

A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Theory on Teacher Mentors' reflections during Teaching Practicum: A case study of University of Limpopo, South Africa

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1. ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present the findings of the reflections of teacher mentors during teaching practicum. Practical learning is a pivotal activity that becomes a reality when mentor teachers execute their roles and responsibilities during teaching practicum. The purpose of this study was to explore teacher mentors' reflections on practical skills, socialisation skills, professional development skills and mentor teachers' feedback on pre-service teachers during teaching practicum. The university-mentor-student collaborations were also evaluated.

Qualitative multiple case study research and participatory action research design were adopted for this study. Descriptive statistics and discourse analysis were used to analyse data. 32 teacher mentors were interviewed from a purposive sample. Field notes were captured during the assessment of 38 lesson presentations at 19 schools. The study revealed that teacher mentors did not execute their roles and responsibilities as expected and that little

effort was provided in giving practical, socialisation, and professional development skills. Furthermore it was revealed that no significant relationship existed between university and teacher mentors. The study concludes that mentor teachers do not practise what is required of them when mentoring pre-service teachers. The study recommends that the university-mentor-student collaboration needs to be strengthened, with the university spearheading this initiative. This relationship facilitates collaboration between university supervisors, teacher mentors and pre-service teachers on teaching practicum issues.

4. TEXT

1. INTRODUCTION AND THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

Teaching practicum sessions provide pre-service teachers with a platform to bridge the divide between theory and practice in teacher education. This session is characterised by multiple opportunities for student teachers, coupled with a variety of challenges emanating from mentoring school, teacher mentors, curriculum, university supervisors, learners and pre-service teachers themselves. The teaching practicum session is well captured by McKimm et al. (2003: 2) when they assert that:

‘It is a formative period where the knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired during a programme of education are applied in practice. It is a transition period which can be stressful as well as challenging as new demands are made upon individuals who are seeking to consolidate their skills. It is therefore a period when a practitioner is in need of guidance and support in order to develop confidence and competence.’

The way a person acquires a particular set of knowledge, attitudes and skills is strongly influenced by and intertwined with the situation in which this person learns, (Hennissen, et al. 2008). A mentoring school plays a significant role in teaching practicum because it provides space for practical learning to occur. Within teacher education programmes the teaching practicum is usually regarded as ‘equivalent to student teachers undertaking a period of school-based practice’, (Wilson and I’Anson 2006: 353). Teaching practicum provides space for pre-service teachers’ practical learning. The relationship between pre-service teacher and the mentor, similar to a learner and teacher, is expected to influence and stimulate learning. Du Plessis et al. (2011) argue that relationships between teachers, student teachers and the community are the central issues that influence learning.

Learning does not mean receiving knowledge passively, but rather, that pre-service teachers build their knowledge from their own contributions as well as from the input of the mentor teacher as co-participant who guides and facilitates learning by listening to pedagogically constructed conceptions (Du Plessis et al. 2011). Pre-service teachers' practical learning is influenced by school mentoring capacity. Hobson et al. (2009: 211) outline factors that influence the success of different kinds of mentoring programmes as 'contextual support for mentoring, mentor selection and pairing and mentoring strategies and mentor preparation. Mentoring pre-service teachers is a requirement in teaching practicum'. Mentor teachers should make themselves available for mentoring pre-service teachers. In-service teachers' commitment and competencies are needed in mentoring pre-service teachers. Rodgers and Keil (2007: 64) support this when they submit that:

In-service teachers have critical knowledge, skills and dispositions that can support education faculty in their supervision efforts. In-service teachers who work in collaboration with university faculty are well-versed in knowledge-building, coaching assessment, and reflection.

However, in South Africa there are challenges faced by in-service teachers in relation to knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. South Africa, with 79.8% black population (Statistics South Africa 2014), has its majority of schools in townships and rural areas, staffed by teachers who are products of Bantu Education. Bantu Education resulted in restructuring schooling and tertiary education systems for black children that were deliberately tempered with and quality was compromised. The segregated education system of their time provided them with limited capacities to take on mentoring functions. Naicker (1999) argues that methodological approaches taught to pre-service and in-service teachers by isolated apartheid teacher training institutions had inadequate underlying values pertinent to a mentoring paradigm. This inadequacy produced in-service teachers who were not willing to mentor pre-service teachers because they are afraid that their own classroom practices and management as well as their teaching shortcomings would be displayed. In some cases they do not know what to offer during mentoring. Moreover the challenge was further augmented by inadequate mentor preparation programmes by some universities that offered initial teacher education. Research has revealed that mentor preparation programmes focused more on administrative aspects rather than on developing mentor's ability to support and facilitate mentees' professional learning (Hobson et.al 2006, 2009).

