EXPLORING MENTORSHIP EXPERIENCES OF BACHELOR OF EDUCATION STUDENT TEACHERS DURING TEACHING PRACTICE: PERSPECTIVES ON CONFLICT OF MENTOR AND MENTEE ROLES

Ratokelo Willie Thabane[*]
Central University of Technology, Free State (South Africa)

Abstract

Lack of understanding of the roles in a mentorship process can be detrimental. During their teaching practice, student teachers are assigned mentors for guidance. Both the mentor teacher and the student teacher have specific mandatory responsibilities that make this relationship work. There is however a pertinent conflict of roles that usually results in the collapse of the relationship. This empirical study aimed to delve into the lived experiences of student teachers and explore these students' perspectives on their understanding of the roles of both the mentor teacher and the student teacher during teaching practice. This study is couched in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory which emphasizes learning by doing. The study adopted a qualitative approach, employing interviews and focus group discussions to gather data from 20 purposively selected student teachers. The results highlight the critical issues of poor communication and misunderstanding of the role of the mentor. Identifying these as key factors in the breakdown of the mentor-mentee relationship provides useful ideas for teacher training programmes. In light of the findings the study argues for a more intense training of both mentors and mentees on their roles in the mentorship process.

Keywords: Mentor teacher, student teacher mentee, mentorship process, conflict of roles.

1. Introduction

During Teaching Practice, sometimes refered to as teaching practicum (TP), students are placed in suitable educational settings that will showcase various types, methods, and forms of learning. Teaching practice provides a chance for students, as future educators, to gain hands-on experience in a real school setting. This experience allows them to merge theoretical knowledge with practical application, assess their skills as potential teachers, address urgent classroom issues, and learn from their errors (Ploj Virtič, Du Plessis, & Šorgo, 2023). Consistent and effective communication occurs between the university, the student, and the work-integrated learning (WIL) site. A mentoring system allows the student to engage with a range of well-structured teaching methods. Faculty members collaborate with relevant individuals at the sites to develop a shared understanding of the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in the student teachers' experience and assessment of their teaching abilities in a manner that fosters professionalism. The practical learning component of WIL for teacher education qualifications primarily occurs in classroom and school environments.

The mentoring theory developed by Kram (1983, 1985) and later expanded by Ragins and Kram (2007) serves as the theoretical framework for this study. According to Kram's theory, mentors fulfill both career-related and psychosocial roles, and she categorizes the mentoring process into four stages: the initiation phase, the cultivation phase, the separation phase, and the redefinition phase.

The mentoring relationship

McHugh and Gruppen (2021) define the concept of relationship as how people connect with each other. They argue that a mentoring relationship can range from informal and brief to formal and lengthy, where mentors with valuable experience, knowledge, skills, and/or wisdom provide advice, information, guidance, support, or opportunities to mentees to aid in their professional growth., The relationship, according to Williamson, Lawrence, Lyons, and Deutsch, (2020) that develops between mentor and mentee

[*]Correspondence e-mail: rthabane@cut.ac.za

is often considered essential for realizing positive developmental outcomes. They further describe a mentoring relationship as a primary driver of change in the mentoring intervention.

Sanyal (2017) identifies factors that play a significant role in the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship. First, the affinity between the mentor and mentee will impact on the effectiveness of the relationship. This is referred to as 'rapport' or 'rapport building'. Second, both mentors and mentees must be clear about the 'purpose' of the mentoring. This will guarantee that every interaction between mentor and mentee provides maximum benefit for both parties involved. Third, the progress through the stages or phases of the mentoring relationship is likely to be dependent on the 'intensity of learning' that is, the quality of the learning. The mentee ought to acquire knowledge or at the very least obtain pertinent information that enhances their understanding or directs them to additional resources or networking possibilities. The mentor should feel assured that they are playing a significant role in the mentee's education and growth. Finally, successful mentoring is a two-way, dynamic process where the functions of both the mentors and mentees are equally important.

During teaching practice mentoring from experienced teachers (mentor teachers) can contribute immensely to the success of practical phases.

