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**Investigating the Extent to Which Mentor Selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 Teaching Practice Enhances Continuous Improvement of Student Teachers' Teaching Skills and Competences**

**Reuben Tshuma\* and Clever Ndebele\*\***

\*Zimbabwe Open University, Quality Assurance Unit, Matabeleland South Region,  
Box 346, Gwanda, Zimbabwe

Telephone: 0284-22965/6, Cell: 0772755370, E-mail: reubentshuma1@yahoo.co.uk

\*\*University of Venda, Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning, P Bag X 5050  
Thohoyandou, 0950 South Africa

Telephone: 0027159628650, E-mail: clever.ndebele@univen.ac.za

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*\*Zimbabwe Open University, Quality Assurance Unit, Matabeleland South Region,  
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*Telephone: 0284-22965/6, Cell: 0772755370, E-mail: reubentshuma1@yahoo.co.uk*

*\*\*University of Venda, Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning, P Bag X 5050  
Thohoyandou, 0950 South Africa*

*Telephone: 0027159628650, E-mail: clever.ndebele@univen.ac.za*

*Address correspondence to:*

Dr. Reuben Tshuma

Zimbabwe Open University

Quality Assurance Unit, Matabeleland South Region

P O Box 346, Gwanda, Zimbabwe

Telephone: 0284-22965/6

Cell: 0772755370

E-mail: [reubentshuma1@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:reubentshuma1@yahoo.co.uk)

**RUNNING HEAD: MENTOR SELECTION IN ZIMBABWE'S 2-5-2 TEACHING PRACTICE**

**KEYWORDS** student teachers, continuous improvement, teaching practice, mentors, classroom practitioners.

**ABSTRACT** The study sought to establish the experiences and perceptions held by mentors and student teachers on the extent to which mentor selection enhanced continuous improvement in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice. The mixed methods design was used to collect data in two phases. The first phase used questionnaires to collect survey quantitative data while the second phase collected qualitative data through interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis. The researchers sampled one hundred mentors and one hundred final year student teachers from the ten national primary teacher education institutions that participated in the first phase. Three mentors and three focus groups of six students each were conveniently selected for interviews. The research findings revealed that mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice was the responsibility of the school head who knew their teachers best. The study revealed overwhelming evidence that most student teachers in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice were mentored by qualified and experienced classroom practitioners with high teaching experience and expertise. The study also revealed that in some instances student teachers were being mentored by junior teachers and temporary teachers while others were on their own without mentors. The existence of junior teachers and temporary teachers as mentors and students operating on their own calls for strict adherence to the college policy of attaching student teacher to experienced classroom practitioners by the school heads. The study therefore recommends that teacher education institutions support school heads by providing them with workshops and providing guidelines on mentor selection to ensure that only qualified experienced and expert mentors without additional responsibilities were always selected to mentor students.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In Zimbabwe, all primary teacher education institutions follow the 2-5-2 teacher education model in which student teachers spend the initial two terms (thirty-two weeks) at college learning theory of education, applied education and research methods and then proceed on teaching practice for five terms (eighty weeks) and finally return to college for revision and examinations for two terms (thirty-two weeks) hence is referred to as the 2-5-2 model. Under Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teacher education model, student teachers spend most of their course duration time (55%) of five terms or eighty weeks on teaching practice in host schools under the tutelage, guidance and supervision of experienced classroom practitioners who mentor them. Since

student teachers spend one year and eight months continuously attached to their mentors whose assessments contribute to students' final teaching practice assessment, the role of mentors is very crucial hence the value of their selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice cannot be over emphasized.

### **Defining mentoring**

Mentoring is defined by Anderson in Kerry and Mayes (1995:29) as a nurturing process in which a more skilled or more experienced person serving as a role model teaches, and supports a less skilled or less experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter's professional development. The issue of experience is also foregrounded by Odina (2008:4) who writes that, "Mentoring is a support given by one, (usually more experienced) person – *mentor* for the growth and learning of another – *mentee*..." and Ngara and Ngwarai (2012) who see mentoring as a developmental relationship in which a more experienced or a more knowledgeable person is paired with a less experienced or knowledgeable person to help him or her to develop professional expertise. This therefore implies that mentors are expected to be selected from among competent, qualified experienced senior teachers of high expertise and ability to guide and assist student teachers towards professional growth (Rwodzi, Muchenje and Bondai, (2011) in Maphosa and Ndamba (2012). Mentors therefore have a multi-faceted role and a great deal of responsibility for nurturing student teachers gradually to become effective and efficient teachers, hence they ought to possess the requisite qualities. The importance of establishing the criteria of mentor selection against revelations by Mhandu and Mashava (2001) who revealed that lecturer visits to student teachers in Zimbabwe's teaching practice is erratic and mentors are not trained cannot be over emphasized.