In light of the above, this study attempted to answer the following research questions:

- What are teacher mentors' reflections on practical and socialisation skills during teaching practicum?
- How committed are mentors to professional development and support of student teachers during teaching practicum?
- Was feedback on pre-service teachers' teaching and assessment given priority during teaching practicum?
- To what extent did the university-mentor-student relationship impact on experiential learning and mentoring during teaching practicum?

2. EVOLUTION OF MENTORING AND VALUE-ADDED BENEFITS TO TEACHING PRACTICUM

Mentor teachers have become crucial partners in initiation of pre-service teachers into the teaching profession because of their practical and theoretical knowledge of the teaching profession (Maphalala 2013). The supervision and mentoring of student teachers has evolved over years. According to Hennissen, et al. (2008) in the seventies and eighties, universities and colleges of education focused mainly on socialisation of prospective teachers within the school organisation by providing feedback, giving advice, instruction and explanation. This study has adopted Hobson et al. (2009: 207) comprehensive definition of mentoring as follows:

'Mentoring is defined as the one-to-one support of a novice or less experienced practitioner (mentee) by a more experienced practitioner (mentor), designed primarily to assist the development of the mentee's expertise and to facilitate their induction into the culture of the profession (in this case, teaching) and into the specific local context (here, the school or college).'

The traditional form of mentoring is one-to-one mentoring but there are other models of mentoring such as co-mentoring or peer-mentoring and group mentoring, (McKimm et al. 2003: 1). An experienced teacher is needed to carry out a mentoring function in schools. Due to additional responsibility these teachers are tasked with they are called mentor teachers.

A mentor teacher is willing to commit time, energy and effort to providing assistance to pre-service teachers during teaching practicum. Due to this commitment, they are cooperating teachers. The universities provide these mentors with induction/ training/ mentor preparation programmes to outline mentor's roles and responsibilities. The drafting of roles and responsibilities of university supervisors, mentoring schools, teacher mentors and pre-service

teachers involve all concerned parties. In this forum university-mentor-student relationship is developed. Furthermore, mentor-mentee relationship needs to be carried over to schools, where mentoring is a prerequisite. According to McKimm et al. (2003: 5) '*mentoring is a protected relationship in which learning and experimentation occur through analysis, examination, re-examination and reflection on practice, situations, problems, mistakes and successes in order to identify learning opportunities and gaps*'.

The application of the acquired competencies needs capacitated at the mentoring schools, which includes competent mentors who are willing to mentor pre-service teachers in an ideal resource-based and orderly school environment. The mentoring process requires that a mentor be appointed to provide amongst others, induction, socialisation, support, practical skills, pedagogical content knowledge, professional development and feedback to students on teaching and assessment. Mentoring therefore helps a mentee through a transition period 'such as coping with a new situation like a new job or a major change in personal circumstances or in career development or personal growth', (McKimm et al. 2003: 1). They further outline mentor's activities which involve include giving technical assistance, clarifying roles and responsibilities; identifying and analysing learning experiences, opportunities and gaps; encouraging analysis and reflection; structuring learning through questioning, listening and giving feedback.

Moreover, values and principles that underpin mentoring: understanding how people learn, recognising individual differences, empowering through personal and professional development, encouraging capability, developing competence, encouraging collaboration not competition, encouraging scholarship and a sense of enquiry, searching for new ideas, theories and knowledge, equal opportunities in the organisation, reflecting on past experiences as a key to understanding, reflection and developing the ability to transfer learning and applying it in new situations, were identified (Kimm, et al. (2003: 3).

3. HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL THEORY

This study adopted hermeneutic phenomenological theory because it attempted to examine mentor teachers' lived experiences to mentoring pre-service teachers and their reflections require their interpretation of these experiences as well as their reactions and interpretation of their lived experiences. The use of this theory is illuminated by Wilcke (2002: 6).

'As I moved between the description of participants' experiences and my own reactions and interpretations of these experiences, the information seems to fall naturally into a linear progression, mirroring the journey participants had experienced. As a result, direct quotes

from participants were used to illuminate points and the etymology of words was examined for the added insight this might offer in elucidating the themes’.

