mentor teacher is the individual most responsible for the quality of experience the student teacher receives.

Teacher training programs have received attention as researchers and practitioners attempt to understand how to best ensure graduates are equipped to teach all learners and schools are able to reduce turnover rates (Ludwig, Kirshstein, & Sidana, 2010). Mentoring student teachers in their initial school-based experience has been advocated as a reform in teacher education since the late 1980s. Bigelow (2002) describe mentoring as a process of helping student teachers to develop teaching behaviors and strategies, involving a nurturing relationship between a less experienced person and a more experienced person where the mentor provides guidance by serving as a role model and advisor. Zimbabwe Open University uses mentoring as a strategy to assist student teachers to develop their skills during the period of teaching practice.

The concept of teaching practice in Zimbabwe

Teaching practice refers to the opportunity given to the trainee to develop and improve his / her professional practice in the context of the real classroom, usually under some form of guidance and supervision. Perry(1997:3) says that teaching practice refers to the period of time in which a student teacher gains firsthand experience in working with a particular group of children. In Zimbabwe, teaching practice involves the student teacher working under the direct and continuing supervision of experienced teacher. During the period of teaching practice the student teachers are able to observe the entire work of the school and to participate actively in all the important professional activities of a teacher both in and out of the classroom (Khan: 1993). Teaching practice contributes not only to the development of professional norms of teaching but also to learning classroom techniques.

Teaching Practice aim to provide student teachers with practical experience in teaching and to enhance student teachers' abilities to further develop their knowledge and skills in the areas studied in their education courses, and to apply these in teaching pupils in school. Student teachers will be able to draw on a given scheme of work to produce lesson plans for all activities they plan and lead themselves. During Teaching Practice, student teachers will be able to work with individual pupils, and will also organize and teach groups and whole classes to facilitate learning in pupils. Student teachers will be able to monitor and evaluate the work produced

by the pupils, adjusting teaching and future planning in the light of this information. Student teachers will be able to evaluate each lesson taught, reflecting on their own professional development and demonstrating a sound understanding of the role of the teacher. Teaching Practice experience consists of an extensive period of school-based activities such as observations, discussions, planning, teaching, assessing, evaluating and reflecting. All of these activities are undertaken in a supervised working through mentoring. The initial days of the Teaching Practice at school could be utilized by the student teacher to observe a range of teaching and learning situations, to familiarize him/herself with school routines and activities, to gather information needed for teaching tasks, and to plan and discuss lessons with practising teachers.

What is mentoring?

Literature has shown that there is no single definition for mentoring. Even in teacher education context, the definitions vary greatly giving the reader differing impressions as to what mentoring is. Some definitions view it as a hierarchical relationship in which the mentor is more experienced than the mentee, or that the mentor has or can provide knowledge and skills that the mentee wants or needs (McCormack & West, 2006). Smith (2007:277) defines mentoring as ‘a particular mode of learning wherein the mentor not only supports the mentee, but also challenges them productively so that progress is made’. However, Fairbanks, Freedman and Kahn (2000:103) define mentoring in teacher education as ‘complex social interactions that mentor teachers and student teachers’ construct and negotiate for a variety of professional purposes and in response to the contextual factors they encounter’. Mentoring is a process which develops the whole person, rather than parts. It involves supporting and providing feedback to the mentee without judgment or criteria.

The term mentoring describes ‘the support given by one (usually more experienced) person for the growth and learning of another, and for their integration into and acceptance by a specific community’ (Malderez, 2001: 57). It is ‘a particular mode of learning wherein the mentor not only supports the mentee, but also challenges them productively so that progress is made’ (Smith 2007: 277). Mentoring involves guidance and suggestion, as well as the development of autonomous skills, judgments, personal and professional mastery, expertise, trust and the development of self-confidence over time (O’Brien & Hamburg, 2014). According to Lai (2005:12) ‘mentoring plays an important role in enhancing novice teachers’ opportunities to learn within the contexts of teaching’. Mentoring in specific context not only allows student teachers to acquire context specific knowledge but also develop situation-based skills, which can be transferred to similar future situations in that context. For the reason that teachers need to learn to teach in a particular context (Feiman-Nemser, 2003) and specific mentoring will occur that is dependant on the contextual circumstance (Hudson, 2004), each educational jurisdiction will have different forms and expectations of mentoring.

