

THE FUTURE AND SUSTAINABILITY OF MEANINGFUL EDUCATION LIES IN THE ABILITY OF SEASONED TEACHERS TO CULTIVATE NOVICE TEACHERS THROUGH STRENGTH-BASED-MENTORING

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Abstract

Newly qualified teachers are barraged with uncertainties and could seem inadequately prepared for the teaching profession. Even though graduates are believed to have sufficient subject content knowledge the average day could offer more interruptions than anticipated. Although this study will not aim dispute the quality or value of the curriculum offered; there seems to be an absence in the holistic development of educators. It is therefore imperative that experienced educators serve as mentors to expand the gain of their skills learnt through exposure and involvement in teaching, adding value to the education sector. As part of prospective doctoral study, the researcher will investigate whether a mentorship program for seasoned educators could offer guidance, stability and confidence to novice teachers by contributing maturity and responsibility.

South Africa has educational challenges 25 years post-apartheid; whether it be pit latrine, bilingual schools in monolingual areas (and vice versa) or often vandalized schools. These factors impact education ranging from macro- (education sector), meso- (socio-economic decline) as well as micro-level (teacher and learner) with majority support from the Department of Education to socio-economic challenges and little attention to educators. Hence, this study will purposefully focus on micro-level where educators could hold one another accountable to build educational capacity. The discovery of challenges novice teachers experience and whether possible gaps exist which could be filled by a suitable mentoring program will have initial priority, with the secondary intention to assist seasoned teachers on a road to self-discovery, embracing a servant leadership role in a quest to address these challenges, striving towards solutions in mentoring for the benefit of sustainable learning.

The study elects to include Secondary schools from different backgrounds in the Free State Educational District, involving teachers selected based on their eagerness to improve their life and teaching skills. A pragmatic research approach will be intended with the inherent use of mixed method research to analyze data. Quantitative data could point towards the possible gaps and challenges with the use of a questionnaire. From this data strengths-based-mentoring collaboration sessions will follow to obtain qualitative data about the suitability of a mentorship programme. Pragmatism as a research method complements the combination of positivism leading to the appreciation of its suitability in practice focusing on solutions.

Keywords: *Mentoring, novice, strength-based, leadership, accountability.*

1. Introduction

This literature review represents an envisaged study based on whether novice teachers could grow in both their personal and professional capacity when suitable and sufficient support are offered from seasoned educators. This reversed responsibility on seasoned educators to anticipate the gaps and shortfalls novice teachers might experience; stepping into a servant-leadership role offering guidance, stability and instil confidence to novice teachers; will be the key driver on the efficacy for the need of a mentorship programme in South African Education Sector.

To add context, the career paths of postgraduates in Education and Professional Accounting will be compared. Both individuals spend around four years on campus completing their studies. Both have been exposed to work integrated learning (WIL) and presumably engaged in numerous student activities building character to develop holistically. On completion of their respective degrees, the future accountant will do an internship prior to a position as an Accountant, the norm being approximately three years. Senior staff understand that interns are finding their feet, learning new skills; mostly retaining their status as students for three additional years. In contrast, Education Postgraduates in South Africa (novice teachers)

leave university as fourth-year students in December, walks into a school early January expected to be adults and at times take responsibility for Grade 12 learners. It proves to be a mammoth task to transform from a free-spirited student to a responsible adult in less than a month. It seems the development gap is a tad too great for a novice teacher to move from student to adult in such a short time frame without suitable support. Against these odds, South African Educators still manages to produce successful matriculants year after year, but the burden has to be lightened for novice teachers.

To date, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has offered and implemented various support programmes to ensure stability in the education sector, although few exclusively support educators. Therefore, this research will aim to focus on the support of novice teachers who enters the work force with more than teaching on their plate.

