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# STUDENT-TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES OF MENTORING PRACTICES DURING THEIR TEACHING PRACTICUM IN ZIMBABWEAN SCHOOLS

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## ABSTRACT

The teaching practicum process entails the direct participation of student teachers, supervisors and the participation of a mentor from the school where the teaching practicum is being carried out. This paper aims to discuss student teachers' views on mentoring practices during their teaching practicum in Zimbabwean schools. The study included all student teachers doing Post Graduate Diploma in Education at the Faculty of Education at Zimbabwe Open University, Bulawayo Region, who enrolled in practicum course in the first semester of the academic year 2016. A quantitative questionnaire was administered on 100 student-teachers in secondary schools in Bulawayo and an interview was carried out with 48 teachers. The findings of the study revealed that the participants have benefited from the practicum practices in the development of many teaching skills such as: the interaction and communication with students and classroom management skills. However, classroom student-teachers highlighted certain common challenges they encountered during their practicum experience. Implications and future recommendations were discussed.

**Keywords:** Teaching practicum, mentoring, mentor, mentee, mentoring model

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The teaching practice is a fundamental period for every novice teacher. It is this experience that makes student-teachers face real teaching situations which at the same time can lead them to the commitment or attrition of their professional choice (Freemyer, 2008). Teaching practice is used to refer to all the learning experiences of student teachers in schools (Kombo and Kira, 2013). It is the stage in which student teachers face the world of their professional carrier and the moment in which they become aware of the theory put into practice. Overall, the teaching practice period constitutes a space where student teachers articulate their knowledge and challenge their desire to become or not educators. It represents the closest approximation to a real life teaching situation which sheds lights on students' construction of what being a teacher is.

Training prospective teachers through practicum is a vital process of providing the required skills for student teachers (Maphosa, Shumba, & Shumba, 2007), because it is the first opportunity that student-teachers have to experience the real teaching practices (Ngidi & Sibaya, 2003). The teaching practice allows student-teachers to discover their abilities and creativities that help them in their future teaching processes.

During teaching practice, student teachers need to be guided, advised, supported and protected through mentoring by experienced teachers. Blackwell (1989) defines mentoring as a process by which a person of superior rank, special achievements and prestige,



counsel, guide and facilitate the intellectual and or career development of persons identified as protégés. This definition is supported by Anderson (1987) who also views mentoring as a nurturing process in which a more skilled or more experienced person serving as a role model, teaches, sponsors, encourages, counsels and befriends a less skilled or less experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter's professional and or personal development. In other words, mentoring is a central process which includes more than simply supervising student teachers' tasks. The mentors' responsibility deals with understanding pre-service teachers' needs and environment, and helping them understand the realities they are facing in their experience. Mentoring is a requirement of every teaching program whose mission entails the desire to educate more qualified teachers. Education is facing new challenges and qualified teachers are in charge of facing those challenges and consolidating a critical perspective to solve problems by generating innovations.

## 2. MODELS OF MENTORING

The process of mentoring may be viewed under three models – the apprentice, competency and reflective models. In the apprentice model, the mentee observes the mentor and learns. In the competency model, the mentor gives the mentee systematic feedback about performance and progress. In the reflective model, the mentor helps the mentee become a reflective practitioner. This learning object subscribes to the reflective model in which mentoring is seen as an intentional, nurturing and insightful process that provides a powerful growth experience for both the mentor and mentee. The apprenticeship model emphasizes learning by doing and observing and emulating others doing it. It entails learning from experienced teachers. In this regard, the student teacher under the apprenticeship model is like an apprentice in some form of industry where he/she learns the skills of teaching in a real classroom situation.

The competence based model refers to a situation where the mentor has to focus on the development of competencies that will assist the student teacher to become a competent teacher. The role of the mentor within the context of the competence model is that the mentor becomes the coach and the student teachers are given responsibilities over their class. Such an arrangement enables the student teachers to teach as they learn and learn as they teach. This promotes the student teachers chances of trying their own ideas. It should be noted that the presence of the mentor to supervise and monitor the student teacher is very critical. In that regard the school heads, apart from providing instructional leadership they have to perform administrative and management functions. Such functions by their nature entail that the student who is mentored by a school head is alone most of the time, taking full responsibility of a class. In such cases the possibility of student teachers being treated as relief teachers is very high.

However it should be noted that there is no clear model of mentoring that we can say teacher education in Zimbabwe was following, as the model can best be described as a combination of the apprenticeship model and competence-based model of mentorship Samukange, (2015).