This theory was adopted because it pursues understanding rather than explanation that involves a linguistic framework; it recognizes the situated position of interpretation, perceives inquiry as conversation and is content with ambiguity, (Kinsella 2006). According to Wilcke (2002) hermeneutic phenomenology aims to elucidate lived experiences and to reveal meanings through a process of understanding and interpretation. Within this theoretical framework the experiences of mentors were presented in a ‘direct and evocative manner, encouraging the reader to enter imaginatively into the experiences described.’

In this study I want to understand the relationship between mentoring student teachers and improved experiential learning of student teachers during teaching practicum. Hermeneutic phenomenology theory aims not to understand individual people, but to understand issues that affect them (Wilcke 2002). Furthermore, mentoring opportunities and challenges that student teachers are exposed to during the teaching practicum are explored through interviews and questionnaires. This understanding emanates from the analytic depth of what is being questioned and the responses which fall within a linguistic framework.

The understanding and the development of relationships between mentoring and experiential learning of student teachers and the diversity of school context recognizes ‘the situated position of interpretation’. Understanding student teachers’ coping strategies in performing and non-performing schools is established. A deliberate dialogic platform should be created by mentors and student teachers to make conversation the inquiry as anticipated in hermeneutic theory. This theory involves entering in a dialogue in which I engage with participants in a genuine conversation based on Socratic-Platonic art of dialect (i.e. the art of questioning and seeking truth) while maintaining a stance of openness (Wilcke 2002).

Mentoring can be upgraded for student teachers to reach appropriate and required experiential learning when they are comfortable with ambiguities that might be brought by mentors, mentoring processes, school context and curriculum demands. This theory allowed me to reflect on the meanings of the experiences, how they engage with student teachers in the name of mentoring, how they help student teachers to bridge the gap between what is learnt at universities and real practice, and how mentoring can impact on experiential learning by focusing particularly on improving mentors’ support, socialisation skills, practical competencies and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK).

4. TEACHING PRACTICUM AND MENTORING APPROACHES ADOPTED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO

A previous study focused on the University of Limpopo pre-service teachers' perceptions and reflection of teaching practicum, and mentoring was found to be a challenging area which needed further exploration. In an attempt to close the gap this current study was based on mentors' reflections on mentoring pre-service teachers during teaching practicum. The focus was on exploring aspects of mentoring, ranging from roles and responsibilities to opportunities and challenges.

The University of Limpopo has adopted school-based model for pre-service teachers' practical learning to support micro-teaching offered by methodology lecturers. The school-based model requires the university to distribute pre-service teachers to mentoring schools during teaching practicum. Furthermore, the university preferred an approach to teaching practicum where pre-service teachers were distributed to schools in the university's neighbourhood. This model created many problems for pre-service teachers without bursary. This led to the use of university-based and school-based approaches during teaching practicum sessions. The adoption of these approaches was arrived at after a lengthy discussion between student representatives, university lecturers and the finance section. The university vision and the school's conceptual framework both guided a decision to accept both approaches. The University of Limpopo's vision was about providing its clientele with quality education in a rural setting, and the School of Education's conceptual framework emphasised the caring and development aspects of its clientele.

The use of these approaches was recently queried by Department of Higher Education and Training when the University of Limpopo was submitting documentation for accreditation of the revised Bachelor of Education in senior phase and training. The letter was submitted to the School of Education Board Meeting, and it says:

'It is observed that student teachers recommend schools closest to their homes to conduct their teaching practicum. The Committee is of the view that schools have to be intentionally chosen by the University. Such schools have to be functional schools that can play the role of supporting students during teaching practicum and a partnership between the school and the University must be set up. The University must assist the school to develop capacity. Report of the Portfolio Committee: Supervision, mentoring (University of Limpopo 2014: SoE2014/251).

The issue was entertained in the school board meeting (in which all lecturing staff are members). There was no consensus reached by revisiting and reviewing factors that led to

adoption of home-based model, which included failure by university to provide student teachers with transportation to neighbouring schools due to budget constraints, and the large student intake which could not easily be accommodated in local schools. The classification of functional and dysfunctional schools has become a dilemma for the School of Education, University of Limpopo since the university is located at the centre of Limpopo Province which has many schools which are underperforming. The reason for underperformance is that Limpopo Province is faced with a multiple challenges, ranging from teachers who were not trained in new curriculum, shortage of textbooks, school infrastructure backlog, the poor state of the school buildings, shortage of classrooms and laboratories, up to inadequate basic facilities such as sanitation and electricity (The Portfolio Committee on Basic Education, 2013).

