

Exploring the Roles and Responsibilities of Mentors During Teaching Practice Session

Dr. Ndileleni Paulinah Mudzielwana

University of Venda, South Africa

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Abstract

The role and responsibilities of mentors is extremely important to the student teachers. Mentors are to provide student teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to allow them to learn and use them in their teaching practice. The study sought to explore the roles and responsibilities of mentors during teaching practice sessions. The study adopted a qualitative case study design in which a purposeful sample of ten mentor teachers participated. Open ended questionnaires were used as the main and sole data collection tool. Content analysis was used to analyse data thematically after coding. The study found that school-based mentors were generally helpful to student teachers in numerous areas ranging from teaching and learning, assessment of learners as well as classroom management. The study concluded that attaching trainee teachers to mentors is a good approach which could be further enhanced by adequately preparing mentors for their roles. Recommendations are made.

Keywords: mentor training. learning theories. student teachers. teaching practice.

1. Introduction

Teaching like any other profession is full of roles and responsibilities. The student teachers should be helped throughout their training years. Student teachers need to go out to schools and practice what they have learnt in classroom over the years before they complete their degree. This indicates that teaching practice occupies a key position in the programme of teacher education (Furlong & Maynard, 1995). Teaching practice provides an opportunity to gather information about pre service teachers' personal capabilities for teaching and to be tested in their beliefs (Katrina, 2004). For the student teacher to learn the art of teaching this requires a strong relationship between a student teacher and a mentor.

Barry and King (2002:35) note that, teaching practice provides the opportunity to apply the principles of teaching and learning that have been studied during coursework. Teaching practice is about modeling good behavior of teaching to student teachers before they leave the programme. It is during teaching practice where student teachers require a role model who can mentor to them.

This is true because teaching is a profession that profoundly affects the lives of every individual, and ultimately the strength and well-being of the nation (Smith, 1986:39). This implies that teaching practice is a serious work that requires high-quality, dedicated mentors who see the importance of what they do with student teachers as important and that it will eventually affects the lives of the children who will pass through the hands of these student teachers and these can be positive or negative. In underlining the importance of teaching practice (Palmer, 1998:141) states:

If we want to grow in practice, we have two primary places to go: to the inner ground from which good teaching comes and to the community of fellow teachers from whom we can learn more about ourselves and our craft. From the observations made above, teaching practice affects the student teachers in all areas, emotionally, socially, physically and intellectually.

1.1 Roles and responsibilities of a mentor.

The mentor must be clear about the roles and responsibilities of mentoring.

Koc (2011:1983) agree that:

In teaching practice, prospective teachers prepare themselves for the teaching profession and improve their professional perspectives through such activities as practice preparation, observation in the practice school, participation in the missions of the practice teacher, the participation in education/management and in out of classroom activities, and assessing practice works.

Because a teacher affects eternity, teaching practice can be quite a challenging task to many student teachers. For

good or ill, this experience, has a significant impact on the student teacher who must carry out and practice the roles and responsibilities of teaching. This view is shared by Groundwater-Smith (1993:137) who observes that:

The practicum experience is one fraught with difficulties, dilemmas and challenges as the student attempts to negotiate his or her way along a hazardous path of professional policies and practices.

The mentor becomes an important figure in assisting the student teacher to improve in their teaching practice. This is the focus of the paper to explore the roles, responsibilities of the mentor and to get clarity on what literature says. A mentor must be willing to assist the student teaches to learn to create a conducive classroom atmosphere which can encourage young learners to learn. Koerner (1992) notes that the quality and success of teaching practice depends on the role and effectiveness of the mentors guiding the student teachers.

Being a mentor requires a person who is willing to serve the community and who is flexible in his/her thinking and not to be authoritarian. A mentor is a person who is willing to learn and to listen and share with others with no reservation, a person who is ready to respond to the needs of both the student teacher and the learners. Doherty (1999:6) defines a mentor as:

*... a person who oversees the career and development of another person, usually a junior, through teaching, counseling, providing psychological support, protecting, and at times promoting or sponsoring.
From the observation above, it is clear that the learning experience which the student teachers gather will depend on the practical and theoretical knowledge of the mentor whom the student teacher is placed under to work with.*

Available literature provides many definitions for the word mentor. Dodgson (1986) defined a mentor as someone who is a trusted and experienced counselor who can influence the career development of an associate in a warm, caring and helpful relationship. Dodgson admits that the definition of a mentor is elusive and varies according to the view of the author. Zey (1991:7) defines a mentor as a person who oversees the career and development of another person, usually a junior, through teaching, counseling, providing psychological support, protecting and at times promoting or sponsoring.