## 3. TEACHING PRACTICE AND MENTORING IN ZIMBABWE

Teaching practice is a core course in teacher education in Zimbabwe. It is one of the four examined sections in the teacher education curriculum in Zimbabwe and it is internally and externally examined (Ngara et al., 2013). According to Bourdillon cited in Ngara et al. (2013), teaching practice goes beyond just knowing what to teach and knowing how to teach; the purpose of teaching practice is to develop several competencies in the trainee teacher which include interpersonal, pedagogical, intercultural and psychological competencies. In teachers' training colleges students are prepared for teaching practice through lectures, observations of competent qualified teachers teaching, micro- and peer teaching. It is the responsibility of training institutions to deploy students for teaching practice and all effort is made to attach students to competent qualified teachers by closely liaising with school heads.

The training institutions for teachers are generally guided by the Department of Teacher Education (DTE) at the University of Zimbabwe in the assessment student teachers on teaching practice. Supervision of student teachers is the task of teacher training institutions as well as the host school. Lecturers and other academic members, value teaching practice as the bridge between theory and practice, but student teachers tend to place theory in one component and practice in another (Marais and Meier, 2004). Furthermore, as Marais and Meier (2004) argue, every lecturer has his or her favourite module with which he or she is pre-occupied to the exclusion of all others, regardless of any connection between modules.

During the period of teaching practicum, student teachers observe their mentors' professional behaviour in class, relationship with their students, classroom management techniques, behaviour management, teaching methods and strategies, and assessment practices. The student teachers are expected to gain the following skills: improve questioning skills; acquire confidence in classroom control; understand how to assess students' works; design lesson plans; prepare exam questions, mark and analyse results; organise group



work; and implement lessons. In addition, both the mentor and lecturers observe the student teacher's teaching practices and discuss how the student teacher can improve teaching practices. Mentors are also expected to assist the pre-service teachers with knowledge and skills in areas that include micro teaching skills, group work, classroom management, content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge (Hudson, Usak, Gencer, 2010).

### **3.1 Research Questions**

The questions that guided the study were as follows:

1. What are the problems of mentoring that student teachers are experiencing during their teaching practicum?
2. What are the causes of the problems of mentoring that student teachers are experiencing during their teaching practicum?
3. What solutions can be proposed to solve these problems?

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Design**

The study employed a descriptive survey design within the qualitative paradigm. Questionnaires and interviews were used to gather qualitative and quantitative data. A survey was suitable as the study involved administering questionnaires to a relatively large number of student teachers and mentors. The qualitative approach was useful for this study as it enabled researchers to conduct open-ended interviews which yielded direct impressions with regards to their experiences, knowledge, feelings and opinions about mentoring of student teachers on teaching practice.

### **4.2 Sample**

The sample was drawn from a target population of 100 student teachers doing Post Graduate Diploma in Education at Zimbabwe Open University and 48 teachers who were mentoring student teachers from ten secondary schools in Bulawayo. Cluster sampling was used because the target population was widely dispersed in Bulawayo province. For the purposes of this study Bulawayo province was divided into four clusters. In each cluster, 12 teachers were randomly selected to participate in this study. The teachers who were involved in the interviews and questionnaires were administered to the 100 students.

### **4.3 Instrumentation**

The questionnaire was the major instrument used in the study. Most questions in the questionnaires were in closed form and that made the quantification and analysis of data easy. Some questions were followed by contingent questions where responses were directly related to the previous responses. The open ended questions on the interview guide gave the respondents the opportunity to express their opinions, attitudes and feelings freely (Tuckman, 1994) towards the mentoring programme.

### **4.4 Procedure**

Researchers got authority to conduct the study from the Bulawayo Provincial Office of Education. Heads of the ten sampled secondary schools were given the questionnaires to distribute to the randomly chosen mentors. After one week, the questionnaires were collected with the response rate of 100%. Interviews were personally conducted by the researcher.

### **4.5 Data analysis**

All data collected was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Qualitative data from interviews followed a thematic approach in its description and interpretation.



## 5. FINDINGS

In this part of the study, the data gathered through interviews will be analysed and supported by direct quotations of the participants. The focal points of the interviews were on challenges about mentorship and mentoring system at secondary schools in Zimbabwe. In this context, the questions below were used to structure the questionnaires and interviews:

- What are the problems of mentoring that student teachers are experiencing during their teaching practicum?
- What are the causes of the problems of mentoring that student teachers are experiencing during their teaching practicum?
- What solutions can be proposed to solve these problems?

The teachers were interviewed by the researcher at the end of the first semester in 2016. They all voluntarily participated to the interviews. The interview questions embodied the themes, which are presented in three categories: problems of mentoring system; the causes of problems of mentoring; and mentors' solution proposals to the problems of mentoring.