5. EMPIRICAL STUDY CONDUCTED AT UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO'S MENTORING SCHOOLS

5.1. Research Methodology

Qualitative multiple case study design and participatory research designs were adopted to gather and analyse qualitative data through descriptive statistics and discourse analysis. The sample consisted of 32 teacher mentors who were purposively sampled and interviews were conducted in schools. Furthermore, field notes were captured during the assessment of 38 lesson presentations at 19 schools.

Baxter and Jack (2008: 544) argue that *'qualitative case studies afford researchers opportunities to explore or describe a phenomenon in context using a variety of data sources'*, whereas Khanlou and Peter (2005) argues that participatory research design is a systematic study of situation, events and people which aims at providing structural change to oppressed groups of people. Kemmis and McTaggart (2007: 276) states that the process of participatory action research is composed of a *'spiral of self- reflective cycles which involves planning a change; acting and observing the process and consequences; re-planning, acting and observing again; reflecting again, and so on'*.

5.2 Results

5.2.1. Gender composition

Figure 1: Gender composition

Figure 1 above depicts gender composition of the participants, with 43, (8% males) and 56 (3% females). There were more females than males. This indicates that many female teachers were willing to commit and avail their time, energy and effort to mentoring pre-service teachers during teaching practicum.

5.2.2. Age distribution

Figure 2: Age distribution

Figure 2 above depicts teacher mentors' age groups with the age group of 21-30 years was 9. (4%), whilst 31- 40 years' age group band made 46 (9%) of the participants. The age group 41- 50 years recorded 15, 6%, whereas age group 51- 60 years recorded 15. 6%. The results further reveal that age group band 61 years plus made 9, 5% of teacher mentors. The study reveals that teacher mentors of all age groups were involved in mentoring pre-service teachers during teaching practicum sessions.

5.2.3. Experience in teaching

Figure 3: Experience in teaching

Figure 3 above exhibits teacher mentors' experience in teaching. Those with experience of 2- 6 years was 37, 5%, whilst 7- 12 years' experience band made 21, 9% of the participants. The participants with experience of 13- 18 years recorded 15, 6%, whereas 19-24 years recorded 25%. The results further reveal that experience band 25-30 years did not have any teacher mentor who participated in this study. The study reveals that in-service teachers who just joined the teaching fraternity were willing to offer mentoring services to pre-service teachers during teaching practicum.

5.2.4. Position held in the school

Figure 4: Post designation

Figure 4 above shows mentors' designations. It was revealed that 37, 5% of the participants were at post level 1, whilst 21. 9% was senior teachers. 12, 5% of the participants were appointed as Head of Departments, whereas 28, 1% were deputy principals. There was no teacher mentor who was a principal. This revealed that the task of mentoring pre-service teachers was delegated to all members of the staff by all schools visited during teaching practicum sessions.

A frequency table below captured the results for the following variables: practical skills, socialisation skills, professional skills, students' feedback and university-mentor-student relationship.

5.2.5. Practical skills

The frequency table 1 above exhibits that 62% of participants disagreed that their mentoring pre-service teachers provided adequate practical learning, whereas 12.5 % of participants were neutral about this issue. Only 25% of the participants agreed that the mentoring they offered provided adequate practical learning. More than two thirds of the mentors who participated in this study agreed that they did not provide adequate practical skills to pre-service teachers.

5.2.6. Socialisation skills

The frequency table 1 above displays that 59.4%, of participants disagreed that pre-service teachers developed socialisation skills during teaching practicum. 12.5% of the participants were impartial whereas only 28.1% of them agreed that pre-service teacher's socialisation skills were developed during teaching practicum session. More than two thirds of the participants did not provide adequate socialisation skills to pre-service teachers during teaching practicum.

5.2.7. Professional development skills

The frequency table 1 above reveals that 81.25% of the participants disagreed that professional skills offered by mentors during teaching practicum were adequate, whereas 18.75% of the participants were neutral about their provision of professional skills to pre-service teachers. The provision of professional development skills was found to be lacking, to teacher mentors who participated in this study.

5.2.8. Provision of Student feedback

The frequency table 1 above depicts that 81.25% of the participants disagreed that teacher mentor provided pre-service teachers with feedback whereas 18.75% of the participants were neutral about their provision of student feedback to pre-service teachers. This result indicates that the majority of teacher mentors who were interviewed agreed that they do not offer pre-service teachers with feedback on their practical learning.