2. Literature review

From literature by Porumb, Romania experienced similar challenges with beginner teachers and have according to literature successfully implemented a mentorship programme supporting their beginner teachers with a program aimed to improve the professional incorporation and active growth of beginner teachers. The programme initiates from university studies and continues towards a national formal system of traineeship which is coherent, cohesive and sustainable. This mentorship program in Romania has been formalised in September 2011 using the experience and potential of existing teachers, ensuring a measure of appeal to the teaching career through mentorship and support activities (Porumb 2015).

Porumb further remarks that document analysis in addition to survey-based research were used as research method; including 82 secondary education teachers who were trained to obtain the mentor status. The training program assured and improved inter correspondences through curricular coherence and their interdependence. The trainees largely agreed that assuring a high level of pedagogy conception and the penetration of the mentorship training program results from the professional model submitted. From this suggestion the researcher embarked on the hunt for a program with a reputable background to support the study to be done in South Africa's Central region.

Crossing the North Atlantic to Texas, USA, literature by Chetty and Hanushek indicated quality teaching relative to other school-based factors to the single most important predictor of student success (Chetty et al. 2014; Hanushek 2011). Associating with the sentiment, more researchers added that the most consistent observable characteristic associated with quality teaching is experience (Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor 2006; Papay and Kraft 2015). This relationship between quality teaching and experience raises an important equity concern as early-career teachers, who are less effective at increasing student achievement are disproportionately assigned to historically underserved students (Goldhaber, Lavery, and Theobald 2015). This unbalanced representation of early-career teachers in particular settings also has equity implications for the stability of underserved students' learning environments with research by Cowan indicating that early-career teachers have a high attrition and mobility rate (Cowan and Goldhaber 2018).

Statistics from the United States by Gray in (Gray and Taie 2015) suggests one in ten teachers does not return to the classroom after their first year and nearly 20% of teachers left the profession entirely within five years. These high attrition rates negatively impact student assessment results (Goldhaber, Lavery, and Theobald 2015; Hanushek, Rivkin, and Schiman 2016). Maerman and Sorenson in turn found that teacher turnover negatively impacts the quality of instructional staff and student achievement in North Carolina, USA (Mearman et al. 2014; Sorensen and Ladd 2020).

It is from these instances where teachers are directly affected that the educational system starts to lose ground from the researcher's perspective.

Similar to Romania, the United States realised a change of focus towards teachers, with research indicating that although the effectiveness of streamlining their teaching ability increases throughout a teacher's career, early-career teachers demonstrate the greatest growth early in their careers (Podolsky, Kini, and Darling-Hammond 2019). Smith concurs that early-career teachers often participate in formal teacher education programs as student teachers in supervised surroundings, but their initial years in the profession are often their first experience as a full fletched teachers taking responsibility for all aspects of the classroom (Smith 2004). This sudden shift in responsibility could be a challenging phase for novice teachers and has rightly accrued a growing body of literature which identifies professional support such as mentoring and professional development to be essential to support novice teachers, encouraging their persistence (Darling-Hammond 2003; Goldhaber, Krieg, and Theobald 2020; Kraft et al. 2018; Podolsky, Kini, and Darling-Hammond 2019; Wood and Stanulis 2009).

3. Mentorship

Mentorship according to Ingersoll and Smith (2004) is described as a component of the teaching profession transformation process. It could be highly structured and formal or less formal and comforting; both intentional assisting novice teachers to acclimate to their new environment (Ingersoll and Strong 2011).

To provide additional support to novice teachers, career strengthening strategies have to be implemented. It often results in a monumental resource-intensive endeavor, but worthwhile in terms of career development. Although the research suggests that mentorship and professional development could shape and drive novice teachers' experiences, this study will mainly focus on a strength-based mentorship approach.

The researcher will aim to find the differences and comparisons between mentorship and coaching to maintain accuracy when roles are being allocated, to ensure a collaborative approach avoiding a top down structure creating a boss and worker setup.