### **Mentor selection**

Mentor selection plays a key role in students' teaching practice as the attributes of individual mentors have a bearing in assuring the quality of the prospective teachers. Mentors in today's teaching practice are the means by which teacher education institutions achieve their goals and mission of producing effective and efficient prospective teachers to address society's literacy, numeracy, and socio-economic needs. A crop of poor mentors will result in poor prospective teachers since the student teachers spend most of their course time in schools under the tutelage of mentors. The quality of the next generation of teachers depends on the quality of mentorship

current student teachers receive (Dreyer, 1998) hence the role of mentor selection in assuring quality teaching practice cannot be over emphasized.

In today's teacher education, the quality of teaching practice is assured by placing greater responsibility and emphasis of student teacher supervision and development in the hands of mentors who do most of the supervision, mentoring and assessment of student teachers as they are with the student teachers for most of their teaching practice period (Lourdusamy, 2005). In Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teacher education model, student teachers spend most of their course time (55%) on teaching practice in host schools, attached to experienced classroom practitioners, with emphasis on-the-job training as in other countries such as Hungary, Finland, Britain, Canada, United States of America, Australia and New Zealand. where student teachers spend more than 66% of their course duration in schools (Forlin & Gibson, 1997; Sorensen, 2004). In this partnership model, student teachers rely more on their mentors to supervise, guide and help them translate the theory that they would have learned in the teacher education program into practice and develop classroom management skills while lecturers make limited lesson observations visits per student teacher during teaching practice. Lourdusamy (2005) argues that under the partnership model, where students spend most of their course duration with mentors in schools, lecturers act as 'quality controllers' and help mainly to validate the grade suggested by the school. In this kind of partnership association between schools and teacher education institutions, student teachers are expected to benefit from the daily contact, guidance, close monitoring and supervision on practical teaching practice issues by the experienced classroom teachers hence the quality of mentors becomes the mainstay of the teaching practice program.

According to Chakanyuka (2006) in Britain, the HMI (1991) report acknowledged the critical role schools play in teacher education while in Zimbabwe the realization came about in early 1995, when all teacher education institutions were instructed to attach student teachers to school-based mentors (Mukeredzi & Ndamba, 2005). In all instances teacher training shifted from being the sole responsibility of teacher education institutions to that of partnership between schools and teacher education institutions in which schools have become the key site for student teachers' teaching practice activities. This partnership model places greater responsibility of integrating

theory of education with real practical teaching in the hands of skilled and experienced classroom practitioners who assume the role of school based teacher educators and do most of the supervision, mentoring and assessment of student teachers they are with for most of their teaching practice (Dreyer, 1998; Lourdusamy, 2005). In the partnership arrangement, mentors play a pivotal role in supervising, assessing and nurturing the student teachers on teaching practice that are attached to them hence the process of selecting mentors has a direct bearing on the quality of prospective teachers and cannot be overlooked.

The selection of mentors is a great challenge for the school heads in Zimbabwe and elsewhere. Not all senior teachers, no matter how experienced and how good they are at their own work, would automatically be suitable candidates for the mentoring and initiation of student teachers (Dreyer, 1998; Nyaumwe, 2001). This role is clearly for an excellent teacher who can teach an adult learner, inspire confidence and trust and be accountable for his/her mentoring actions. Chakanyuka (2006) contends that in many mentoring programs, the responsibility of selecting mentors, in teaching practice, has been left to heads of schools who know their teachers best. Heads know which teachers are experienced, qualified and expert classroom practitioners and it is for this reason that institutions rely on school heads to select mentors (Mukeredzi & Ndamba, 2005). Contrary to the belief above that school heads know which teachers are capable of mentoring, a study by Maphosa and Ndamba (2012) indicates that some schools have a 'rotational policy' for mentoring so that all teachers eventually have a chance to mentor students on teaching practice regardless of whether they have the capability to mentor or not.

According to Tomlinson (1995), a mentor should be an experienced senior teacher who takes on an agreed role, displays capability in classroom teaching, demonstrates superior achievement, uses a variety of teaching techniques or skills and also sympathizes and empathizes with colleagues. Dreyer (1998) identifies the defining characteristics or attributes of effective mentors to be knowledgeable, interested, dedicated, exemplary, experienced, enthusiastic, receptive, informed, eloquent, reliable, thorough, open-minded, sensitive, able to guide and to observe. It is then clear from these guidelines that even the experienced senior teachers, will need training to become effective mentors as most of them would lack some of the characteristics and/or the knowledge of teaching adults.