The mentor's role

Maria-Monica and Alina (2014) identify the following mentor teacher's responsibilities in relation to the student teacher: Manages the student's activities; Supports the use of curriculum documents; Supports the design and implementation of lessons; Provides feedback for each task in the design phase and after implementation; Develops self-reflection and self-assessment of students; Draws up an evaluation report which mentions the evolution of students.

Mentors play a crucial role in facilitating the self-growth of pre-service student teachers, a process that relies on relationship building; therefore, their practice and connection with the mentee significantly impact the overall experience. The mentor's attitude and level of experience are essential for the pre-service students' mentoring journey as the mentor is required to provide support, which is challenging to achieve without a constructive mindset (Ploj Virtič, Du Plessis, & Šorgo, 2023).

The mentee's role

In addition to gaining professional knowledge, the mentoring process will teach mentees how to effectively communicate with various educational process participants, manage their time effectively, and become proficient with contemporary educational technologies (Shvets, Kuzmenko, Motuz, Moiseienko, & Pasichnyk, 2024). Mentees have an obligation to set their own personal goals; be open to communication with the mentor and learn from the mentor: skills and knowledge about the day-to-day work of a teacher.

2. Problem statement

Kang (2020) has emphasized the significance of the mentor's support for the mentees' improvement of their classroom teaching, while Hobson and Maxwell (2020) discovered that clarity and expectations regarding the roles are vital for the effectiveness of the mentoring and lack thereof may result in the collapse of the mentoring relationship. When a relationship fails, mentors and mentees may share some of the blame. While the most prevalent negative traits of an ineffective mentor include neglect, a lack of training in mentorship, inaccessibility, and a lack of interest in a mentee's work, Negative mentees are typically characterized as possessing a sense of entitlement and lacking drive, aptitude, and experience.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach, employing interviews and focus group discussions to gather data from 20 purposively selected student teachers. In order to inform this qualitative study, a semi-structured focus group interview was developed by the researcher. The final interview was composed of the following open-ended questions:

(1) How do 4th-year pre-service teachers perceive their mentoring experience during their Teaching Practice?
(2) What do you regard as the most critical roles of the (a) mentor teacher and (b) the mentee in the mentoring process?
(3) How satisfied were 4th-year pre-service teachers with their mentors?

4. Results and discussion

On how fourth year pre-service student teachers perceived their mentoring experience. Most student found the experience positive and enriching as reflected in some of the responses below:

The experience was incredibly enriching to be able to apply theory into practice with guidance from someone who has years of experience, especially because my mentor was my former teacher and I've grown to see her teach me throughout my whole high school life, then get to work in the same space as her, it was an honor indeed. In my experience, the mentoring journey was shaped not only by the mentor's teaching ability, but also by their willingness to engage with me as a learner, a future colleague, and a professional-in-progress.

Another student had this to say:

As a fourth-year students I perceive mentoring experience as a journey to grow and learn, simply because during my first year I overcome a lot of challenges such as poor speech because of the belief that learners do not take me as a teacher, poor classroom management because I was not trained enough how to prepare appropriate lessons and employ appropriate discipline. Four years later here I am walking tall and confident that I am a teacher all because of my teaching practice and the way I was mentored.

The above responses indicate that mentoring is a critical part of teacher training that is both enriching and helps in building confidence to student teachers. Student teachers also perceived mentoring process to have contributed in their personal development as future teachers. This notion is strengthened by De Ossorno Garcia and Doyle (2021) who maintain that mentoring passes on knowledge of subjects, facilitates personal development and encourages wise choices. In order for the mentor to provide assistance and encourage the mentee to shift context and envision a positive future or outcome Sanyal (2017) identifies seven types of mentor assistance – mentor's ability to help the mentee to shift context and envision a positive future or outcome; listen and be a sounding board when the mentee has a problem; pick up on underlying feelings related to the mentee's issues/problems; confront and challenge when appropriate; offer relevant information or suggest possible solutions; encourage explorations of options and bolster the mentee's confidence by delegating authority and providing new opportunities.