The mentoring context in teacher education

Mentoring has replaced supervision in most cases in teacher education context, but it is unclear from the research literature how mentoring is implemented and operates in this context (Hudson, 2004). Bray and Nettleton (2006: 849) indicate that supervising involves ‘the roles of teacher, boss, assessor, counselor and expert’, whereas mentoring involves ‘assisting, befriending, guiding, advising and counseling. Hudson and Millwater (2006) describe supervision as having the key purpose of assessment performance, whereas mentoring is about building trust within a relationship. In this respect, Sanford and Hopper (2000) claim that the term ‘supervision’ has negative connotations: that one needs watching or that something needs to be fixed and also note that there is a hierarchical system within supervision: the supervisor has power over the protégé. Despite the highlighted differences between mentoring and supervision, mentors in teacher education engage in both mentoring and supervisory roles. Mentors nurture the development of the mentee through building rapport. They also use such interpersonal functions as supporting, advising, empathizing and role modelling. Student teachers usually experience several different school sites throughout their degree, thus encountering a variety of mentor teachers (Queensland College of Teachers, 2007). Therefore, the kinds of mentoring relationships that a student teacher forms with their mentor may be significantly different to a professional who have mentors for an extended period of time.

Teachers are accountable for their classrooms and the students that inhabit in those classrooms. In an education context, the mentee may be required to undertake all tasks the mentor does, necessitating complex planning and organisation of the mentoring relationship and process (Hudson, 2004). According to Smith (2007), a mentor can be a co-worker or a peer, someone who is equal in status and in age. Peers who are mentors can be more experienced than the mentee or at the same developmental levels. Mentors, in the traditional sense of the term, are usually people in leadership roles or are people whom the mentee aspires to be like (Cox, 2005).

The statement of the problem

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to highlight the importance of mentoring as experienced by the student teachers doing Post Graduate Diploma in Education at Zimbabwe Open University. Diploma

II. Methodology

The study adopted the qualitative research approach because it aimed at exploring student teachers' experiences during their teaching practice. Qualitative methodology was compatible with the study's focus for as it enables researchers to dig deep into the phenomenon under study (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). Qualitative research allows for the collection of rich detail and insights into the participants' experiences of the world and these may prove to be more meaningful than other approaches.

Participants

50 student teachers doing Post Graduate Diploma in Education at Zimbabwe Open University were used in this research. These students spend one semester out of three semesters of their training programme doing Teaching Practice in schools where they would be attached to or mentored by trained teachers. Teaching Practice is an extensive period of school-based activities such as observations, discussions, planning, teaching, assessing, evaluating and reflecting.

Procedure

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews of participants from different schools: academic mentors, student teachers and Heads of Schools. The interviews provided opportunities for the participants to reflect on their experiences and evaluate the importance of mentoring for student teachers. Semi-structured interviews were preferred for the collection of data as they enabled the researcher to probe responses and solicit further details from the interviewees.

Findings

The students appreciated the role played by mentors who are experienced trained teachers. They were however exceptions where some of the mentors due to lack of training imposed their ideas on the student teachers. Some of the student teachers stated,

Some of the mentors are not skilled in helping student teachers. Because when you ask them to explain the relevance of philosophy in the study of different subjects they are unable to provide a convincing answer. Mentors also tended to treat the student teacher as an apprentice hence he /she has to learn from the mentor without question. The challenge posed by such an attitude was that some of the student teachers studying post graduate diploma in education have been teaching for a long time. Their academic qualifications might be better than the mentors. There is need for mentors to respect the student teacher and even appreciate that they can learn a few things from the student teacher.

Mentors assisted the student teachers in terms of the importance of documentation and the link that is there between psychology, sociology and the teaching of a specific subject. Student teachers appreciated that sometimes they overlooked the experiences, knowledge and skills that the pupil brought in the classroom. Through the guidance of the experienced mentor they learnt how to organize lesson in a way that pupils use their experiences and knowledge as a foundation for new knowledge.

The following comments were made by students on teaching practice;

"Mr. Elfias Moyo, my mentor in the history department, constantly encouraged me to experiment with new assignments. When attempts to increase student engagement failed, which happened, he didn't record or report my mistakes to any superior; he helped me refine and analyze my approach to be more successful."

"Similarly, Bruce Sibanda, who just retired after 42 years in education -- most recently as Deputy head of school at Domboshava -- never scolded me for making mistakes. In fact, I can only recall his offering me support and praise, along with pragmatic advice on how to continue maturing as an effective teacher. Mr Sibanda didn't just simply pat me on the back and send me on my way. He took the time to truly listen".

"Hayes certainly picked up on my body language, and he tailored his feedback to my nervous, insecure state. He found a way to be honest and helpful, never hurtful or insensitive. I also felt great comfort in knowing that he empathized with my difficulties, and that when he was a new teacher, he experienced similar challenges."

