

Understanding the Role of Mentor Teachers during Teaching Practice Session

M. C. Maphalala

University of South Africa, College of Education: Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies, 0003, Pretoria, South Africa
E-mail: mphalmc@unisa.ac.za

KEYWORDS Mentoring. Cooperating School. University Supervisor. Student Teacher Socialization

ABSTRACT Mentor teachers have become key players in launching student teachers into the teaching profession. Mentor teachers are recognized for their practical knowledge of the teaching profession, which complements the theoretical knowledge that the student teacher has acquired from the university. This paper therefore investigated how mentor teachers understand and perceive their roles as they prepare University of South Africa (UNISA) student teachers for their teaching careers during teaching practice session in cooperating schools. This study adopted a mixed methods research design because of its ability to incorporate both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. A total of 46 mentor teachers filled in the questionnaire and 15 of them were also interviewed to gather more qualitative data to enrich the study. Findings reveal that mentor teachers understood their roles to be that of facilitating socialization of student teachers into the teaching profession, by assisting them to gain competence in the various areas of the school functioning, including lesson planning and presentation; classroom management and appropriate use of teaching strategies and resources. The mentor teachers also demonstrated understanding of the concept of 'mentoring', but they needed feedback from UNISA to assure them if student teachers are being assisted according to the institution's expectations. This indicates that UNISA still needs to do more to enhance the roles and responsibilities of mentor teachers in supporting student teachers.

INTRODUCTION

A major component of teacher education and the preparation of teachers throughout the world is teaching practice (TP) (Wright 1999). Furlong et al. (1988) contend that teaching practice occupies a key position in the programme of teacher education. They further argue that it is a culminating experience in teacher preparation, as it provides opportunity to beginning teachers to become socialized into the teaching profession.

Graham (2006) points out that there are two components, critical to the success of the teaching practice experience, namely: the mentor teachers who guide and support student teachers and the sites where the experiences occur. The role of mentor teachers is crucial in the student teacher's growth and development. Mentor teachers as practicing professionals, are aware of current issues in education, and they are uniquely positioned to help student teachers navigate the demands of the practicum, particularly in matters of curriculum and classroom management. Student teachers will look up to their mentors for support through a period that is frequently stressful both emotionally and physically (Handbook for PDPP 2010-2011).

The mentor teacher has the greatest influence on the development of the student teacher as a teaching professional. This responsibility

is a highly significant one. The knowledge, time, and involvement that is required to make this experience a valuable one for student teachers and mentors is much appreciated by the university collaboration. Providing a climate for open and honest discussion, questions, and concerns will create an environment for professional growth and reflection in which both mentor and student teacher can thrive (University of Maryland 2007). The university therefore has to ensure that mentor teachers are clear about the role that they need to play in order to effectively support the student teachers during their placements in schools.

Ismail (2001) as quoted by Ligadu (2012) in her study found that mentoring had some influence on mentees' performance but there was still a need for more appropriate training of the mentor teachers. This suggested a need for better ways of mentoring during teaching practicum that would improve on the existing systems. Studies investigating mentoring of student teachers are necessary to generate knowledge so as to shed light on the nature of mentorship that student teachers receive with a view of continually improving the existing systems.

This study therefore sought to investigate how mentor teachers understand and perceive their roles as they prepare University of South Africa (UNISA) student teachers for their teaching careers during teaching practice session in

cooperating schools. The recommendations of this can be used to enhance the mentorship programmes and current mentoring practices in schools during teaching practice.

Teaching Practice Process at UNISA

All Initial Professional Education and Training (IPET) programmes have three components in common: educational theory, professional studies and school practice. The Teaching Practice Office is a component of the College of Education at the University of South Africa. Its main function is to fulfil the third of the training components namely, work-based school practice. This is achieved through the organisation, coordination and facilitation of the Teaching Practice activities of the Teacher Education Programmes offered at the UNISA.