Fish (1995) argues that school heads should use clearly understood criteria for selecting mentors to reduce friction amongst teachers and ensure support and participation in the mentoring program by all the teachers, such as selecting senior teachers with requisite qualities, qualifications, experience and expertise to take up the mentoring responsibilities. Mhandu & Mashava (2001) in their study in Zimbabwe observed that school heads assigned student teachers to mentors without using professional criteria to select mentors. Tomlinson (1995) suggests that teachers close to student teachers in age may be better placed to understand the student teachers and be flexible enough to accommodate new ideas and skills as opposed to long serving teachers who may find it difficult to be flexible and appreciate new ideas student teachers bring with them from teacher education institutions. In the interest of concentrating on student teacher development and assuring quality teaching practice, selected mentors should not hold positions of responsibility in the school as that would interfere with their mentoring responsibilities. Mukeredzi & Ndamba (2005) advise that school heads should not appoint as mentors those practicing teachers who are already overloaded with other responsibilities as this would not allow these mentors adequate time to perform quality mentoring duties and this exclude the school heads and heads of departments from mentoring student teachers.

In Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice, where student teachers spend most of their course time (55%) attached to experienced classroom practitioners, mentors ought to be selected from class teachers with high expertise, experience and qualities, yet indications from studies by Nyaumwe (2001) are that some heads selected mentors for wrong reasons such as friendship or being heads of department or deputy heads and even school heads themselves mentored some students as it is assumed that mentors with student teachers do lighter work than others. Such findings suggest that mentors with additional responsibilities off loaded their teaching responsibilities over to student teachers for them to focus on the additional administrative duties. Fish (1995) argues that administrative responsibilities and mentoring are incompatible hence one of the two is likely to suffer. Mentors selected for such wrong reasons may lack the requisite qualities, qualifications, time, experience and expertise and de-motivate other experienced teachers from participating in the mentoring program. Mentor selection plays a key role in students' teaching practice as the attributes of individual mentors have a bearing in assuring the quality of the prospective teachers.

It is therefore the concern of this research study to establish the extent to which mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice enhances continuous improvement of the students' teaching skills and competences resulting in the production of quality prospective teachers.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The aim of this study was to examine the extent to which mentor selection in Zimbabwe 2-5-2 teaching practice enhances continuous improvement of student teachers' teaching skills and competences. The specific objectives of the study were to;

- To establish the criteria used to select mentors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice.
- To investigate the extent to which mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice enhances continuous improvement of student teachers' teaching skills and competences.
- To determine the implications of mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice.
- Offer recommendations for improved mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The mixed methods design was preferred for this study because it enabled the researchers to use both qualitative (case study) and quantitative (survey) approaches in a complementary manner and provided some interaction rather than a dichotomy between these approaches (Gelo, O., Braakmann & Benetka, G. (2008). The use of Mixed Methods enabled the researcher an opportunity of checking or explaining findings from one method against findings from another hence provided a more complete analysis of the research problem through comparing data produced by the different methods. The mixed methods research design enabled the researcher to overcome the limitations of purely quantitative or qualitative approaches by maximizing the advantages and minimizing the disadvantages connected to the single application of one of the two approaches (Creswell, 2007; Gelo et. al., 2008; Maree, 2007).

The mixed methods design enabled the researchers to triangulate the quantitative and qualitative methods and data sources as well as provided a convergence and corroboration of results from the different methods and designs in studying the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The use of mixed methods in this study produced different kinds of data on the same phenomenon that allowed the researcher to see and understand the problem under study in a more rounded and complete fashion than would be the case had the data been drawn from just one method. Through mixed methods the researcher was able to collect data in two separate phases. The first phase used survey questionnaires to collect quantitative data while the second phase used interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis to collect qualitative data.

### **Population and sampling**

The target population comprised all three teaching practice lecturers, all final year student teachers and their mentors at each of the ten (10) national primary-teacher education institutions in Zimbabwe that responded. The target population was too large for all members to participate hence the researchers drew a sample of the final year students and that of their mentors from the ten primary teacher education institutions that participated.

Purposive sampling procedure was used to extract 28 teaching practice lecturers from the ten national primary teacher education institutions that responded. Due to the geographical spread of host schools in which student teachers were deployed and the prohibitive travelling cost involved, the researcher used convenience sampling to select host schools from which 100 mentors and 100 student teachers who had previously responded to survey questionnaires in the first phase of this study were drawn. Convenience sampling also enabled the researcher to sample the college of his employment as the case to study and to select host schools from which three mentors and three groups of six student teachers were identified for face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions respectively. The survey questionnaires generated 200 general overview responses, while interviews and focus group discussions generated in-depth understanding of the extent to which the provision of mentor support services in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice enhances continuous improvement of student teachers' teaching skills and competences.