Mentoring is when an experienced teacher gives support to student teacher during teaching practice. In underlining the important role of the school-based mentor, McDonald (2004:85) states that:

... an effective associate teacher needs to motivate student teachers, find out about their learning needs, discuss their perceptions about teaching and model effective teaching practice. ... should also provide regular feedback and ensure that their classroom is supportive of student supervision.

In underlining the importance of mentors, an elementary principal cited in Albert Teachers' Association (ATA) (2003:19) expressed the importance of mentors when saying:

Because teaching is a new experience every time you walk into a classroom, good teachers build a repertoire of strategies and tools that they can use when they need them. Good mentors share their tools with their protégés and help them build their own repertoire.

Mentors should also engage mentees in various aspects of their duties (Mudzzielwana & Maphosa, 2014:403). Such a view is consistent with a view by Fisher, Higgins and Loveless (2006:2) that 'teacher learning is an active, experiential process, through which knowledge is enacted, constructed and revised.' Students are expected to apply the theory acquired in their classes into practice and by so doing develop deeper understanding of educational principles and their implementations for learning (Akbas, 2002).

It is therefore important that mentors who work with student teachers in schools are properly prepared for their role. Calla (2006:9) stress that the mentor should help the student to find answers to challenging situations, assist with strategies for action in the job role, promote both nurture and challenge within the boundaries of the relationship with the practitioner and encourage sustained motivation in the work place. It is important that in order to improve student achievement, mentors should be competent and have proper understanding of the subject matter.

In a related study, Shumba, Shumba and Maphosa (2012) established that in most cases mentors were not trained for their roles as mentors.

Levinson (1978:99) described the functions of a mentor as follows:

He may act as a teacher to enhance the young man's skills and intellectual development. Serving as sponsor, he may use his influence to facilitate the young man's entry and advancement. He may be a host and guide, welcoming the

initiate into a new occupational and social world and acquainting him with its values, customs, resources and cast of characters.

Through his own virtues, achievements and way of living, the mentor maybe an exemplar that the protégé can admire and seek to emulate. He may provide counsel and moral support in times of stress. The mentor has another function, and this is developmentally the most crucial one: to support and facilitate the realization of the Dream.

According to ATA (2003:10) the roles and responsibilities of a mentor is to continue to teach while serving as mentors, understand the typical needs and challenges of the beginning teacher, develop and use a variety of strategies to assist the beginning teacher, prepare themselves for effective one-on-one consultation with individual teachers, initially focus their efforts in areas known to be difficult for novice teachers, make the accumulated wisdom of other experienced teachers accessible to beginning teachers and develop strategies for giving acceptance and support for the beginning teacher within the school context.

In addition, ATA(2003:10) match the above mentioned roles with the mentor responsibilities, namely to encourage and support the acculturation of the protégé into the district, prepare and implement a joint mentorship growth plan with the protégé, maintain a relationship with the protégé consistent with the code of professional conduct, model and demonstrate effective teaching strategies, observe and provide feedback to the protégé, assist the protégé in identifying personal strengths and planning for further professional growth, and assist the protégé with curriculum and instructional planning. ATA (2003:19) further clarifies the roles and responsibilities of mentoring mentor as:

1.2 Teaching

Mentor must be a professional model. Teaching the protégé the skills that skilled mentors (unconsciously or consciously) practise on a daily basis. Many experienced teachers teach instinctively, which makes it difficult for them to analyze their own teaching. In order to teach the protégé, the mentor must become a reflective practitioner. Student teachers need sound advice regarding teaching practice, professional conduct and the culture of the school and community.

Kumaravadivelu (1999:35) state:

... the primary responsibility of the expert is not to provide the teacher with a borrowed voice but to provide opportunities for dialogic construction of meaning out of which an identity or voice emerge ... It therefore becomes necessary to conceive teacher education not as the experience and interpretation of pedagogic practice, but rather as a dialogically constructed entity two or more critically reflective interlocutors.

1.3 Sponsoring

Sponsoring the protégé is another function of mentoring. The mentor must identify the strengths of the protégé and advise the protégé as to what activities would be most successful. Sponsoring then requires the mentor to support the protégé when he or she attempts the new practice.

Be a diplomatic. Mentees are naturally going to make mistakes. It becomes the job of the mentor to help them correct their errors and develop reflective/anticipatory thinking skills, by providing constructive feedback in a helpful and non-threatening manner.

1.4 Encouraging

Encouragement is a key mentor function. By helping protégés see the positive side of their teaching practice and building on those reflections, the mentor is supporting and encouraging the growth of the protégé.

