

A STRENGTH-BASED MENTORSHIP PROGRAMME FOR NOVICE TEACHERS ILLUMINATED BY ACQUIRED STRENGTHS

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Abstract

The lyrics from “Another brick in the wall’ by Pink Floyd released in 1979 inadvertently puts teachers on the backfoot, especially when the society can’t help to sing along. Although the song voices the feelings of many young adults pondering about teachers ruining their freedom by forceful actions of superiority, the majority of children, however, deem their primary school teachers as heroes. High school learners on the other hand, find themselves in a tussle with teachers; whether it might be an authority challenge or the need to be heard.

Annually novice teachers instinctively rock up at schools as young and energetic postgraduates hoping to impact children’s lives; often finding themselves exhausted after their first year, occasionally considering leaving the profession. Is this an indication that novice teachers are unprepared for reality? This paper will not dispute any level of content knowledge nor ability to teach but will investigate whether a one-year internship could be beneficial to young graduates entering the teaching sphere.

Professions in medical, engineering, accounting, and law require postgraduates to complete at least a calendar year internship prior to becoming full members. Some even expect their candidates to pass board exams including extending certain skills. On the other hand, our education students are only required to complete 21 weeks across their four years at university for full employment. Mastering some soft skills before postgraduate shoulder responsibility in the classroom setup could prove to be a valuable commodity in the education profession; with seasoned educators playing a vital part to instil these soft skills. Internships overall suggest that being present in the day-to-day activities often offer opportunities for growth which repeatedly include people management, integrating theory and practice.

The study will aim investigate how strengths-based coaching can be utilized to assist mentors and novice teachers during their internship year. Research about strength-based coaching indicate that applying formerly acquired strengths to new challenges, could guide an individual to a higher percentage of achieving success.

The Education Sector is under severe pressure to perform; therefore, an individual entering the sector knowing how to manage their strengths and address learners, will greatly contribute to communities with little hope for their children. This research would aim to motivate the introduction of an internship for educators instilling an appropriate level of preparedness of novice teachers, especially by pairing them with seasoned educators using Gallup and the Clifton Strengths assessments. The value of a strength-based mentorship program embedded in an internship structure for postgraduate education students serving in government school could soon become a necessity.

Keywords: *Mentoring, novice, strength-based, leadership, soft skills.*

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 the South African Education Sector.

2. Background

To add context the career paths of postgraduates in Education and Professional Accounting will briefly 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 a compulsory two- or three-year 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 the foreseeable future.

In contrast, Education Postgraduates in South Africa (novice teachers) leave university as fourth-year students in December, gracefully 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. The development gap might be a tad too great for any 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.

3. Literature study

A motivation for this mentorship needs, derived from comparison to other professional careers where a required internship and at times a board exam is needed before an individual is allowed to practice. For example, a prospective Professional Accountant is required to do 3 years internship, and then write a Professional Examination assessment (SAIPA 2023). Auditors in South Africa CA(SA) are doing the same length of internship, but a further 2 assessments are required (SAICA 2023). In the medical profession, Doctors, Occupational Therapists, Pharmacists, Dentists, etc. are required to complete at least one practical year as well as an internship at a selected government hospital, with medical doctors doing two years of practical work in government hospitals (HPCSA Corporate Affairs 2017). Prospective Lawyers are also required to complete a two-year clerkship with four board exam papers in addition to an admission exam consisting of another four papers in two sittings (van der Merwe 2022).

Literature in terms of internships from the Accounting Sector will be discussed briefly. Albrecht noticed in a study that there is an expectation that internships lead to a closer relationship between the theoretical and technical knowledge when used in practice, guiding the development of personal competencies also known as soft skills (Albrecht et al. 1990). Results from a Romanian study suggests that the most important role to internships is to develop certain competencies which proven quite valuable in terms of notable contributions made by an internship; forming and developing students' competencies, practical and professional abilities in addition to increased ethical values added to a more informed understanding of the profession (Albu, Calu, and Guşe 2016).

Another study suggest that internships represent an instrument allowing to bridge theoretical and practical knowledge, for students to get better understanding between the shift from their expectations as students compared to the needs of the business environment in correlation with studies (Beard 2007; Beck and Halim 2008; Martin and Jack E. Wilkerson 2006) on the value an internship adds to the working environment.

Literature in terms of the medical profession points to the importance of clinical support for junior doctors at District Hospitals and standardisation of intern training at accredited facilities across South Africa (Miller, Mayanja, and Porter 2021). According to the researchers the objective of the internships are to instil confidence when managing emergencies and to gain experience. In addition the self-perceived readiness of medical interns completing their training to safely manage patients on their own was evaluated. Considering the lack of experience and confidence identified in Miller, Mayana and Porter's research, it becomes essential that senior medical doctors and on-site family physicians are attracted and retained where they could be able to support junior doctors.