III. Discussion

It is clear from the examples of comments from the student teachers that the mentor acts as an educational companion, giving *technical* support to the novice teacher by means of feedback, reflection-on-action, reflection about the what – how – why of lesson events. The mentor refers to the development of the professional self of a novice teacher. The "3 level-mentoring" (Niggli 2003), referring to the classroom-action of

the mentee (level 1), the reflection on action (level 1) and the development of professional competencies (level 3) gives advice to a differentiated mentoring programme.

The mentor acts as a change agent, working together with a mentee by means of collaborative inquiry to teaching and learning of pupils. The model of *cognitive coaching* is addressed to curriculum planning as well as direct intervention of the coach in the classroom. The aspect of change is not only referring to classroom practice but also to the development of a professional culture in a school.

Types of mentoring

Underlying assumptions about teaching, learning, and schooling in general differ. Wang/Odell (2002) came out with three types in existing mentoring programs which show certain advantages and pitfalls.

- **The Humanistic perspective** on teacher mentoring deals primarily with emotional support. This approach helps the novice teacher to deal with the “reality shock” in a school, to reduce psychological stress, to empower self-esteem. The mentor is a **counsellor** who helps by giving personal support and encouragement. Mentor training programs refer to communication skills, positive feedback and supervision techniques. Mentoring is more or less a process of adjustment to the situation, not an innovative approach.
- **The Situated apprentice perspective** on teacher mentoring is concentrated on giving field related technical support, develop situated knowledge in a process of observation, modelling, demonstration, and reflection. The mentor acts as a *guide* who helps to develop practical teaching skills and knowledge. The mentor-mentee-relationship is hierarchical, aiming at a functional adaptation to an existing teaching practice.
- **Critical constructivist perspective** on teacher mentoring involves the processes of learning that is shaped according to assimilation and accommodation. ” (Zanting et al 1998 suggests that critical reflection, explication of practical knowledge and the collaborative work of the mentor and the mentee are dedicated to change existing practice. Inquiry oriented learning is preferred. The mentor is acting like a *change agent*. Mentor training programs will focus on “cognitive coaching”. The notion of change is challenging, but creating uncertainty. The potential of denouncing existing knowledge and practice in general could cause troubles. The three different types will not occur in pure shapes, and there will be bridges between them in reality. According to McIntyre/Hagger (1996) these types are formed in a successively complex way: the personal relationship with emotional support is a basic involvement of the mentee; on a second level mentoring involves active guidance and technical support; on a third level mentoring is including collaboration and change. The types are stages in a development process of mentoring. What is important is the differentiation of underlying assumptions about teaching, learning, and how one can learn how to teach.

IV. Conclusions

The aim of this synthesis of the research literature was to examine critically how mentoring is conceptualized in the literature as well as to arrive at a description and/or a definition of mentoring as it might apply with a pre-service teacher education context. A second aim of this synthesis was to examine the roles that mentors and mentees play in a mentoring relationship and how they interconnect. The following key points can be concluded from the synthesis: a) Mentoring is defined in many various ways throughout the literature. Existing definitions in pre-service teacher education do not consistently consider or embrace the three broad components of a mentoring relationship – relationship, process and context. A definition for mentoring that embraces the three components is as follows. Mentoring is a non-hierarchical, reciprocal relationship between mentors and mentees who work towards specific professional and personal outcomes for the mentee. The relationship usually follows a developmental pattern within a specified timeframe and roles are defined, expectations are outlined and a purpose is (ideally) clearly delineated. b) The literature reveals that roles undertaken by mentors and mentees in mentoring relationship are numerous, depending on the context and the goals to be achieved. Nevertheless the roles are not clearly defined in terms of what actions occur during the process of mentoring. It has also been revealed that there is a clear link between the roles of mentors and mentees, but there is a significant gap in research about the synergy between mentor and mentee roles and how the roles interact and react. c) There is limited research about the role of mentees in the pre-service teacher context. The focus of most research studies is the role of mentors. Research is needed about the role of mentees from the perspective of mentors and mentees. The plethora of literature about mentoring indicates that mentoring is a widespread, universally accepted relationship that occurs for a variety of reasons in many professions. This review has defined mentoring and has begun to delve into the interconnectedness between mentors and mentees. It has highlighted the need to define mentoring for the pre-service teacher context as well as defining the interconnecting roles of mentors and mentees. Mentoring is a valuable process that impacts on both mentors and mentees. It is essential that the impact be positive, therefore both mentors and mentees need to

know what their associated roles are and how they interact. Future research in the pre-service teacher context needs to focus on definitions and roles, as well as the interconnectedness between the roles.

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