POST-TEACHING OBSERVATION FEEDBACK
IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES:
COLLEGE MENTOR AND STUDENT-TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

School-based practice has long been considered an integral component of effective initial teacher education programmes. During school-based practice, mentor feedback is generally perceived as fundamental to student-teacher development. Post-teaching observation feedback (PTOF), given when mentors meet with mentees to discuss recently observed teaching, is the focus of this action research study. This study was conducted at an Emirati female initial teacher education institution in the United Arab Emirates. It explores, develops, and improves PTOF practice from the perspectives of Emirati and expatriate college mentors and female Emirati student-teachers. Cycle 1 explored college mentor and student-teacher perspectives on PTOF practice using qualitative questionnaires and focus group interviews. Cycle 1's findings informed a series of professional development sessions during which new practice guidelines were collaboratively developed with college mentors. Cycle 2 evaluated the effectiveness of the professional development and practice following implementation of the new practice guidelines. Cycle 2 data were collected through interviews and focus group interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data from both cycles. Cycle 1's findings revealed an overall lack of consistency to PTOF practice. College mentors mostly implemented either directive or collaborative theoretical approaches to mentoring and PTOF. This resulted in confusion and differing levels of developmental support for student-teachers. The Covid-19 pandemic meant that Cycle 2 evaluated the implementation of the new practice guidelines while school-based practice and PTOF occurred online. Cycle 2's findings indicated a more consistent, structured approach to PTOF. A transition towards collaborative approaches to mentoring and PTOF was evidenced, although challenges to their implementation were apparent. Reflective practice was perceived as predominately descriptive. The online delivery mode revealed challenges specific to female Emiratis. More time, along with contextual developmental support, is recommended to improve future PTOF.

Keywords: Initial teacher education, lesson observation feedback, mentoring, reflective practice, Emirati student-teachers.

1. Introduction

Learning through practice has long been considered an integral component of effective initial teacher education (ITE) programmes (Allen et al., 2019). Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) recognise that during school-based practice (SBP), mentor feedback is essential for student-teachers to develop into well-qualified teachers. Mentor feedback, particularly the oral feedback mentors provide after they observe a student teach during SBP, is the focus of this research study. This support, defined in this study as post-teaching observation feedback (PTOF), is the mentor's act of meeting with a mentee to discuss recently observed teaching. Bjørndal (2020) argues that PTOF is crucial for student-teacher development and that effective mentor/mentee PTOF needs to be collaborative, critical and reflective. Clarke et al. (2014) argue that providing PTOF is a focal mentor role. However, an issue of concern is that much of the recent PTOF literature is Western-centric. This research study was conducted in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) because I wanted to understand if predominantly Western PTOF literature was applicable to the UAE ITE context.

This study investigated professional and programme development, evaluated a transition towards collaborative approaches and gave participants a voice in the process. It is an action research (AR) study consisting of two cycles. The first cycle explores the perspectives of expatriate and Emirati college mentors and female Emirati student-teachers on PTOF practice at a federal ITE institution. Cycle 1's

findings inform a series of professional development (PD) sessions, during which new practice guidelines were developed. Cycle 2 used participant perspective to evaluate the effectiveness of the PD and practice following the implementation of the new practice guidelines.

2. Background

This AR study was conducted within the ITE department at an Emirati female higher education (HE) institution in the UAE. This institution is the largest provider of HE in the UAE and has 16 gender-segregated campuses across the country. The ITE programme is an eight-semester (four-year) undergraduate bachelor's degree It runs on five female campuses across four different emirates. Twelve education faculty work on the campus at the research setting, evenly split between Emiratis and expatriates. The expatriate faculty originate from five different countries across four continents. Three are male. The majority of students join the education programme directly from school, although there are a small number of mature students.

The institution is currently accredited to offer a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, which qualifies graduates to teach in kindergartens and up to grade 2 in UAE public schools. Previous offerings included primary and English language teaching, but these are being phased out and new education programmes are at the planning stage. Student-teachers study both core and general education subjects, and take a School Based Practice (SBP) course every semester. Its learning outcomes and week-by-week course delivery focus on practice and theory to support SBP. Each semester, student-teachers receive an SBP handbook, which is informative and provides tasks to complete during SBP. During SBP, education faculty work as college mentors observing student-teachers and conducting PTOF.
School-based mentors (usually the class teacher) also observe student-teachers when they teach. Student teachers spend between 10 and 40 days in schools each semester. The length incrementally increases and in total, student teachers complete 155 days in school.

3. Research questions

The six research questions are investigatory. The first three explore participants' pre-intervention perspectives on PTOF, and their findings inform the interventions. The latter three evaluate the interventions and practice following the implementation of new practice guidelines, from participant perspectives.