This suggests that experienced individuals undeniably have knowledge and skills to convey to young graduates. In terms of the envisaged study, the Gallup Strength Based assessment can be valuable to find the strengths from individuals and apply them where needed. Individuals with definite gifts should be nourished to ensure stability in each profession.

Research by De Villiers, Van Heerden and Van Schalkwyk suggests the value internship in the medical fields are aiming at both interns and the value supervisors could add. From their study the intern supervisors indicated that interns were challenged by the transition from student to doctor, having to adapt to their new environment, extended working hours and deal with an increased workload. Clinical competencies, as well as attributes related to organisational acumen, social intelligence and personal characteristics, were identified as important to prepare interns for the workplace. Adding to the list of responsibilities, characteristics like diligence, reliability, self-discipline and a willingness to work emerged as stepping stones to employability (De Villiers, Van Heerden, and Van Schalkwyk 2018).

Realising the value supervisors add to preserve certain sectors, Education in itself should be a sector where we want to ensure stability, especially if we believe our children are our country's future. Australian research indicate that beginning teachers' lives have been scrutinised and studied over many years and extensive literature reported on their challenges, their need for support and the consequent effects on teacher attrition and student learning (Schuck et al. 2018). Their research steers that early career teachers, Novice Teachers, are indeed in need of more support compared to what they are currently receiving. Schuck's research reinforces the initiative of this study by indicating similar approaches in New South Wales, Australia, where their study was conducted. The Department of Education in Australia requires each full-time beginning teacher be assigned to a mentor teacher and to be assisted by this mentor to gain accreditation, through professional learning linked to national teaching standards in an effort to address the concerns arising in the literature.

4. Objectives

Crisp postgraduates in education leave the university setup where lecturers, content and study guides advocate the how and when of their existence. As students, they have lived an era of freedom with limited responsibilities apart from passing their respective modules. Entering a school setup, the exact same individuals are now responsible for the success of approximately 200 learners; and in as little as two months since leaving university the work environment changes their thoughts and experiences.

This study will form part of a doctoral study envisaged to commence in 2023. Phase 1 of the study was for the researcher to complete the Gallup Strength Coaching course to become a formal coach, which will be the basis on which mentorship will be focused. With phase 1 done, the second step will be to approach schools and participants.

5. Methods

An active research pedagogy will be applied with mixed methods in a pragmatic paradigm. This combination of approaches will be implemented at five secondary school in the Motheo Educational District, South Africa by approaching an equal number of Novice Teachers and Seasoned Educators from each school.

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 used 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).

Feilzer explored the practical relevance of pragmatism as a research paradigm implementing partial pragmatic research that exploited the inherent dual use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods to analyse data. The research supported the use of mixed method research in a pragmatism approach in abductive reasoning to produce socially useful knowledge and can confidently serve as a rationale for formal research design in addition to a more grounded approach to research (Feilzer 2009). From pragmatic epistemology, the pragmatists believe that there is a single real world, but different people can have different views about that real world. For this vast point of views, it will be important to ensure participants from various backgrounds and level of experiences where the pragmatist seeks knowledge according to the circumstances in which the phenomenon occur. (Brierley 2017; Kaushik and Walsh 2019; Research Articles 2019)

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-questionnaires 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 whether Gallup could be used to define and motivate the implementation of a mentorship programme which could add value to novice teachers. The aim will be to include participants whom might not be subject related, but rather selected on eagerness to improve their personal skills and growth, assisting in evaluation and implementation need for a formal mentorship programme.

6. Discussion

For more than twenty-odd years education in South Africa, and possibly globally, have been reason to various uncomfortable situations. Whether it be pit toilet 25 years post-apartheid, bilingual schools in monolingual areas (or vice versa) or challenges to keep assets undamaged on school premises; we have a few challenges impacting school education on all levels, from macro-level (challenged education sector; school system), meso-level (socio-economic decline, eroding values in society, broken homes/single parents) as well as micro-level (the teacher and learner). The fact is: we need help, and as much as we can get to keep the ubuntu dream alive – believing that each learner should be treated as a ‘village child’ which requires all stakeholders to be present and take responsibility. Although educators cannot be held solely responsible for these challenges, we could and should start to hold one another accountable to be the best possible individual to provide support and guidance to learners. Our learners, especially the marginalised, the fatherless and the misinformed could benefit so much when a suitable support structure is in place to provide support to our novice teachers.

7. Conclusions

Considering that Romania, America and Australia have already responded to the challenges early career teachers are experiencing, this study are definitely relevant and could contribute to a dire need in the South African Education needs. To address the problem on hand, I will research the preparedness of novice teachers for the profession they plan to enter, as well as how valuable seasoned educators could be if they are paired with a novice teacher using strength-based assessments. The value of a mentorship program as part of an internship structure for post graduate education students serving in government school.

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