In terms of the National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa (2007) student teachers have to be placed in schools which have been identified as excellent places of teaching and learning, where student teachers will be able to complement their theoretical training experience, and gain valuable experience, of day-to-day operations within a school and an authentic teaching and learning situation. Students select three schools in which to do teaching practice. UNISA then chooses one school from the students' selection in which the student will be placed. Students are placed in appropriate schools, which offer particular subjects in their fields of study.

Schools are asked to allocate a mentor teacher to the student placed in their school for further support. The mentor teacher is expected to be someone with proper influence at the school to be in a position to contribute positively to the learning experience of the student teacher. The agreement between UNISA and schools contains the responsibilities of the mentor teachers towards students. The University holds workshops for mentor teachers from time to time and these are aimed at empowering mentor teachers to effectively and efficiently support the student teachers on their journey to become professional teachers.

Aims of the Study

The study aimed at the following objectives:

- To ascertain the nature of mentorship provided to UNISA student teachers

- To determine the nature of support that teacher mentors receive from UNISA
- To examine some of the challenges that may prevent teacher mentors from performing their roles effectively and efficiently.
- To make recommendations to enhance the experiences of the teacher mentors regarding their mentoring roles.

The Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by Padua's model for mentor teachers. According to Padua (2003), mentor teachers are usually experienced, have a deep understanding of a specific content area, and know how to build capacity in others. He points out that primary goals of a mentor teacher are as follows:

- to assist classroom teachers in refining existing instructional strategies;
- to introduce new strategies and concepts;
- to engage teachers in conversations about their teaching; and
- to provide overall support.

However, every teacher will have different needs. Mentor teachers must rely on their professional judgment to determine which goals are most suitable for each teacher. Padua (2003) adapted Routman's "Model for Effective Teaching and Learning" to use as a model for mentor teachers. He argues that, even though it is designed to facilitate student learning, the techniques Routman describes can apply to mentor teachers as well (see the Appendix A for Routman's and Padua's Models). Padua (2003) commends that before using any of the techniques described above, the classroom and mentor teachers should discuss the lesson's goal and focus, the instructional strategies that will be used, and why they were selected. After the lesson, the teachers should also discuss it and plan the next steps.

Demonstration Lessons

Mentors teachers should model the practice of teaching to the student teachers (Galvez-Hjoernevik 1986; Barab and Hay 2001). The skills of teaching will be learnt more effectively through modelling (Bellm et al. 1997; Carlson and Gooden 1999; Hudson 2002). Pre-service teachers view the mentor as a model to develop

a greater understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses. Modeling effective instructional strategies is one way a mentor teacher can help. In addition to seeing how concepts are applied and how students respond, the student teacher can learn appropriate instructional language, classroom management techniques, and how to pace a lesson.

Team Teaching

Padua (2003) argues that team teaching technique works especially well with student teachers who are not completely confident but willing to try new concepts/strategies. The student teacher leads the lesson, but the mentor teacher is alongside ready to give advice and assistance. In this context, risk taking is less intimidating.

Independent Practice/Observation

As student teachers gain the confidence and knowledge to implement instructional strategies independently, they may welcome observation and feedback. Padua (2003) proposes that mentor teachers should make prior arrangements for observations to ensure that student teachers are not made uncomfortable by them. By discussing the goals of both the lesson and the observation in advance with student teachers, mentor teachers can respond sensitively to their concerns and needs. The mentor teacher may take notes during the lesson but should not let that activity interfere with the observation. After the lesson, a good starting question to ask the teacher is "How did you think the lesson went?" The answer may provide valuable insights about the teacher's intentions. More importantly, it suggests how best to approach the rest of the discussion.