The exploratory cycle: Cycle 1
Research question 1
How do college mentors and student-teachers describe their current experiences of giving and receiving PTOF?
Research question 2
How do college mentors and student-teachers describe their theoretical approach to, and/or practice of, mentoring and giving or receiving PTOF?
Research question 3
What suggestions, if any, do college mentors and student-teachers have to develop PTOF?
The evaluation cycle: Cycle 2
Research questions 4, 5 and 6 relate to the post-intervention cycle.
Research question 4
How do college mentors and student-teachers describe their post-intervention experiences of PTOF?
Research question 5
In what ways, if at all, do college mentors and student-teachers perceive the interventions have altered their theoretical approach to, and/or practice of, mentoring and giving or receiving PTOF?
Research question 6
What suggestions, if any, do college mentors and student-teachers have to further develop PTOF practices?

4. Action research model

Coghlan and Brannick's (2014) AR model was followed for this study because it supports the implementation of change to practice within an organisation and has been successfully applied to

education institutions. Coghlan and Brannick's (2014) model includes a context and purpose stage followed by four phases in the AR cycle.

5. Data collection

In cycle 1 of this study 18 student teachers participated in focus group interviews (three focus groups comprising of six student teachers in each). The focus group interview protocol included two main questions with eight additional questions and possible follow-up prompts. The student-teachers speak English as a second or additional language, so I ensured that the questions were short, clear, and included familiar language. The planned questions aimed to give participants as much opportunity as possible to talk about aspects they viewed as significant. Eight college mentors completed an anonymous online qualitative questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 21 questions. Three questions were closed, designed to be simple and easy to respond to. The remaining questions were open-ended to elicit unrestricted responses from college mentors. This was intentional because, as Cohen et al. (2011) explain, open-ended responses provide richer data.

In cycle 2 of this study 18 student teachers participated in focus group interviews (three focus groups comprising of six student teachers in each). The focus group interview protocol included five questions with six possible follow-up prompts. Six college mentors participated in one-to-one interviews. Each interview consisted of six open-ended questions and prompts. The initial question was intended to be easy to answer. Jacob and Furgerson (2012) suggest initial questions should be familiar but central to the research. The questions then became more in-depth, requiring more thought. Whiting (2008) suggests that this question order is likely to provide richer data.

All data was collected online due to the Covid-19 pandemic and mandated social distancing protocols.

6. Data analysis

I adopted thematic analysis (TA) to examine the data in this study. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), TA provides a "rich and detailed yet complex account of data" (p. 78) and is particularly useful for understanding participant perspectives (Brown & Stockman, 2013). I used Braun and Clarke's (2013, 2019) six-stage reflexive TA approach to guide each phase of the data analysis. I found that the six stages were not linear: the process was iterative as I moved backwards and forwards checking and rechecking data, codes, clusters and themes.

7. Cycle 1 findings

The first cycle of this AR study's findings revealed that most participants described their experience of PTOF as confusing. College mentors were uncertain of their roles and responsibilities. Student-teachers were unclear what college mentors expected from them, perceiving each college mentor to have different expectations. At the time, there were no institutional guidelines, policies, or procedures for PTOF practice. Although this institution's SBP handbook outlined college mentor roles and responsibilities, these were poorly defined, unspecific and not directly related to PTOF. Cycle 1 found consensus on beginning PTOF positively then moving onto developmental feedback; however, there was less consistency to ending PTOF, to conducting meetings before SBP, and to requesting student-teachers complete pre-PTOF self-reflections.

Most participants explained that there was not enough time to give and receive PTOF. College mentors considered their SBP workload too heavy, and student-teachers recognised that PTOF was often rushed. College mentors equated longer PTOF with quality feedback and student-teachers explained they needed time during PTOF to feel comfortable enough to discuss their practice openly. Time required to build relationships was perceived as important, particularly as student-teachers preferred to be paired with a college mentor who had taught them before. Additionally, college mentors explained that they spent time supporting school-based mentors.

All the college mentors provided examples of how they were positive, sensitive and tried to instil confidence in student-teachers during PTOF. While the student-teachers mostly recognised that college mentors tried to encourage and support them, they explained that they wanted college mentors to be considerate when they gave feedback. If college mentor language was negative, they felt it was detrimental to their development. A few student-teachers explained that on occasion they received contradictory positive oral PTOF and what they perceived as negative written PTOF. It was unclear whether student-teachers misinterpreted oral PTOF or college mentors withheld less positive oral feedback.

Opinion was divided when college mentors described their theoretical approach to mentoring and PTOF. Half the college mentors said that they mostly implemented directive approaches, while the remaining half indicated that they mostly implemented either a collaborative or a combination of directive and collaborative approaches. The student-teachers perceived that they mostly received and indeed wanted directive approaches to mentoring and PTOF. It appeared that college mentors implemented their preferred approach as and when they chose, rather than when it was developmentally appropriate for student-teachers. This inconsistent implementation likely accounted for student-teachers' perceptions of differing levels of mentoring and PTOF support.