4. Theoretical framework

With this review of the literature in mind, (Patton and McMahon 1999) Systems Theory Framework of Career Development could guide this study as the theory illustrates how a number of interrelated systems collectively impact an individual's career development, including the individual, social, and environmental-societal systems. The individual system includes attributes such as an individual's age, skills, health, gender, ethnicity, beliefs, interests, and skills. The workplace, community groups, educational institutions, family, and peers will be a key driver guides our approach to find a suitable mentor-mentee partnership.

The scarceness of research in terms of educational mentorship could be justifies the researcher probably to transition from a Theoretical to Conceptual framework as the study progresses since theoretically a problem does exist in the development and attrition of novice teachers. Conceptually the researcher will have to investigate the possibility that novice teachers might only be uncertain about the expectations and responsibilities culminating from their career choices. From the interviews with novice teachers the framework will conceptually indicate where the exact shortfalls exist to be addressed during the promising development of a mentorship programme.

Two likely theories related to Coaching and Mentoring are the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) described as the distance between what a learner is capable of doing unsupported versus what they can do supported, and Biggs's Presage-Process-Product Model (3P's) summarised as the movement of learning from a student's prior knowledge using learning focused activities to reach a desired outcome.

The GROW Model (used when dealt with performance considerations) could also proof a worthy contributor to the study since the goal in terms of the reality still has to be set.

5. Design and methodology

Since individual feedback are paramount, the researcher will indulge in a qualitative research approach, including scrupulous literature review. Formal interviews will be held; including pre- and post-interviews to measure possible growth during an active research pedagogy study.

The researcher enrolled for a Gallup strengths-based-coaching course as research tool to utilise during the interviews. Since the purpose is not to redesign existing mentorship programmes, Gallup as an existing course has been selected to investigate if Gallup could be used to define and motivate the development of a mentorship programme which could add value to novice teachers.

The Gallup coaching course requires certification to present, and therefore the researcher will first complete the course before approaching schools. When the researcher is a qualified Gallup coach, 5 schools, with diverse resources ranging from rural, urban, cross cultural, single medium and/or poor in the Free State Educational District, will be approached. The aim will be to include 10 teachers of which 5 seasoned and 5 novices, whom do not have to be subject related, but rather selected on eagerness to improve their personal skills and growth.

All participants will be invited to a workshop, participating in a Gallup online assessment similar to what the researcher has done. The workshop will then aim to manage individual attention and focus for the participants to learn about and from themselves and their peers.

The practical relevance of pragmatism as a research paradigm will be implemented during pragmatic research to analysed data. The purposeful use of quantitative data will be to find the possible gaps and challenges novice teachers might experience via interviews. The perceived frustration seasoned teachers might experience when novice teachers join the team of educators could drive the conversation.

From these gaps, challenges, and frustrations a strengths-based-mentoring collaboration session will be held. Qualitative research methods will be employed during this period discussing how participants deem a suitable mentorship programme could benefit sustainable teaching (Mitchell 2018).

6. Objectives

By being resolute in the application of such a strength-based-mentorship program, the purpose would be to instil confidence in novice teachers, using their strengths to build an education sector which provides support at each level of its hierarchy, taking responsibility of our own, and realising that support is readily available. Ultimately this study will aim to investigate how and if our education structure, internally and externally, can be impacted by implementing a strength-based-mentorship programme developing a responsibility model linked to educational hierarchy.

A mentoring programme offered by seasoned teachers could have a positive impact to capacitate novice teachers for their chosen career in teaching. Investigation will be done to discover possible challenges novice teachers' experiences and which gaps could be filled by a suitable mentoring program. These gaps or challenges could range from lack of experience in teaching; lack of exposure to various personalities in a single class; uncertainty on fluctuations in a classroom situation; time management; etc.

An intentional benefit will be to assist seasoned teachers on a road to self-discovery embracing a servant leadership role in a quest to identify potential problems or challenges experienced by novice teachers and providing mentoring to ensure sustainable learning takes place in our classrooms.

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