Feedback and Ongoing Support

Numerous researchers (Little 1990; Riordan 1995; Bellm et al. 1997; Bishop and Denley 1997; Haney 1997; Bishop 2001) have reported that constructive feedback in pre-service teacher education is a vital ingredient in the mentoring process. Feedback allows the pre-service teachers to reflect and improve teaching practice, in what Schon (1987: 157) calls the "reflective practicum." Specifically, mentors need to observe practice in order to provide oral and written feedback on aspects associated with the

mentor's pedagogical knowledge (Ganser 1995; Rosean and Lindquist 1992), which also includes reviewing plans (Monk and Dillon 1995) and assisting in developing the student teacher's evaluation of teaching (Long 1995). Linked to the provision of feedback is the mentor's articulation of expectations (Klug and Salzman 1990). Whether mentor teachers are demonstrating, team teaching, or observing, all these techniques should be followed up with timely feedback. The purpose of the feedback is to provide suggestions on how to improve instruction, increase student learning, and encourage the classroom teacher. Like students, teachers need continual support, and feedback should celebrate their successes as well as address their challenges. By revisiting classrooms, seeing teachers in action, and providing ongoing feedback and support, mentor teachers help classroom teachers grow professionally.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The participants in this study were 46 mentor teachers who had mentored second, third and fourth -year pre-service teachers who are enrolled for a Bachelor of Education programme at UNISA. This study used both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Interviews and questionnaires were used as the major approaches of inquiry to investigate how mentor teachers understood their role during teaching practice.

The quantitative data collected through the use of the questionnaire involved mentors' (n=46) written responses to statements and questions relating to their mentoring of student teachers for learning how to teach in their chosen fields of specialization. The questionnaire had both open-ended and closed-ended questions seeking to understand the role of mentor teachers: The questionnaire covered the following aspects:

- preparation for the role as mentor teachers
- facilitating socialization of the student teacher
- provision of feedback on teaching performance
- providing facilitative information to enhance classroom performance
- mentor teachers' perceptions of their mentoring roles
- suggestions for enhancing mentoring practices

Out of the 46 mentor teachers who filled in the questionnaire, 15 of them were also interviewed to gather more data to enrich the study. Krueger (1994) argues that the purpose of interviews is to produce qualitative data to provide insights into the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of participants

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Biographical Information

Participants in this study involved 46 mentors (male=17, female=29) associated with University of South Africa. The mentors' ages varied (23% between 22 - 29 years; 38% between 30 - 39 years, and 39% between 40-49 years). Regarding their experience of mentoring (42% had mentored between 4 to 9 mentees, 50% had mentored more than 10 mentees, while for 16% this was their first mentee). These mentor teachers do not only mentor UNISA students but also assist student teachers from other universities in the country. 59% of the mentor teachers do not feel supported by UNISA in performing their roles as mentors. Finally, only 37% indicated that they had received training to become mentor teachers whilst 63% had not received any training. (See appendix B on distribution of participants according to their biographical variables).

The following section provides findings from data analysis. The nature of the data resulted in a range of findings, but only those that had a direct connection to major issues and which were thought to be at the heart of mentoring are reported. These are:

- Allocation of mentor teachers
- Preparation for the role as mentor teachers
- Facilitating socialization of the student teacher
- Provision of feedback on teaching performance
- Qualities that mentor teacher should possess
- Areas identified by mentors as being important for the student teachers to be supported on

Allocation of Mentor Teachers

The study discovered that the general practice in allocating mentors to is that student teach-

ers would be placed under the care the heads of departments as their mentors. Where the school did not have enough heads of departments, senior teachers would be allocated as mentors.

Preparation for the Role as Mentor Teachers

UNISA regards school-based mentoring as a key element of the Initial Teacher Training experience, it therefore provides training opportunities for teachers who are or who wish to become mentors to student teachers. To achieve this, UNISA runs a series of mentoring workshops every year. The provision of mentor training is intended not only to improve student teachers' school-based experiences but also to facilitate school improvement through the development of a mentoring force in schools. Regarding preparation to perform their mentoring the roles only 37% mentor teachers indicated that they had received training whilst 63% had not received any training. The majority of mentor teachers do not feel confident to perform their roles as they are not sure if they are supporting the students according to UNISA expectations. Interviewee 7 (mentor teacher) mourned the fact that UNISA does not even provide a handbook to guide them on how to assist the student teachers during teaching practice.

