

The Reliability of Mentor Assessments in Teaching Practice in an Open Distance e-Learning (ODEL) Context

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ABSTRACT All Teacher Education Institutions depend on school-based mentors to assist and guide student teachers doing teaching practice. Some also depend on mentors to do some of the assessments of these student teachers. ODeL institutions depend on these mentors even more as their lecturers cannot visit all students everywhere. For an ODeL institution it is therefore of critical importance that assessments done by mentors should be reliable. Research for this article was undertaken to determine if assessments done by mentors that were utilised by a particular ODeL institution were reliable and if not how that can be remedied. The findings indicate that most mentor assessments are not very reliable at this stage but that good training in mentoring and assessment can improve the reliability of such assessments. For ODeL institutions it is therefore critical to ensure that quality mentor training precedes the appointment of mentors so that more reliable mentor assessments can be made.

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring is an activity that has its origin in ancient times but is as relevant today as any time in history. Although there are different interpretations of mentoring in education, the utilisation of mentoring in practical teaching is well recognised and probably universally applied as the benefits are beyond dispute (Dreyer 1998). All teacher education providers in South Africa utilise mentors to guide and support student teachers during practical teaching periods and depend on them for some assessments during this time.

In ODeL the providers are even more dependent on mentors as their student teachers do their practical teaching anywhere in South Africa (and even beyond its borders) and in some cases at any time of the year, making it virtually impossible for lecturers to visit all students during teaching practice. Mentors therefore become the eyes and the ears of such providers and are depended on to do a number of school-based assessments on behalf of the providers.

If a provider decentralises some of its assessments (even if only partly) it must make sure that the quality of those assessments can be depended on, especially in a high stakes assessment like teaching practice. The research for this paper was undertaken to determine if the mentor assessments done for a particular ODeL provider is dependable and of good quality, and if not how this can possibly be remedied.

Literature Study

Mentoring can be regarded as a process where a person with a serving and inspirational attitude (the mentor) firstly sees development and leadership potential in a still-to-be-developed person (the mentee). The mentor supports, advises and guides, eventually and significantly influencing the mentee in the realisation of potential (Steinman 2007). Mentoring is thus viewed as a dynamic, shared personal relationship in which a more experienced person acts as an adviser, guide and role model for a less experienced person (mentee). Through their social interaction, a mentor and mentee, share their learning experiences. This study, therefore, is guided by the social constructivist learning theory, which advocates that learning occurs when learners are engaged in social activities such as the mentor-mentee relationship. Social constructivist approaches can include reciprocal teaching, mentor support, problem-based assessment and all other methods that involve learning with or from others (Kukla 2000).

Socio-constructivist theory also claims that the personal construction of knowledge always occurs in social contexts, since learning activities are socially and contextually bound (Woolfolk 2007). Without social and meaningful interaction with his or her mentor, it is always very difficult or almost impossible for a mentee to acquire the real meaning of an important concept and to learn how to use it. For example,

assessment discussions between a mentor (supervisor) and mentee (student teacher) in teaching practice, particularly after each assessment process, facilitate the students' learning, the construction and building of knowledge and testing of this knowledge in a real classroom situation. Even a dialogue, which may occur from time to time between a mentor and mentee, in a socio-constructivist learning background, is at the heart of any teaching practice activity. This interaction gives students an opportunity to play an active role in constructing knowledge, as learning is collaborative and in this way students learn from their mentor teachers. Du Plessis et al. (2010) contend that socio-constructivists emphasise that student teachers are always confronted with complex teaching situations, hence they need ample opportunities to engage in meaningful, problem-solving activities with their mentor teachers.

Mentoring in Teaching Practice

The best way of mentoring and developing student teachers is to first acquire a clear understanding of their problems and to then guide them through constructive development activities or programmes that can sustain them by addressing issues that are challenging to them. One such programme could be teaching practice, which Yan and He (2010) see as an opportunity to "observe and work with real students, teachers and curriculum settings". Teaching practice experiences influence student teachers' professional development profoundly as it gives them opportunities to experience real classroom situation (Farell 2008). Bezzina and Michalack (2008) view teaching practice as critical to the development of student teachers because they can apply practical pedagogical knowledge acquired during the didactic lessons under the supervision of mentor teachers.