### **Data Collection Procedure**



The researchers used the survey questionnaires to collect quantitative data in the first phase of the study. The survey questionnaires provided a general overview of perceptions and experiences held by mentors and student teachers on the extent to which mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice promoted continuous improvement of student teachers' teaching skills and competences and that of the teaching practice program. The survey questionnaires collected quantitative data in the first phase and comprised of both open-ended and closed-ended questions that were administered to final year students on teaching practice, their mentors and teaching practice lecturers. Qualitative data was collected in the second phase through semi-structured interview schedules that comprised a few structured questions that were followed by unstructured open-ended questions which enabled the researcher to collect descriptive data from the information rich respondents. The interview schedule enabled the researchers to document real events, record verbatim what people said and observe the behaviour of participants who were immersed in the natural setting of everyday life in which the study was framed (Maree, 2007; Neuman, 1997). The semi-structured interview schedule enabled the researchers to recognize several nuances of attitude and behaviour that could have escaped the researchers had they used other methods. The use of focus group discussions enabled the researchers to acquire in-depth understanding of student teachers' experiences and perceptions on mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice. The researchers also analyzed available teaching practice documents which reflected the practice of mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis enabled the researchers to systematically search, organize, synthesize, present and transform data from questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis into manageable units and increased the researcher's understanding of the phenomena under study (Borgden & Biklen 1992; Leedy, 1993). Data analysis enabled the researchers to bring order, structure and interpretation to the mass of collected data which resulted in the generation of patterns, themes, categories, constructs and inferences relating to the research question.

In the first phase, the quantitative numerical data collected through survey questionnaires had raw data coded or organized into a computer readable format (Neuman 1997). The collected data was summarized through a table of frequency distributions and percentages that were displayed in graph form. The table and graph of frequency distributions were manipulated to reveal

patterns, relationships and trends of student teachers' experiences and perceptions (Creswell, 2007; Maree, 2007) on the mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice.

In phase two, the researchers used interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis to collect qualitative data. The qualitative data was organized on the basis of themes, categories, general ideas, concepts or similar features that related to the main research question. In analyzing qualitative data, the researcher sought to summarise what had been seen and heard in terms of common words, phrases, themes or patterns that aided the understanding and interpretation of that which was emerging (Maree, 2007). This study transcribed verbatim the audio taped interviews and the results were cross-checked with the participants before their analysis. After the quantitative and qualitative data had been analysed and interpreted separately, inferences from the separate findings were made and integrated for interpretation. The qualitative data served to confirm the results of the quantitative data in instances where all the responses pointed to similar conclusions. In instances where responses revealed incongruities, the qualitative data did not confirm the quantitative data.

## **RESULTS**

Mentors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice are the mainstay of internal quality assurance practices as they work with students on daily basis applying the theory they learnt at college in the real world of school and pupils. Mentors can then be seen as agents of transformation as their interactions with student teachers help them see and experience the real world of teaching and learning on daily basis. If they do their work according to expectation, mentors can be key players in promoting continuous improvement of student teachers' teaching skills and competences. This scenario therefore makes mentor selection key for successful teaching practice by student teachers. The results are presented under the following subheadings; mentor selection as the head's responsibility, mentor selection as based on teacher expertise, mentor selection as based on age closeness between mentors and student teachers, mentors as selected from teachers with additional responsibilities and mentors as selected from weak teachers.

***Mentor selection is the head's responsibility*** The study sought to establish whether mentor selection was the responsibility of the school head. Data in figure 1 and table 1 items 1.1 and 1.2 show that the majority of the sampled mentors (62%) and student teachers (85%) indicated that school heads were responsible for selecting the ideal teachers to mentor students while 33%

mentors and 9% students differed and 5% mentors and 6% students were not sure. The 33% disagreement by mentors suggested that there were other means of selecting mentors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice other than by the school heads. The data from the majority of both mentors and student teachers conclusively reveal that mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice was the responsibility of school heads as they knew their teachers best.

***Mentor selection is based on teacher expertise*** The study sought to establish whether mentor selection was based on the individual teacher's expertise. Data in table1 items 2.1 and 2.2 and figure1 show that sampled mentors (58%) and student teachers (72%) indicated that mentor selection was based on the individual classroom teacher's expertise while (39%) mentors and (25%) student teachers disagreed and (3%) mentors and students were not sure. The 39% mentors and 25% student teachers who disagreed suggest that there could be other means of mentor selection other than teacher expertise being used in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice. In the main, data from the majority of both mentors and student teachers however indicate that mentor selection was based on teacher expertise though there is evidence that there could be other criteria of mentor selection being used.