Facilitating Socialization of the Student Teacher

Mentor teachers play a vital role in influencing student teachers' professional stance and practice. As student teachers try to make sense of what is going on in their classrooms, the explanations and advice they encounter, especially from more experienced colleagues, affect their attitudes. Student teachers' long for opportunities to learn from their experienced colleagues and want more than social support and instructions for using the copying machine. New teachers want to discuss curriculum implementation, get ideas about how to address specific students' needs, and gain insight from colleagues with experience in their subject areas (Johnson and Kardos 2002). Providing emotional support is not as valuable as helping new teachers learn to create safe classroom environments, engage all students in worthwhile learning, work effectively with parents, and base instructional decisions on assessment data.

Mentor teachers understood their roles to be that of facilitating socialization of student teachers into the teaching profession. This according to them included the following:

- arranging opportunities to observe other teachers' classrooms including the mentor teacher
- introducing the student teacher to the school community and explain his or her reason for being there
- helping student teachers understand school activities and practices.
- providing student teachers with information about the school, policies, regulations and resources
- demonstrating various teaching techniques and strategies
- provide a space in the classroom for the student teacher to work and keep materials
- encouraging student teachers to evaluate his or her own progress using the reflective process

Providing Feedback on Teaching Performance Using Feedback Strategies

One of the important roles of the mentor teachers is the provision of feedback and advice to the student teachers on a regular basis. Interviewee 11 (mentor teacher) pointed out that feedback to the student must be developmental in nature rather than judgmental. Glickman and Bey (1990) and Britzman (1991) argue that feedback must be presented in a collegial spirit, with opportunity for genuine dialogue about the matters in question.

Mentor teachers believe that:

- feedback should not be only about the weaknesses of the student teachers, but also about their strong sides
- a detailed feedback to the student teachers about their teaching performance should be provided
- feedback to the student teachers should also entail their language skills
- In providing feedback the student teacher should also be afforded an opportunity reflect about their own teaching performance

Padua (2003) points out that feedback allows the pre-service teachers to reflect and improve teaching practice.

Qualities That Mentor Teacher Should Possess

Mentor teachers indicated qualities that a mentor teacher should possess for a successful mentorship role. Interviewee 3 (mentor teacher) thought that it takes a special personality to be an effective mentor teacher. Most mentor teachers identified human relations an important element/skill for a successful mentoring relationship. In working with student teachers, mentor teachers will need the listening and problem-solving skills, flexibility, and ability to compromise required in any effective relationship. Mentor teachers also believe that a sense of humour goes a long way as well and should not be ignored as a beneficial attribute to possess.

Interviewee 3 (mentor teacher) believes that mentor teacher should be a lifelong learners and be in a position to illustrate how the field is growing and changing and that even after many years there are still new things to learn. They should also be willing to learn from others including the student teachers. They should also command respect amongst their fellow colleagues.

"A mentor teacher must be a person who has accumulated a wealth of experience in the teaching profession. He should be knowledgeable and be specialist in their areas of specialization. They say that experience is the best teacher but the second best teacher is someone else's experience. The mentor therefore must be willing to share his or her experiences with the student teacher that he or she is mentoring" A good mentor is willing to teach what he/she knows and accept the mentee where they currently are in their professional development.

A good mentor is able to provide guidance and constructive feedback to the student teachers. He must be able to identify current student teacher's strengths and weaknesses and use them to foster professional development and a feeling of accomplishment in learning the field. They should also provide the support necessary to help the student teacher develop a professional identity, and to further develop the basic competences that were acquired at the university. Whilst professional support and guidance are an important aspect of mentorship, emotional support to the student teachers should not be overlooked. A study conducted by Edwards (2002), which used student teachers as partici-

pants emphasized that the emotional support the mentor teachers provided, the non-judgmental feedback, and the opportunity to grow professionally were important to their staying in teaching.

Further qualities were suggested as follows:

- Approachability
- Trust worthy, reliable, and self-confident
- Be aware of and have respect for human diversity.
- Should understand moral issues and ethical practices in educational environments
- Motivates others by setting a good example
- An effective listener and communicator
- Respected by others
- Have in-depth knowledge of content and pedagogy.