### 5.1 Problems of Mentoring that student teachers experience

The mentors raised the same problems that are experienced by the student teachers during their teaching practicum in secondary schools of Zimbabwe. The mentors indicated that the student teachers were not aware of importance of mentoring and that they looked at teaching practice as a means of gaining income during their practicum period. There was also a general lack of awareness and/or interest in the role of mentoring by the mentor and the mentee. The expectations for the university were not clearly given to the mentors and some mentors did not know what to do. One of the participating teachers stated that:

*In my opinion, the mentoring system does not function adequately or completely, in the way intended by Zimbabwe Open University. I was not aware of what they wanted the PGDE student to achieve during the practicum period.*

In other words the stakeholders and participants in secondary schools were not aware of the importance and impact of mentoring on the professional development of trainee teachers and also on the practicing student teachers. Mentoring was regarded as a marginal activity necessary to organise the teaching practice in schools, but not as a central component for training well-educated, competent teachers.

The participants indicated that there was a general lack of dissemination of information about mentoring in general and the Zimbabwe Open University mentoring programme in particular. One of the teachers pointed out that teaching practice in Zimbabwe is looked upon as an additional income period for the student teacher. She stated that:

*"It is often looked upon as a method of generating additional income for student teachers. The student teachers concentrate less on their lesson and being assisted by their mentors. At times the mentors may experience a lack of support for their mentoring work, and can feel they are in an isolated position. In addition, the organisation of the programme is often less than ideal, with arrangements for trainees only being settled once the university semester has already started, creating difficulties in programme planning."*

The student teachers' responses from questionnaires showed that the student teachers had problems with their mentors with regard to the methods of guidance they were being given. Some student teachers indicated that the mentors did not guide them on the way they should develop lesson plans, improve teaching methods, preparation of learning aids and ways of dealing with disciplinary problems in a learning situation. Some student teachers were left alone with the class for more than a month while the mentors pretended to be doing other duties within the school. One student teacher had this to say:

*"Most of the mentors that were assigned to us were administrators of the school, and they had no time to come and see or supervise us as they were busy with other duties. This exposed us to many problems that we could not resolve alone without the guidance of an experienced teacher"*.

Another problem which was highlighted by the student teachers was that the selection of mentors was the prerogative of the school head. There was no clear procedure to be followed in the selection of mentors. In some instances, experience took precedence over qualification and expertise. There is no mechanism to monitor the mentor's skills and the extent to which they are compatible with modern trends in education (Samukange, 2015).



## 5.2 Causes of the problems of mentoring that student teachers are experiencing during their teaching practicum

Some of the teachers interviewed indicated that they had not been involved in any form of mentoring training and hence they had problems in assisting student teachers under their guidance. In other words, lack of mentoring skills created problems for the student teachers they were mentoring.

The mentors also pointed out that in Zimbabwe, the mentors are not paid for their services and hence they do the mentoring half hearted. This has caused the teachers not to give full guidance to the student teachers and thus student teachers are not fully cared for in the teaching learning situation

## 5.3 Solutions to the problems being experienced by the student teachers

One of the solutions recommended by the student teachers was that the qualification, performance and experience of mentors have to be considered when selecting mentors at school level. In addition, the information regarding mentoring must be widely disseminated to schools. One participating student teacher said:

*‘The various aspects and details of mentoring should be explained, discussed, debated, accepted or rejected by those involved. This can be achieved by mentor training, seminars, meetings, and the like. Such activities should also serve to reduce the problem of lack of contact and collaboration between the university and schools.’*

Some of the participating teachers suggested that there should be a course about mentoring in the PGDE programs and schools should work together with university supervisors to meet the needed expectations from the trainees. One of the student teachers pointed out that the selection criteria for school mentors should be drawn up and implemented by the university. Only those who are willing and have some appropriate training or qualifications should be considered as school mentors. Such criteria and training may be useful to both the mentor and student teachers.

The student teachers also proposed that there should be provision of resources to support trainee teachers on teaching practice and that there should be training and staff development of both mentors and school heads in modern trends in education. There is need to get important exposure for the trainee teachers during teaching practice.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The study found out that the student teachers experienced problems such as having unhelpful mentors who have no interest in mentoring. The student teachers were not being guided about classroom management, good and effective teaching methods which is in line with what Yavuz (2011) suggested. The student teachers recommended that there was need for the university to have mentor-training seminars. In addition there should be selection criteria for school mentors to be drawn up and implemented by the university.

The study also concluded that practicing secondary schools should be selected taking into consideration the availability of well trained and disciplined mentors who mentor learners according to the expected outcomes of teaching will practice. Once a practicing school is well disciplined and has well-trained mentors and resources, most of the other aspects of the practice will fall into place. The choice of a poor or perhaps trapped school for teaching practice risks exposing student teachers to numerous challenges ranging from poor mentoring to a lack of cooperation and support. Mentors of student teachers during teaching practice should receive training in their mentorship responsibilities. Not only should mentors be trained, but all those involved in the management of teaching practice should be trained as regards their responsibilities. Student teachers should be further oriented as to the expectations of teaching practice before they set out on teaching practice.

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