5.2.9. University-mentor-student collaboration

The frequency table above reveals that 78. 2% of the participants disagreed that university-mentor-student collaboration facilitates joint decision-making on arriving at roles and responsibility of each of them. 21. 9% of the participants were not sure whether the relationship exists. This result reveals that there is no collaboration between teacher mentors and the university.

Table 2: Advantages and disadvantages of home-based approach versus university-based approach

5.2.10. Advantages and disadvantages of home-based approach versus university-based approach

The table 2 above depicts advantages and disadvantages of home-based and university-based approaches emanating from observation reports compiled during teaching practicum. The force-field analysis method was used to establish which approach was appropriate, for University of Limpopo teaching practicum. Table 1 above exhibits home-based approach with more benefits than setbacks, and that it is more preferred than university-based approach. This analysis points in the direction of home-based approach as the more appropriate model to be adopted by University of Limpopo.

6. DISCUSSION

Effectiveness of teaching practicum occurs when student teachers were adequately mentored at schools as practical sites, to achieve required levels of practical learning. I want to agree with Professional Research in Educational Development (PRED) Office when it asserts that ‘teaching practicum is one of the most important aspects of teacher education programme’, University of Limpopo (2014: SoE2014/263).

Universities require the services of mentor teachers to improve pre-service teachers’ practical and experiential learning through mentoring activities, which involve support on practical skills, socialisation skills, professional development skills and provision of feedback.

In the schools which we send or allow our pre-service teachers to go for teaching practicum were found to create many challenges to teaching practicum and practical learning. The PRED office found that students were not welcomed in schools, in-service teachers refuse our

pre-service teachers with classes, some schools were not willing to accommodate pre-service teachers for teaching practicum, pre-service teachers were given classes to teach without proper guidance and assistance, schools lack of facilities which resulted with pre-service teachers teaching big classes, (University of Limpopo 2014: SoE2014/263).

When PRED Office acknowledges that the quality of teaching practicum placement, the professional development and growth the pre-service teachers' experience, and their future attitudes and beliefs about teaching and learning are greatly influenced by the supervision and support provided by the teacher mentors and university supervisors, (University of Limpopo 2014: SoE2014). The study reveals that the University of Limpopo mentoring function was faced with multiple challenges.

The study revealed that female teachers, post level 1 teachers and newly appointees were willing to commit their time, energies and efforts to mentoring pre-service teachers during teaching practicum. Furthermore it was revealed that teacher mentors were aware of their failure and acknowledged that their mentoring failed to provide adequate practical learning in respect of practical skills, socialisation skills, professional development skills and provision of student feedback. Moreover, it was highlighted that university-mentor-student collaboration did not exist.

7. CONCLUSION

The study revealed that mentors did not execute their roles and responsibilities as expected and that little effort was provided in giving practical skills, socialisation skills, professional development skills and feedback. Furthermore it was revealed that no relationship exists between university and mentoring schools and teacher mentors. The study concludes that mentor teachers do not know exactly what was required of them when mentoring pre-service teachers. I therefore recommend that the university-mentor-student collaboration be created, with the university spearheading this initiative. The relationship will facilitate induction and training of teacher mentors, pre-service teachers and university supervisors on their roles and responsibilities.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from this study, I therefore recommend that:

- University-mentor-student collaborations should be created, and UL must take a lead.

- Teacher mentors should be trained and the training should be comprehensive and should encompass requirements for provision of practical skills, socialisation skills, professional development skills and student feedback.
 - A research should be conducted by University of Limpopo to profile schools based on performance, size and locality.
 - Student teachers should be allowed opportunities to practice in different school situations as categorised per performance, size, and locality to ensure that their practical learning encompasses diversity of school dynamics.
 - University of Limpopo should adopt a school-based model for teaching practicum.
- It is therefore recommended that universities should deliberately choose mentoring schools based on developed set criteria.