Mwaka et al. (2013) assert that mentoring in teacher education, and particularly in teaching practice activities, is highly crucial as it plays a major role in preparing the graduate teachers for work environment demands, and should, therefore, be responsive to these demands. This implies a need to provide quality mentoring which can only be received through a programme that is relevant to the needs of its recipients. It follows that this status of the mentoring process requires great efforts at producing the kinds of

teacher graduates who will not only be adaptable to the rapidly changing needs of the society but also contribute to innovation and development.

White and Stephenson (2000) found that in a teaching practice setting, a mentored student teacher's benefits could be greater professional competence, better acceptance within a school family and accelerated employability. The benefits of the mentor are personal satisfaction and fulfilment, enhanced professional career identity (being recognised as a mentor), personal renewal and development and recognition by the school for developing talent in teacher trainees. Possibly one of the greatest benefits that a mentor teacher could have is the pleasure associated with shaping future teachers (Steinman 2007).

Rosemary et al. (2013) assert that teaching practice, under the guidance of a mentor or supervisor, provides an opportunity for teacher trainees to apply the knowledge and theories learned on campus to the real classroom. Student teaching has been called the most challenging, rewarding, and critical stage of teacher education (Goethals and Howard 2000) and it is generally accepted that the student teaching experience is key for teacher preparation programmes.

While different institutions may operate in different teaching practice systems, they all share the ultimate goal of letting student teachers demonstrate specific competencies that they are expected to have mastered at different stages in their training phase. Thus, it sets the stage for success or failure in student teaching and a student teacher's future in education may be determined by what happens during their training period (Yan and He 2010). Because it is so important, teaching practice should be conducted in such a way that student teachers can continuously learn new knowledge and skills and develop professionally. *Inter alia*, emphasise Rosemary et al. (2013), supervision by mentors and assessment of students doing teaching practice, if properly done, can contribute to the quality of student teacher training.

Mentor Assessment in Teaching Practice

Concerning Unisa BEd and PGCE teaching practice assessment at Unisa, mentor teachers at school are supposed to give informal feedback to student teachers on general performance,

report on the whole practical teaching period and do lesson assessments with feedback to the students and the university. Unisa assessors visit each student twice during their duration of their studies for lesson assessment and school-based mentors assess ten lessons.

Fei (2007) observed that there are common problems in the supervision of teaching practice by many institutions, namely lack or insufficient assessment training and lack of consistent and credible supervision by school mentors.

As is the case with teaching practice at Unisa, Fei (2007) further argues that the existing teaching practice in many institutions appears to be a formality, owing to the lack of clearly defined objectives and lack of monitoring mechanism for teaching practice assessment. Wang (2007) sees the lack of nationally standardised assessment criteria and assessor training as detrimental to student teachers' professional development. Farrell (2001) emphasises quality support from the schools and further contents that student teachers should be placed in the hands of competent supervisors (mentors) whose assessment skills are reliable and who undergo continuous supervisory and assessment training as part and parcel of their professional development. Equally, Yan and He (2010) echo the training and role of the mentor teacher "*who is most available for advice during the teaching practicum, in developing student teachers*". These scholars also propose that the mentor teacher heavily influences student teachers' teaching styles through direct contact, sharing of experiences and assessment discussions. In support, Kiggundu (2007), states that "*supervisor teachers or mentors have a great influence on the development of student teachers' orientation, conceptions and classroom practice.*"

However, assessment as a part and parcel of teaching practice process is often a weak link in the design of mentoring preparation. Too often, school supervisors receive only cursory professional training for the role, and their marginal status may weaken their potential influence (Grossman 2010). Given their critical role in supporting student teachers, lack of training, with clear criteria, on the part of mentors influences their assessment in an adverse way. High quality assessment on the other hand impacts positively on students' learning and their professional development (Timperley 2008). This pro-

fessional development occurs within systematic inquiry and knowledge-building cycles based on assessment planned by teachers and principals. Timperley (2008) identifies factors that have an impact on teaching practice assessment and these can be summarised as follows:

- ♦ Identification of clear curriculum and professional skills to be assessed
- ♦ Time or duration allocated to assessment process
- ♦ Identification of assessment tools to be used
- ♦ Prior-training of assessors with clear assessment standards
- ♦ The need for engagement in systematic evidence-informed discussions (between assessor and teacher trainee) that build the relevant professional knowledge, skills and dispositions
- ♦ Allocation of marks from assessors, coupled with the provision of feedback, should be based on honesty and objectivity that diagnose students' learning needs and also engage students in new learning experiences
- ♦ Feedback given should deepen professional knowledge and refine teaching skills rather than focussing only on normative achievements

The above factors suggest that the assessment process in teaching practice should be considered as information that guides the reflection about the effectiveness of teaching and what needs to happen next. These factors also emphasise the notion that during teaching practice, assessment of students' performance is a key element. Assessors of teaching practice need to do everything in their power to ensure success. Trevit et al. (2012) contend that at the heart of the assessment process, then, is an act of judgement or qualitative appraisal, with which both the student and the assessor must be comfortable.

Research

During the support visits to student teachers the authors both school based assessor and the Unisa lecturer co-assess the student teacher and discuss their findings afterwards. Informal observations of these discussions revealed that assessment scores differed substantially in many cases and that not all school-based teachers who supervise student teachers are trained as mentors and not all mentors are trained as

assessors. Furthermore, there is no monitoring of school-based mentor assessments, which might render the process unreliable and inconsistent. To find out more accurately what the real situation is, it was decided to do research on the reliability of mentor assessments.

The research question therefore is: How can the reliability of mentor assessments be determined in order to improve on them?

Theoretical Framework

The practical teaching situation is an example of situated or contextualised learning where student teachers learn through engagement or doing in an authentic learning environment. The student teacher is a novice that learns from an expert (school-based experienced teacher) who acts as mentor. It is in this environment where the mentor also acts as an assessor.

The teaching practice situation is also one where there is social interaction and where knowledge (and meaning) is socially constructed by all participants. The socio-constructivist theory is therefore applicable in this situation as it was the objective of the researchers to try and determine how mentors made meaning of their task as assessors and which factors influenced this process.

Research Framework

As the objective of the research was to determine how the reliability of mentor assessments of student teachers could be determined in order to improve on them the research fell into two sections. The first part was to find out how reliable mentor assessments were. The second was to try and determine which factors influence the dependability of mentor assessments and from that devise ways of improving the dependability of mentor assessments.

The researchers used the following framework to achieve these objectives.

Mentor and lecturer observation of lessons presentation by student teachers were done using a scoring rubric. This generated documents that could be analysed to determine differences in the assessment by mentors and by lecturers. Data was then gathered through the use of a questionnaire regarding possible factors that influenced differences in assessments between mentors and lecturers. Questionnaire

data and data from documentary analysis were then collated to determine which factors possibly contributed to differences between mentor and lecturer assessments

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Because of the dualistic nature of the research a mixed method design was used. For determining the reliability of mentor assessments, document analysis needed to be done which implied qualitative research. For determining mentoring characteristics that may influence the reliability of mentor assessments a survey needed to be done which implied quantitative research.

Document analysis is undertaken when documents generated by people as part of their jobs/lives is of interest to researchers (McMillam and Schumacher 2006). The analysis of such evidence (the way people did things or the results of what they did) provides data that can be used to find out how they interacted with their world in a specific time and place. Ryan and Bernard (2000) indicate that the performance of people is one of the documents that can be the object of analysis. Documentary evidence can be very useful if it is possible to determine their authenticity, their credibility, their representativeness and their meaning (Macdonald and Tipton 1993). In this research the documents that were analysed were generated by known mentors and lecturers that were appointed to perform a task according to guidelines provided by an accredited provider. Their authenticity and reliability as a source of evidence was therefore beyond reproach. They also had direct meaning for the research as they provided evidence of mentor and lecturer assessments which was directly related to the research.

When gathering information about people such as years of teaching experience, highest qualifications, etc. it is the most logical to do a survey amongst a sample of respondents that can provide answers that may have significance or meaning for the research (Babbie and Mouton 2011). In this case a survey was done amongst the same group of mentors who generated the mentor assessments. The sample was therefore one of convenience and was actually determined by the participants in the qualitative part of the research as the data gathered from them specifically was needed to collate the two

data sets (also see the research framework for a visual representation of this).