***Mentor selection is based on age closeness between mentors and mentees*** The study also sought to establish whether mentor selection was based on closeness in age between the mentor and student teacher to facilitate flexibility and acceptance of new ideas students brought from teacher education institutions. Data reflected in table1, items 3.1 and 3.2 and figure1 show that the majority of the sampled mentors (92%) and student teachers (76%) indicated that the closeness in age between mentors and student teachers was not the criteria used to select mentors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice. The data conclusively show that the age closeness between mentors and student teachers is not a criterion of mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice.

**INSERT TABLE1 HERE**

**INSERT FIGURE1 HERE**

***Mentors are selected from teachers with additional responsibilities*** The study further sought to establish whether mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice was from among teachers with additional responsibilities such as school heads, deputy heads and heads of

departments. Data in figure1 and table1 items 4.1 and 4.2 show that the majority of the sampled mentors (77%) and student teachers (66%) indicated that mentors were not specifically selected from among teachers with additional responsibilities. An interview with one mentor revealed that some students were attached to the head or deputy head in order to alleviate their teaching loads. However the 17% mentors and 26% student teachers who agreed suggest that there could be instances where some mentors are selected from teachers with additional responsibilities. The data from open ended questionnaire responses also showed that mentors were not mainly selected from classroom teachers with additional responsibilities.

***Mentors are selected from weak teachers*** The study also sought to establish whether mentors were selected from among weak teachers with the hope that learners would benefit from additional assistance from student teachers. The majority of the sampled mentors (88%) and student teachers (95%) reflected in figure1 and table1 items 5.1 and 5.2 conclusively reveal that mentors were not selected from among weak teachers in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice. The data showed that the mentor selection process sought to assure quality teaching practice as mentors were not selected from among weak teachers in an effort to benefit the learners.

## **DISCUSSION**

***Mentor selection is the head's responsibility*** Analysis of the data shows that mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice is the school heads' responsibility as they know their teachers best. The findings of this study concur with those of Chakanyuka (2006) and Mukeredzi & Ndamba (2005) who contend that in many mentoring programs, the responsibility of selecting mentors has been left to heads of schools who know which teachers are experienced, qualified and expert classroom practitioners hence it is for this reason that institutions rely on school heads to select mentors. In the same vein, in a study by Maphosa and Ndamba (2012) 81% of the mentors on being asked how they had become mentors indicated that they were simply asked by the school head to be mentors. Fish (1995) seems to be in support of the idea of school heads selecting mentors, arguing that school heads should use clearly understood criteria of selecting mentors to reduce friction amongst teachers and ensure support and participation in the mentoring program by all the teachers. Maphosa and Ndamba (2012:79) however seem to differ and argue that there is "no guarantee that the mentors would be committed and give of their best

if the school head used his or her authority to pick on teachers who were not willing to be mentors”.

Interviews with mentors as show in the results section also revealed that some school heads used wrong reasons in selecting mentors such as friendship, classroom practitioners with additional responsibilities and weak teachers hoping that student teachers will provide better quality teaching than the weak class teachers. The use of such wrong reasons in selecting mentor does not enhance continuous improvement of student teachers’ teaching skills and competences in Zimbabwe’ 2-5-2 teaching practice and does not resonate well with global practices in mentoring. How then can continuous improvement in teaching practice be assured if students are not mentored or are mentored by inexperienced junior teachers and by unqualified temporary teachers who are not accredited with teaching qualifications? Under such circumstances it is difficult to ensure the production of quality prospective teachers. While it can be argued that the school heads know their teachers best and therefore know who can best serve the role of mentoring student teachers the teacher education institutions cannot afford to totally neglect the key aspect of mentor selection during training of their students as they are the custodians of the teaching standards of student teachers (Dreyer, 1998). The provision of supporting guidelines to school heads in mentor selection to ensure continuous improvement of students’ teaching practice cannot be over emphasized.

***Mentor selection is based on teacher experience and expertise*** The study revealed that mentor selection in Zimbabwe’s 2-5-2 teaching practice was mainly based on classroom teachers’ expertise, experience and competence. An interview with one mentor revealed that at their school mentor selection was on the basis of competence, experience and expertise from among qualified teachers who were capable of mentoring student teachers and did not need close monitoring to ensure that the student teachers acquired valuable teaching experiences. The findings of the research concur with the mentor attributes identified by Tomlinson’s (1995) and Dreyer (1998) which define mentors as those effective and experienced senior teachers who are knowledgeable, exemplary, experienced, display capability in classroom teaching, demonstrate superior achievement, use a variety of teaching techniques or skills and are able to guide and observe. Such mentoring attributes are only attainable from among experienced, competent and expert senior teachers. The selection of mentors by school heads from among classroom

practitioners' with the requisite competences, experience and enhances continuous improvement of student teachers' teaching skills and competences hence resonates well with current global practice in mentoring student teachers.