Areas Identified by Mentors as Being Important for the Student Teachers to be Supported on

Mentors were requested to identify areas which they felt were very important for the student teacher to be supported on. The following areas were suggested:

- Ability to maintain order and discipline in class
- Time management
- Lesson planning and presentation
- Appropriate use of Learning, Teaching and Support Materials (LTSM)
- Understanding of curriculum policy documents. (Mentor 17)
- Classroom management,
- Curriculum planning and assessment,
- Instructional strategies,
- Understanding of cultural and racial differences of learners

Professional Development and Benefits for Mentors

Mentoring has the potential to benefit both student teachers and mentor teachers. It helps student teachers confront their challenges in the classroom; through collegial conversations and consistent support with an experienced teacher, they improve their teaching practices. The mentoring experience also provides professional development for the mentor teachers. In this study mentors identified the following benefits for the role they play as mentors:

- they improve their teaching practices
- Improved reflective practices,
- a higher level of professional responsibilities,
- a broadened view of the profession,
- they are becoming more self-critical and reflective in their own practices
- developed improved skills in monitoring and evaluating practice

They valued the opportunity to develop leadership skills and development of mentoring built capacity in their schools.

CONCLUSION

Mentoring is regarded as a central strategy in the education of student teachers at UNISA. It has a particular role to play in initiating student teachers to the teaching profession. Although the concept of 'mentoring' is generally understood by mentors in schools UNISA can enhance the roles and responsibilities of mentor teachers in supporting student teachers by offering ongoing workshops and keeping contact with the mentor teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

UNISA should invest more time and resources to towards the development of a pool of mentor teachers to assist student teachers during their placement in schools. UNISA also needs to appreciate the fact that becoming a good mentor takes time, therefore ongoing workshops should be conducted aimed at continuously improving mentor teachers. Incentives for mentor teachers in recognition of the responsibility they have assumed should be provided to motivate them to contribute positive towards the professional development of student teachers. Incentives may include: certificates of recognition, end of year recognition functions or certificates. Before placement UNISA should ascertain that the student teacher would have a suitable mentor in the school.

REFERENCES

- Barab SA, Hay KE 2001. Doing science at the elbows of experts: Issues related to the science apprenticeship camp. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 38(1): 70-102.
- Bellm D, Whitebook M, Hnatiuk P 1997. *The Early Childhood Mentoring Curriculum: Trainer's Guide*.