The directive approach to mentoring and PTOF appeared to be influenced by the requirement to grade each observed lesson. Again, opinion was divided. Half the college mentors felt that grading individual lessons and discussing grades during PTOF motivated student-teachers and supported their development. The other half considered grading all formative lesson observations as not conducive to student-teacher learning. Interestingly, most student-teachers explained that they found grading individual lessons unmotivating and a distraction from the developmental feedback the college mentors gave. Although half the college mentors indicated that they implemented collaborative approaches to mentoring and PTOF, there was limited evidence of developmental feedback that was assertive, questioning or 'critical' as defined by Bjørndal (2020). Student-teacher comments indicated that college mentors mostly pointed out elements of their teaching they needed to develop and directly told them how to improve, indicating linear dialogue. These findings did not appear to support the reflective practice model that underpins ITE at this institution.

8. Cycle 2 findings

Cycle 1 findings informed a series of professional development sessions. New practice guidelines were developed and implemented during the next period of school-based practice (SBP). Due to the global pandemic this period of SBP was conducted online. Cycle 2 evaluated the professional development and implementation of the new practice guidelines.

Cycle 2's findings revealed that the new practice guidelines supported a more consistent and structured approach to giving and receiving PTOF. College mentors indicated that they knew what their roles and responsibilities entailed. The addition of meetings before SBP facilitated student-teachers' understanding of expectations and served to build mentor/mentee relationships. After the interventions, all college mentors indicated that they found the new formative lesson observation template easier to use. It supported their provision of evidence-based feedback to student-teachers during PTOF. Additionally, most college mentors found the PD useful, and the additional resources supported them to give PTOF. Most participants preferred the convenience and flexibility of online PTOF. However, the home environment was not always conducive to student-teacher development and learning. Student-teachers mostly switched off online cameras, explaining that their families would disapprove if they showed their faces. Cycle 2's findings raised concerns that Emirati female student-teachers who study from home may be disadvantaged. Despite no commuting, a lack of time to conduct PTOF remained a concern in Cycle 2. This suggested serious flaws in the institutional formula used to calculate lesson observation schedules.

There was a transition towards collaborative mentoring and PTOF after the interventions. Most college mentors acknowledged that the PD and new practice guidelines supported this transition. Before the interventions, these college mentors acknowledged that they mostly incorporated directive approaches to PTOF; this transition therefore represented a paradigm shift in their theoretical approach. The findings revealed that removing grades from individual observed lessons supported greater collaboration during PTOF. However, reflective practice was mostly found to be descriptive. Most student-teachers were positive, more relaxed and felt more comfortable during Cycle 2's PTOF than Cycle 1's. While the shift to online delivery likely accounted for some of this sentiment, this change indicated a transition towards collaborative approaches to mentoring and PTOF. However, challenges were experienced when holding learning conversations and giving and receiving assertive, questioning feedback, which were perceived as new practice for approximately half the college mentors. These college mentors found giving grades easier and student-teachers wanted college mentor direction to develop their knowledge and improve their teaching skills. These findings indicated that the participants could have perhaps been better prepared, suggesting directions for future development.

9. Conclusion and recommendations

Although this study is not generalisable, its recommendations for improved PTOF are likely to apply to other campuses conducting the ITE programme. It is recommended that the practice of not grading individual observed lessons continues. However, this needs to be coordinated with PD and

curriculum development. Student-teacher PTOF development is likely to be more effective if it is built into the SBP course curriculum. This study recommends that reflective practice and collaborative approaches to mentoring and PTOF are taught overtly. I suggest implementing a developmental approach.

While it is recommended that PTOF is conducted immediately after lesson observation, this study demonstrates it is not always feasible. To ensure PTOF is timely, Management have approved the continuation of online PTOF. Given the challenges surrounding online PTOF evidenced in this study, I recommend that online PTOF is only conducted when face-to-face PTOF is not possible on the same day as the lesson observation. The lack of time to conduct PTOF evidenced in this study suggested serious flaws in the institutional observation schedule formula. I therefore recommend replacing the formula. College mentors should teach the SBP course to the same student-teachers they mentor in school. This would allow time for relationships to be built and expectations established before the commencement of SBP. If class sizes were limited to 12 or 15 student-teachers, more manageable observation loadings would result.

I recommend that a college mentor development programme is developed and implemented. It should be contextually appropriate and include reflective practice and collaborative approaches to mentoring and PTOF. Adequate time needs to be allocated for mentor development: Wetzel et al. (2017) noted that it took over a year of mentor professional development before PTOF dialogue became less directive and more reflective, collaborative and forward-thinking. To enhance future college mentor PD offerings, I suggest establishing pedagogical partnerships to represent all perspectives and stakeholders. While Murphy and Ní Dhuinn (2022) acknowledge that in ITE discourse pedagogical partnership tends to be limited to school-university partnerships or staff-student partnerships, their study focused on pedagogical partnership between a university and the wider community. Similarly pedagogical partnerships could be between the MOE, schools and this institution. Emiratis, expatriates, mentors and student-teachers should be involved to research and plan a future PD programme. Once developed, piloted, implemented and evaluated, a similar programme for school-based mentors could be installed. This study found that the new practice guidelines and PD supported the development of practice, though there remains room for further improvement. While this study demonstrated that Western models of mentoring and PTOF can be applied in the research context, it highlights that developmental support is imperative for success.

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