While selection of mentors according to expertise is lauded, the study however also showed that there were some, though very few instances where mentors were selected from among junior teachers and temporary teachers and some student teachers operated without mentors. In a study by Mutemeri and Chetty (2011) in all the focus groups, the students indicated that most of their mentor teachers had a poor idea of the aims of practice teaching. This inconsistency in mentor selection points to a need for close monitoring of strict adherence to the policy of student teacher attachment to experienced classroom practitioners and to provide school heads with mentor selection guidelines by the teacher education institutions to ensure that only qualified and experienced senior teachers are selected to mentor student teachers.

***Mentor selection is based on age closeness between mentors and mentees*** The study also sought to establish whether mentor selection was based on closeness in age between the mentor and student teacher to facilitate flexibility and acceptance of new ideas student teachers brought from teacher education institutions. The data conclusively show that the age closeness is not used as criteria for mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice. The findings of the study therefore in a way disagrees with Tomlinson (1995) who suggested that classroom practitioners close to student teachers in age might make better mentors as they might be flexible enough to accommodate new ideas and skills student teachers brought from college as opposed to long serving teachers who might find it difficult to be flexible and appreciate the new ideas. In any case, teachers whose age is close to that of student teachers tend to be equally young and inexperienced in the teaching practice hence are not well equipped and ideal to mentor students

***Mentors are selected from teachers with additional responsibilities*** The study showed that the majority of mentors were not selected from among teachers with additional responsibilities such as school heads, deputy heads and heads of departments. These findings of the study concur with Mukeredzi & Ndamba (2005) who advised that school heads should not appoint as mentors those practicing teachers who are already overloaded with other responsibilities as that would not

allow such mentors adequate time to perform quality mentoring duties. On the issue of relief of additional responsibility, Maphosa and Ndamba (2012) found that although some mentors volunteered to school heads that they wanted to mentor student teachers for genuine reasons, it appears that others volunteered for wrong reasons, particularly when they thought that their work load would be reduced.

However, data from some interviews with mentors revealed instances where student teachers were attached to school heads or deputy heads in an effort to ease their teaching loads so that they could perform their administrative duties. This revelation concurs with findings by Mukeredzi & Ndamba (2005) and Nyaumwe (2001) that also showed the existence of student teachers under the mentorship of school heads and deputy heads in Zimbabwe's teacher education. A recent study by Maphalala (2013) discovered that the general practice in allocating mentors was that student teachers were placed under the care the heads of departments as their mentors. The data show that attaching student teachers to teachers with additional responsibilities who spent most of their time away or in the office leaving the student alone to run the class do not guarantee mentor commitment (Ndamba and Chabaya, 2011) and continuous improvement of students' teaching skills and competences in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice. Student teachers who are attached to mentors with additional responsibilities are not likely to benefit much as the mentors are frequently away on other school errands (Nyaumwe, 2001; Ndamba, Mufanечиya and Mukeredzi, 2008).

The study further showed that students under the mentorship of teachers with additional responsibilities such as school heads, deputy heads and heads of departments were not directly supervised on a regular basis in comparison with those students who were attached to classroom teachers without additional duties. The contact time between the student and mentor with additional responsibilities was rather limited or reduced as compared to that of those students who were attached to the teachers without added responsibilities. In this regard, Maphosa and Ndamba (2012) argue that a student teacher attached to a mentor with other responsibilities is unlikely to benefit much since the mentor would frequently be away attending to other school duties which have nothing to do with the classroom business. The findings of the study further concur with those of Mukeredzi & Ndamba (2005) and Nyaumwe (2001) who observed that student teachers under the mentorship of teachers with additional responsibilities such as school

heads, deputy heads and heads of departments were assessed rather than mentored. Such mentors were always away performing school administration duties leaving student teachers on their own and only surfaced when they wanted to make assessment reports. The study therefore shows that allocating student teachers to school heads who spent most of their time away on administration business left the students to run the class on their own hence did not benefit much from the attachment practice as they were not constantly supervised in comparison with other student teachers who were attached to classroom teachers without additional responsibilities.