Research Instruments

Document Analysis

The observation schedules (scoring rubrics) were analysed to determine differences in scores between mentors and lecturers, including determining in which sections of lesson presentation differences occurred. Thirty-nine sets of scoring rubrics were available for analysis.

Questionnaire

In trying to understand what contributed to the differences in scores between mentors and lecturers a questionnaire was developed that included a range of possible factors.

The questionnaire was used to gather information on the:

- ♦ qualifications of the mentor;
- ♦ teaching experience of the mentor;
- ♦ mentor training;
- ♦ mentor experience;
- ♦ school context and
- ♦ mentor-protégé relationship (as seen from the mentors' perspective)

FINDINGS

It was thought prudent to first determine what an acceptable difference in scoring of lesson presentations would be. For that one needs a standard. The standard was determined by the scoring of the two lecturers as they were trained assessors with many years of experience in assessing student teachers doing teaching practice. They furthermore are the assessors that set the requirements for these assessments, the level, the outcomes and the standards that must be achieved.

Scoring by the two lecturers was examined and it was found that the average difference between them was under two per cent and that it ranged between one and five per cent. It was therefore accepted that differences in assessments will occur but that such differences are not acceptable if it is more than five per cent.

From the documentary analysis it was found that:

- ♦ 32% of mentor assessments fell into the range of 1-5% difference in scoring the student teachers if compared to lecturer assessments.
- ♦ 68% fell outside this range with differences ranging between 6 and 29%.

Considerable differences were found between lecturer assessment scores and mentor assessment scores.

Findings on Possible Factors that Influenced the Assessment Ability of Mentors

Teaching Qualifications of Mentors

Marks of mentors with Matric plus 5 years study differed with 5.3% on average

Marks of mentors with Matric plus 4 years differed with 16.75% on average

There seems to be a link between mentor qualifications and the accuracy of mentor assessment scores.

Mentor Training

Only 30% of the mentors in the study received formal mentor training that included training on assessment. The average difference of their scores from lecturer scores was 2.1%. The difference in scores for mentors without training was 10.2%.

Mentor training makes a difference to the accuracy of their assessments.

Mentor Experience

About one third (35%) of mentors in the study have mentored 10 students or more. Their average difference in scores from those of lecturers was 3.6%. The average difference in scores for mentors who mentored less than 10 students was 19.2%.

Mentor experience improves the accuracy of their assessments.

Mentoring System

Only 20% of schools had some sort of mentoring system in place. Scoring from mentors in these schools differed from lecturer assessments by 2.2%. The average difference for mentors in schools without a mentoring system was 10.1%.

Assessments from mentors in schools where mentor systems are in place are more accurate than mentors in schools where such systems are absent.

Teaching Experience

Very few mentors had less than 10 years teaching experience and we left them out in this finding. For mentors with 10-19 years teaching experience there was a 4.25% difference in scores as compared to lecturer scores. The difference for mentors with 20-29 years teaching experience was 3.6% while it was 14.3% difference for mentors with 30 or more years teaching experience.

Teaching experience does not seem to be a good predictor of reliability of mentor assessments of teaching by student teachers.

Mentor-Protégé Relationship

We asked mentors about their perceptions of the involvement with their student teachers. They could choose from no involvement, some involvement, good involvement and high involvement.

Those with a high involvement (42%) had a score difference of 3.8% as compared to lecturer assessments. Mentors with good involvement (19%) had a score difference of 2.1% while those with some involvement (38%) had a score difference of 9.3% and those with no involvement (1%) had a score difference of 29%. Percentages had to be rounded off for numbers of mentors in the different categories.

Although there is not a completely even rise in reliability of assessment from no involvement to high involvement, higher involvement does seem to increase the probability of more reliable assessments.

DISCUSSION

Considerable differences were found between lecturer scores and mentor scores. This confirmed original anecdotal evidence that led the researchers to undertake this research. It is worrying if only three out of ten mentor assessments (which some teacher education providers depend on for part of the final score of students) are reliable. It also means that teacher education providers that do rely on mentor assessments

might need to reconsider such a dependence on these scores.