During communication with the student teacher, the mentor is able to explore how and what the student teacher thinks about teaching, interpersonal skills such as active listening, questioning, problem solving and decision-making are critical elements. Mentors must be open-minded and approachable in order to encourage their mentees to seek help. Being a communicator enables the mentor to know when to listen and when to offer advice, when to assist and when to expect mentees to take initiative.

According to (Mentor Teacher Handbook,n.d 15) a mentor must guide the student teacher toward effectiveness by monitoring effective use of time, requiring written lesson plans two days in advance of teaching, creating a climate that encourages questioning and self-reflection, praising and encouraging, keeping interactive lines of communication open and discuss problems frankly, one at a time, sharing professional experiences and materials, encouraging the use of alternative instructional and management strategies, and guiding the acceptance of varied school duties and tasks which

represent the teacher's workload

It is critical that when carrying the roles and responsibilities, the mentor should develop a good relationship with the student teacher. (Kram), (1985:48) described some of the functions that the mentoring relationship provides:

Through sponsorship, coaching, protection, exposure-and-visibility, or challenging work the junior colleague learns the ropes of organization in life and prepares for advancement opportunities. Through role modeling, acceptance-and-confirmation, counseling, or friendship, he or she develops a sense of competence, confidence, and effectiveness in the managerial role. By providing a range of career and psychosocial functions, the senior colleague gains recognition and respect from peers and superiors for developing young talent, receives support from the junior colleague who seeks counsel, and experiences satisfaction by helping a less experienced adult navigate effectively in the world of work.

Crutcher (2007) advises that mentors should establish a collegial relationship with student teachers. Therefore, a mentor should take interest in developing another person's career and well-being; has an interpersonal as well as a professional relationship with those whom they mentor.

In underlining the importance of collegial relationship between mentor and student teacher, Feiman-Nemser and Parker (1993 716-717) state:

Mentor teachers may serve as educational companions who help student or beginning teachers reflect on their experiences in order to gain insights that will support development of their teaching skills. Mentor teachers who act as agents of change, seek to break down barriers that prevent teachers from sharing, inquiring, and collaborating about their teaching. During the teaching practice session, the importance of 'significant others' is critical.

Marais and Meier (2004) note that while on teaching practice, trainee teachers are exposed to a wide variety of experiences and this makes teaching practice challenging. Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) cited in Mudzielwana and Maphosa (2014:394) state that teaching practice is a make or break phase for student teachers. Kram (1983) cited ATA (2003:30) identifies four important phases of the mentorship relationship namely initiation (where mentor and mentee get to know each other), cultivation (developing understanding and parameters of operation), separation (allowing mentor's role to decrease and mentee's to increase) and redefinition (assessing the progression of the mentor-mentee relationship). It is important that the mentor should be aware of theories of and learning. The mentor must use the theoretical knowledge during mentoring.

The primary goal of the mentor is to provide the student teacher with the opportunity of applying effective teaching practices. Student teachers should be willing to learn and be free to participate in the various learning activities. Lick (1999) and Alred and Garvey (2000) stress that a special goal with mentoring is to contribute to learning. To make that happen, the student teacher as the learner, ought to be engaged and have a constructive self-awareness

2. Theoretical Framework

According to Bandura's theory (1977), learners imitate what they see other people do, be it their parents or their teachers. During teaching practice, mentors are seen as good models, as they usually have positive and nurturing relationships with student teachers. They should therefore display positive teaching behaviour so that student teachers can imitate and internalise these.

According to social learning theory, learning is a reasonably enduring change in observable behavior that occurs as a result of experience (Slavin, 2002; Eggen & Kauchak, 2001). The emphasis is thus on the acquisition of new behaviours via the imitation of actions modeled by other which is a teacher in the context of this article. The same applies to teaching knowledge: it comes about when the mentor as an individual controls another (student teacher) to behave in a certain way.

Usually in the classroom, it is the mentor to have contact with the student teacher, which will have this kind of control on the student teacher's teaching competence. The social learning theory emphasized that learning occurs as a result of reinforcement of particular behaviours by the learners social and environment influences. Within the context of this article, teaching is a conditioned behavior which cannot occur in a vacuum.

Student teachers cannot acquire teaching skills in isolation; they need to be taught and this requires a committed mentor who is aware of his/her responsibilities. The implication of this theory is that teachers can provide rich and varied teaching experiences, using different strategies to address the needs of different learners. Bandura (1977) developed a social learning theory in which he postulated that children use rewards, punishment and imitation to understand the working of the world (Kail, 2001:459). According to Bandura (1977), the environment plays an important role in the child's life, because this is where he/she interacts with people who can provide important information about the world. These people (*mentor*) can also act as role models to the child and in the context of the study this refers to student teachers.