- Washington DC: National Center for the Early Childhood Work Force.
- Bishop C 2001. *Case-based Learning and the Construction of Professional Practical Knowledge in Teacher Education*. EdD Dissertation. Faculty of Education, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia.
- Bishop K, Denley P 1997. The fundamental role of subject matter knowledge in the teaching of science. *School Science Review*, 79(286): 65-71.
- Britzman D 1991. *Practice Makes Practice: A Critical Study of Learning to Teach*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Carlson R D, Gooden J S 1999. Mentoring Pre-Service Teachers for Technology Skills Acquisition. *Proceedings of Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education International Conference 1999*. Chesapeake, VA: AACE, pp. 1313-1318.
- Department of Education 2007. *The National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa*. Pretoria: Department of Education
- Edwards F 2002. *The Impact of Mentoring on New Teacher Retention*. Doctoral Dissertation, Unpublished. Wisconsin: Cardinal Stritch University
- Feiman-Nemser S, Parker M 1993. Mentoring in context: A comparison of two U.S. programs for beginning teachers. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 19(8): 699-718.
- Galvez-Hjornevik C 1986. Mentoring among teachers: A review of the literature. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 37(1): 6-11.
- Ganser T 1996. What do mentors say about mentoring? *Journal of Staff Development*, 17(3): 36-39.
- Glickman C, Bey T 1990. Supervision. In: WR Houston (Ed.): *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*. New York: Macmillan, pp. 549-566.
- Graham B 2006. Conditions for successful field experiences: Perceptions of cooperating teachers. *Teacher and Teacher Education*, 22: 1118-1129.
- Haney A 1997. The role of mentorship in the workplace. In: MC Taylor (Ed.): *Workplace Education*. Toronto: Culture Concept, pp. 211-228.
- Hudson P 2002. Mentors and Modeling Primary Science Teaching Practices. *The Electronic Journal of Science Education*, 7(1). From <<http://unr.edu/homepage/jcannon/ejse/ejse.html>>
- Ismail N B H 2001. *The Mentoring Processes of Primary ESL Student Teachers in Malaysia*. 1st Edition. United Kingdom: The University of Exeter.
- Johnson SM, Kardos S 2002. Keeping new teachers in mind. *Educational Leadership*, 59(6): 13-16.
- Klug BJ, Salzman SA 1990. Formal Induction vs. Informal Mentoring: Comparative Effects Andoutcomes. *Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association*, Boston, Massachusetts, April 16 - 20, 1990.
- Krueger R A 1994. *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. 2nd Edition. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Ligadu CP 2012. The impact of the professional learning and psychological mentoring support for teacher trainees. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 8 (3): 350-363.
- Little J 1990. The mentor phenomenon and the social organisation of teaching. In: C Cazden (Ed.): *Review of Educational Research*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association, pp. 297-351.
- Long J 1995. The Challenge for Change: Mentoring for School-based Teacher Education. *Paper presented at the ATEA Conference 24-29 September 1995*. Australian Catholic University. North Sydney.
- Monk M, Dillon J 1995. *Learning to Teach Science: Activities for Student Teachers and Mentors*. London: Falmer Press. Taylor and Francis.
- Moran S 1990. Schools and the beginning teacher. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 72(3): 210-213.
- Padua JFM 2003. Mentor Teachers Tips and Techniques that Support Classroom Teachers. Pacific Resources for Education and Learning. From <http://www.prel.org/products/paced/apr03/pc_mentors.pdf> (Retrieved on 04 December 2011).
- Riordan G 1995. Teachers' Perceptions of Collaboration and Clinical Supervision. *Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*, San Francisco, CA, April 18-22, 1995.
- Rosean C, Lindquist B 1992. Collaborative Teaching and Research: Asking 'What does it mean?' *Elementary Subject Centre Series No. 73*. East Lansing, MI: Institute for Research on Teaching. Michigan State University.
- Schon D 1987. *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Windschitl L, Hudson P, Skamp K 2003. Development of an Instrument: Mentoring for Effective Primary Science Teaching. From <www.interscience.wiley.com> (Retrieved on 25 February 2012).
- Wright S 1999. A comparative view of teaching practice in physical education. *International Sports Studies*, 21(1): 55-68
- University of Maryland 2007. The Mentor Teacher. From <<http://www.education.umd.edu/EDCI/info/packets/mentor.pdf>> (Retrieved on 24 October 2012).

APPENDIX A

Table 1: Routman's and Padua's Models

<i>Routman's model for effective teaching and learning</i>	<i>Padua model/Techniques for mentor teachers</i>
Demonstration	The mentor teacher demonstrates a lesson
Guided practice	Mentor and classroom teachers team teach
Independent practice	The classroom teacher independently applies a new strategy or concept while the mentor teacher observes
Response and feedback and on-going assessment	The mentor teacher continues to provide feedback and support as the classroom teacher strives to improve instruction

APPENDIX B

Table 2: Distribution of participants according to biographical variables (N=46)

	<i>F</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	27	59
Male	19	41
<i>Age in Years</i>		
29 and below	4	9
30-39	11	24
40-49	18	39
50-59	13	28
<i>Level of Education</i>		
Matric	0	0
Matric and Diploma	17	37
Matric and Degree	29	63
<i>Number of Students Mentored in the Past 5 Years</i>		
None	9	20
1-3	18	39
4-6	11	24
7-9	6	13
10 and more	2	4
<i>Location of Schools</i>		
Rural	17	37
Urban	13	28
Suburb	16	35