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6. FIGURES

5.2 Results

5.2.1. Gender composition

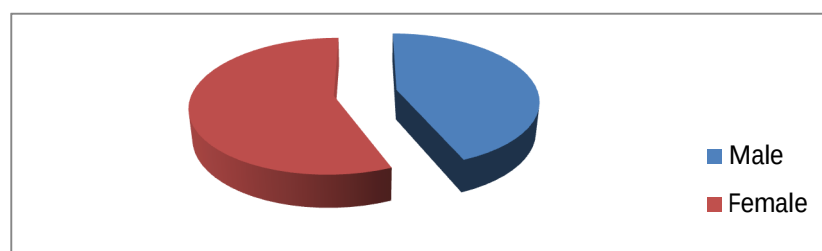


Figure 1: Gender composition

5.2.2. Age distribution

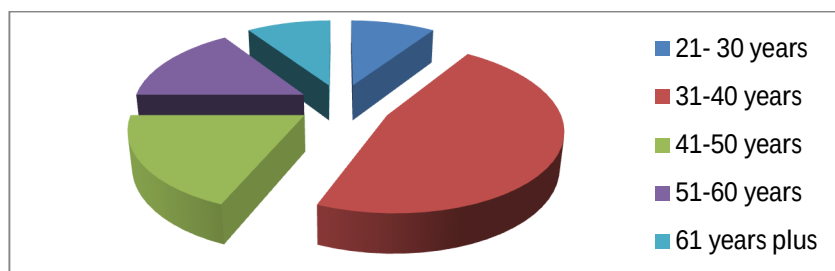


Figure 2: Age distribution

5.2.3. Experience in teaching



Figure 3: Experience in teaching

5.2.4. Position held in the school

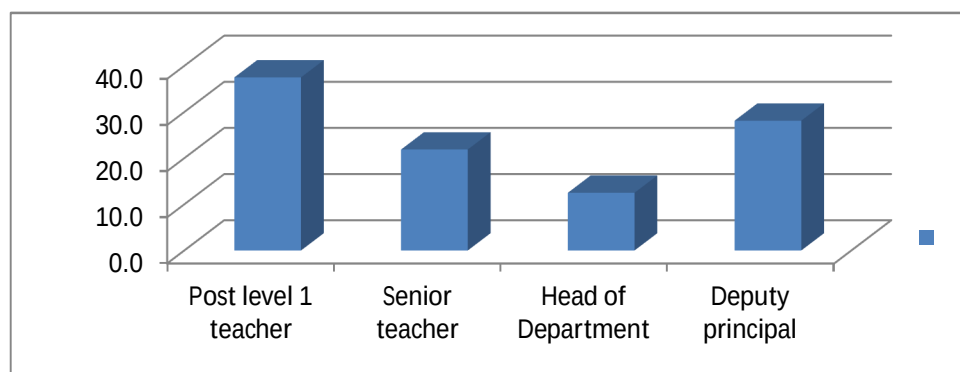


Figure 4: Post designation

7. TABLES

Table 1: Multiple-variable frequency table

Variable	Percentages/ %		
	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Practical skills	62	12. 5	25
Socialisation skills	59. 4	12. 5	28. 1
Professional development skills	81,25	18.75	0
Providing student feedback	81,25	18, 75	0

University-mentor-student relationship	78.2	21.9	0
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8.2.5. Practical skills

Table 2: Advantages and disadvantages of home-based approach versus university-based approach

Home-based approach	University-based approach
It was mostly preferred by students without proper funding. These are student teachers without Funza Lushaka or Limpopo Department of Basic Education (LDBE) and Mpumalanga Department of Basic Education (MDBE) or any other DoE bursaries. <u>Advantages</u> - Student teachers minimise travelling and accommodation cost. - In most cases mentor teachers are former teachers. They become supportive and caring. - They are willing to assist in professional development and student socialisation. - They normally provides hands-on skills and provide timely feedback <u>Disadvantages</u> - This model is very costly to university to reach out pre-service teachers at extreme localities. Schools in Limpopo and	This model is mostly used by students with adequate funding. These are mostly students who are financed through Fundza Lushaka and LDBE's or MDBE's bursaries. <u>Advantages</u> - Less costly for pre-service teachers to stay on campus, or in their rented places. Travelling to university placement schools is less costly. - Pre-service teachers use university facilities to prepare their lessons and materials during teaching practicum. <u>Disadvantages</u> - Student teachers are packed in the neighbouring schools. In one school situated next to university's gate twenty eight (28) were packed. - This causes accommodation and' class allocation problem. - Furthermore, mentor teachers feel they are being overloaded by mentoring

Mpumalanga are scattered. - Access to teaching, learning and assessment materials becomes a problem as many pre-service students come from deep remote areas of Mpumalanga and Limpopo provinces.	student teachers when also have their school roles and duties. - Receiving pre-service teachers has become a burden to some schools. Mentoring becomes a nightmare, and pre-service teachers are neglected. In one school it was found that teachers were not introduced to learners and staff. In some schools pre-service teachers worked in separate old and used library without any supervision. They are left on their own.
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