***Mentors are selected from weak teachers*** With regards to the selection of weak teachers as mentors hoping that student teachers would offer additional assistance to the weak teachers and benefitting the learners, the research conclusively revealed that mentors were not deliberately selected from among weak teachers. The data therefore showed that the mentor selection process sought to assure quality teaching practice as most mentors were selected from among the experienced and competent teachers and not from among weak teachers. The study revealed overwhelming evidence that most student teachers were mentored by qualified and experienced classroom practitioners with high teaching expertise. The findings of the study concur with Dreyer (1998) who argued that the quality of the next generation of teachers depended on the quality of mentoring current student teachers received hence weak mentors are likely to produce weak prospective teachers.

While the majority of the respondents indicated that mentors were not selected among weak teachers, as already shown, there still existed pockets of schools where some student teachers were under the mentorship of junior and temporary teachers while some were on their own and without mentors. How then can continuous improvement in teaching practice be assured if students are not mentored or are mentored by unqualified and inexperienced personnel who are not accredited with teaching qualifications? The existence of junior teachers, temporary teachers as mentors and student teachers operating without mentors confirmed findings by Mhandu & Mashava (2001) who observed that school heads in Zimbabwe assigned student teachers to mentors without using professional criteria in selecting mentors. In the same vein, a study by Mutemeri and Chetty (2012:512) confirms the existence of weak mentors when they cite a student teacher in their findings who lamented that, “*they [lecturers] need to evaluate the*



*teachers that they are sending us to because some of the teachers we get sent to are horrible... we don't learn anything from them."* This scenario calls for teacher education institutions to closely monitor and ensure strict adherence to the policy of attaching student teachers only to experienced and qualified classroom practitioners and providing school heads with mentor selection guidelines. Allowing student teachers to be mentored by junior and temporary teachers while some are left on their own without mentors does not resonate well with current global practices in mentoring hence is not recommended.

**Other methods of selecting mentors** Interviews with mentors revealed that there were other strategies of selecting mentors that were used in schools. One mentor had this to say about mentor selection at their school;

*Students are randomly given mentors through preference of their class grade. If they want to go to the infant department or up to the junior grade they can just volunteer to go there but usually they are just randomly given mentors and may be sometimes it depends in the number of student teachers deployed but when they are very few it will be the deputy head, the teacher-in-charge and may be most of the senior teachers who get students in preference.*

The above strategy of random allocation of students to teacher mentors including the head and deputy head does not indicate a systematic and deliberate process of mentor selection hence does not resonate well with current global practices in mentoring students in higher education. The 'random allocation' of student teachers to mentors is therefore not guided by teachers' experiences and expertise but simply responds to student teachers' class or grade preferences or choices hence inexperienced and incompetent teachers are likely to be allocated student teachers to mentor. The issue of random allocation of mentors is also confirmed in findings by Maphosa and Ndamba (2012) who cite a mentor who passed the following comment, "*The policy at this school is that we are asked to mentor student teachers in turns, so this time it was my turn.*" Such host schools can benefit from the provision of mentor selection guidelines generated by teacher education institutions.

The other mentor interviewed indicated another method of mentor selection used at her school which she preferred to call 'fair distribution' in which mentors alternated between student teachers. Under the policy 'fair' policy of allocating student teachers to mentors classroom practitioners at this school are asked to mentor student teachers in turns. Under the 'fair' distribution student teachers are distributed among the effective and hard working classroom

practitioners with the requisite mentoring qualities, expertise and experience. This strategy seeks to ensure that all hardworking classroom practitioners are given equal chances of mentoring student teachers and resonates well with current global mentoring practices.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study revealed that mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teacher education system was the responsibility of school heads who mainly selected teachers with the requisite expertise and experience. The study however revealed instances where mentors are selected from among teachers with additional responsibilities, junior teachers, temporary teachers and at times student teachers were not allocated mentors. The study also revealed that the majority of mentors were selected from teachers without additional responsibilities and weak teachers were excluded from mentoring students. The school heads were not provided with mentor selection guidelines and lacked close monitoring to ensure that students are attached to qualified and experienced teachers only. Failure to closely monitor the attachment system resulted in some students being attached to junior teachers, school heads and deputy heads and heads of departments with some working on their own without attachment.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study focused on how mentors were selected in Zimbabwe primary teacher education institutions. It provides the following recommendations for consideration by teacher education institutions, as well as academics doing research in the field of teaching practice;

- The teacher education institutions ought to provide school heads with mentor selection guidelines and workshops to ensure that mentors are selected from among qualified, experience and expert teachers.
- School heads should not select mentors from among teachers who are overloaded with additional responsibilities as these extra duties are likely to interfere with their mentoring duties.
- School heads should not select mentors from junior teachers and temporary teachers. This caliber of teachers does not ensure continuous improvement of student teachers' teaching skills and competences.