The child's (*student teacher*) interaction with other people (*mentors*) is based on observing their norms, values and beliefs within the context of a particular society and the child is most likely to imitate adults with whom he or she has an emotional or nurturing bond which Bandura calls 'nurturant models'. In his theory, Bandura (1977) refers to this concept as 'modelling', which means that student teachers learn positive or negative behaviour patterns from observing behavior (*mentor*). In a real classroom when the student teacher interacts with mentors, he/she is being socialised and as a result, he or she adopts and teach according to what has been seen from the mentor.

Another concept in Bandura's theory is that 'experience gives student teachers a sense of self-efficacy, which in the context of the study refers to student's beliefs about their own abilities and talents' (Kail, 2001:16). This means that student teachers will have a good sense of what they can or cannot do and therefore will mostly not imitate the actions of someone if they feel their own abilities are not similar. The imitation of a model is important in a classroom situation; student are expected to pay adequate attention to what the mentor says so that they can understand what is being taught. With memory, what is being observed must be processed into short-term and long-term memory for storage, so that it can be retrieved when such information is needed.

Observation is important because the behaviour displayed by the model should be reproduced. For an observed behaviour to be reproduced perfectly, practice is important. Reinforcement also plays an important role and if modelled behaviour is rewarded, the chances of this behaviour being repeated are high (Hjelle & Ziegler, 1981:246-249; Engler, 1985:391-401).

This theory is very important during mentoring because learners imitate what they see other people doing, be it other teachers in the school. Mentors Teachers are regarded as good models as they usually have positive and nurturing relationships with the student teachers who should display positive teaching strategies so that students can imitate and internalise these. For example, for the student teachers to become independent and competent teachers who could master their own teaching practice it is advisable that they should be actively involved during teaching practice session.

3. Research Context

The study was carried out in one school of Education in one rural university. The university offered a four year degree-Bachelor of Education-Foundation Phase. During their second and third year of study student teachers go out to schools for observation. In their fourth-which is their final year of study student teachers go out for teaching practice in the second semester. It is during this session that they work closely with a mentor. University lecturers visited them to assess and support them.

4. Research Objectives

The sole purpose of the study was to explore the roles, responsibilities and functions of mentors during student teacher's teaching practice session in a rural based university in South Africa and assess measures that could be put in place to better prepare mentors for teaching practice.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research paradigm

In this study, a descriptive qualitative approach was followed to explore the roles and responsibilities of mentors in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Qualitative research is fundamental, well suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, process and structures Miles and Hubberman, (1994:10). The purpose of the study is to explore the roles, responsibilities and functions of the mentors during teaching practice and so, qualitative research was found suitable.

5.2 Research design

A case study design was utilized for the study. Creswell (2007:73) states that in qualitative research, the researcher employs a case study design to explore "a bounded system (case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information." The present study adopted a case study strategy of inquiry to study a single case of mentors at only one institution to collect data on the roles, responsibilities and functions during student teaching practice session.

5.3 Sampling techniques

A total sample of 10 mentors consisting of four males and six females participated in the study. The mentors were considered 'information-rich' sources because of their work which involved working directly with student teachers in ensuring that they have the relevant teaching skills.

5.4 Data collection tools

The study utilized an open-ended questionnaire to collect data from the participants. The open-ended questions allowed the participants to give details freely without any prompting. The questionnaire was selected based on its quality of ensuring anonymity and hence the participant's willingness to freely provide responses.

5.5 Data analysis

The data collected was analysed using descriptive as found appropriate to answer the question, what are the roles and responsibilities of mentors during student teaching practice session.

6. Conclusions

The study explored the roles, responsibilities and functions of mentors during student teachers teaching practice session. The findings of the study revealed that mentors lack the theoretical knowledge of what a mentor teachers are, the roles, responsibilities.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings it is recommended that:

Institutions should have a programme to prepare and plan the mentoring programme for the mentors so that it can be beneficial to both the student teachers, and the learners in the classroom

Mentors should be employed based on the set criteria that he/she is able to model effective good behavior of teaching and have the skills necessary to can observe and evaluate student teachers, share their knowledge of effective teaching and give constructive feedback so as to foster positive growth of the student.

Mentors must use a research-based framework to guide student teachers in reflecting on practice for the purpose of development.

Mentors must use structured tools, for example the formative assessment to guide interactions and keep conversation focused.

Institutions must design a mentor handbook that must be well developed, have detailed and clear guidelines for mentors and mentees to ensure that student teachers are made aware in advance of expectations from lesson observers who promote excellence in teaching

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