On what student teachers regarded as the most critical roles of the mentor teacher and the mentee, student teachers exhibited their knowledge of the important roles that both mentor-teachers and mentees play in the mentoring process. Regarding the role of the mentor teacher these were the responses:

"The most critical role of a mentor is giving feedback which can be done through observing, constantly following up and raring the student teacher. The most critical role of a mentee is communicating effectively with the mentor and being open to feedback"

"The most critical role of the mentor teacher is to guide, support, and model best practices. This includes giving unfiltered constructive feedback in a timely and respectful manner, helping the mentee set goals, being available to answer questions—it can be about learners, since the mentor knows them best, classroom, staff, school environment, policies—and creating an environment where learning is encouraged."

Responding to their perceived roles of the mentee student, teachers maintained that mentees also have an important role in the mentoring process.

"As a mentee, it's essential to be an active participant in the process, be open to feedback, proactive in asking questions, and reflective in my teaching. A step to being a good prospective teacher is to take criticism, knowing to put your feelings aside and see growth in your feedback, which in the end will lead to a good reflection in your teaching. Mentees should show initiative, professionalism, and a willingness to learn. It's not enough to just follow instructions—you also need to observe, adapt, and take responsibility for your growth. Being respectful of the mentor's time and classroom expectations is also key to maintaining a good relationship."

"The most critical role of a mentee is communicating effectively with the mentor and being open to feedback"

De Orsono Garcia and Doyle identify three main educational tasks of these mentoring roles: (1) sharing knowledge and experiences related to their field of expertise; (2) providing advice on recurring dilemmas and strategies that require knowledgeable understanding of the issues involved; and (3) exposing mentees to the social networks of mentors.

Results also reveal that student teachers as mentees experienced conflict of roles with their mentors as expressed in the following responses:

"My mentor expected me to manage the class fully, including admin and discipline, without really offering guidance. On that day, I was not given any resources to conduct a class. I understand that student teachers need to develop independence, but the sudden transfer of responsibility felt more like being "thrown into the deep end" than supported growth. I felt like I was being treated more like a substitute teacher than a student learning through mentorship."

"Yes, I was one student teacher who believed I have the right to be at the school and to be mentored the way I want to grow in the profession, so I would ask my mentor to observe and rate me in every lesson I present then we would quarrel a lot because they just want to send me in the classroom and sit in the staffroom."

"I experienced the conflicts mostly when you come up with the simplest way of making the learners to understand the certain concept then the mentor will be like you are spoon feeding the learners and a you act like you know better than him or her as he or she is more experienced than you as a mentee."

Conflict of roles often leads to the collapse of the mentoring relationship. The relationship that develops between mentor and mentee is often considered essential for realizing positive developmental outcomes (Williamson, Lawrence, Lyons, & Deutsch, 2020).

When asked how satisfied they were with their mentors, responses show that student teachers are generally not satisfied with the conduct of their mentors as reflected in the responses below:

"On the other hand, several student teachers—myself included—faced challenges like minimal feedback, lack of communication, and limited support. For example, some mentors would disappear for hours, leaving us alone with learners without discussing it first. Others were openly critical without offering suggestions for improvement. This led to feelings of frustration and anxiety, and in some cases, discouraged student teachers from seeing teaching as a sustainable career."

"I am partially satisfied, however my mentors could have been more effective to my growth and to the feedback they gave."

5. Conclusion

The overarching aim of this research was to examine and delve into the lived experiences of student teachers and explore these students' perspectives on their understanding of the roles of both the mentor teacher and the student teacher during teaching practice. From the results it can be concluded that inasmuch as students find the whole experience of teaching practice as enriching and bolstering confidence, there are however instances where there is a conflict of roles as a result of poor communication. This is mainly due to lack of understanding of mentor teachers as to what is expected of them during the teaching practice period. In some cases, student teachers were left out to fend for themselves while mentor teachers abandon their responsibilities. To remedy this occurrence of conflict of roles, it is thus recommended that the University should invest in training the mentor teachers before the teaching practice session

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