- The teacher education institutions should provide, closely monitor and enforce the 'attachment' policy of student teachers to senior classroom practitioners with the requisite experience and expertise.

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Table1: Responses from mentors and student teachers on mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 practicum

| Item                                   | Agree | %  | Disagree | %  | Not sure | % | Total | %   |
|----------------------------------------|-------|----|----------|----|----------|---|-------|-----|
| 1.1. The head's responsibility-mentors | 62    | 62 | 33       | 33 | 5        | 5 | 100   | 100 |
| 1.2.The head's responsibility-students | 85    | 85 | 9        | 9  | 6        | 6 | 100   | 100 |
| 2.1.From expert teachers-mentors       | 58    | 58 | 39       | 39 | 3        | 3 | 100   | 100 |
| 2.2.From expert teachers-students      | 72    | 72 | 25       | 25 | 3        | 3 | 100   | 100 |

|                                                                |    |    |    |    |   |   |     |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|----|----|----|----|---|---|-----|-----|
| 3.1 On age closeness-mentors                                   | 4  | 4  | 92 | 92 | 4 | 4 | 100 | 100 |
| 3.2.On age closeness-students                                  | 19 | 19 | 76 | 76 | 5 | 5 | 100 | 100 |
| 4.1.From teachers with extra responsibilities-mentors          | 17 | 17 | 77 | 77 | 6 | 6 | 100 | 100 |
| 4.2.From teachers with extra responsibilities-student teachers | 26 | 26 | 66 | 66 | 8 | 8 | 100 | 100 |
| 5.1.From weak teachers-mentors                                 | 7  | 7  | 88 | 88 | 5 | 5 | 100 | 100 |
| 5.2.From weak teachers-students                                | 1  | 1  | 95 | 95 | 4 | 4 | 100 | 100 |
|                                                                |    |    |    |    |   |   |     |     |

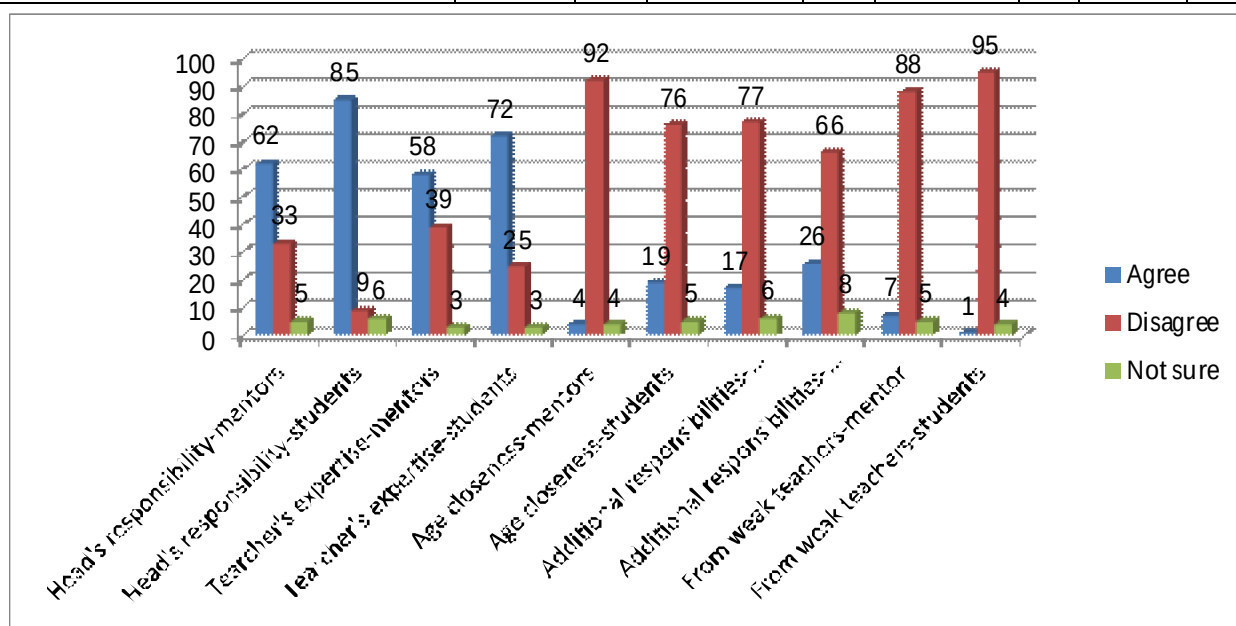


Figure 1: Mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 practicum