An alternative is to devise ways of overcoming these inconsistencies in mark allocation. This will be discussed further under recommendations.

There seems to be a link between mentor qualifications and the accuracy of mentor assessment scores. It is perhaps a little risky to say that there is a strong link between mentor qualifications and assessment accuracy as there were examples of mentors with Matric plus 4 years who differed with only 1%. However as these were exceptions there is the probability that mentors with higher qualifications might assess more reliably.

Mentor training makes a difference to the accuracy of their assessments. It seems that assessments by trained mentors might be more reliable, if their training included assessment of student teachers. This is something that teacher education institutions should take note of as mentor training could help solve the problem of accuracy of mentor assessments. Many mentor training programmes and workshops do not include training on assessment or do not give enough attention to this. While other aspects of mentor training mostly benefit student teachers a mentor that is well trained in assessment of student teachers may be of great benefit to teacher education institutions.

ODEL institutions have a particular interest in accurate mentor assessments (and mentor training to ensure this) as they are probably more reliant on these assessments than contact institutions with more regular access to student teachers doing Teaching Practice.

Mentor experience improves the accuracy of their assessments. The fact that experience in mentoring is a significant factor in the reliability of their assessments is not surprising as this is the norm in many human endeavours. As teacher education institutions are often dependant on schools for the selection and appointment of mentors they could make this finding known to schools to keep in mind when placing students with mentors. Of course novices have to gain some experience as mentors at some time and it might be a good idea to let them co-mentor student teachers to gain the needed experience.

Assessments from mentors in schools where mentor systems are in place are more accurate than mentors in schools where such systems

are absent. In schools with a mentoring system more staff members have been exposed to mentoring and they seemed to assess more reliably because of this. The establishment of mentor systems in schools should not only be advocated but the knowledge and skills to do so should be included in the training of mentors.

Teaching experience does not seem to be a good predictor of reliability of mentor assessments of teaching by student teachers. The researchers were surprised by the lack of reliable assessments by teachers with 30 or more years of experience. The only explanation we can put forward that might explain this is the fact that these mentors were mostly school principals and vice principals (and not a classroom teacher) that were no longer teaching themselves (and might be losing touch with what is required in classroom teaching). Because the number of mentors involved is quite low it is also possible that this was just an anomaly.

Higher involvement of mentors with their protégés increase the probability of more reliable assessments. Once again this is hardly a surprise as research has confirmed the numerous benefits of good mentoring. Unfortunately the situation in South African schools is that classroom teachers carry a heavy teaching load with large numbers of learners in each group that come to them. There are also very few schools where mentors are given some free time to dedicate to mentoring. Mentoring is therefore an additional burden even though teachers might be aware of the benefits and the responsibility of schools to assist with the training of new teachers and would like to be involved.

CONCLUSION

In teacher education but more particularly where it is offered by means of ODeL, mentor assessments of student teachers doing Teaching Practice is of prime importance. As mentor assessments contribute to the very high stakes assessment that takes place in Teaching Practice these assessments should be accurate, reliable and of high quality. Research has shown that this is not the case everywhere at present and that it is not because of a lack of ability of mentors but because they receive very little or even no training at all in mentoring and particularly in the assessment of student teachers.

It is therefore the responsibility of teacher education providers to train mentors before they are required to mentor and to assess. ODeL institutions are even more obliged to do so if they want to ensure the integrity of their assessments of student teachers while doing Teaching Practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from the study might be useful for teacher education institutions that depend (if only partly) on mentor assessments, especially in ODeL, and the following is recommended to try and improve the dependability and accuracy of such assessments.

Although teaching experience does not seem to have an influence on the reliability of mentor assessments, the higher the teaching qualifications of mentors the more reliable their assessments seem to be. It is therefore recommended that teaching qualifications might be used as a criterion in the selection of mentors but should never be used to exclude teachers who meet other requirements but may have lower qualifications. Some people are just natural mentors and should be given the opportunity to mentor.

In the opinion of the researchers the most significant finding was that mentors that underwent mentor training (that included assessment training) assessed much more reliably than those that were not trained as mentors. It is therefore recommended that mentors should be thoroughly trained and that specific attention should be given to their role as assessors of student performance.

As it seems that experience in mentoring is a significant factor in the reliability of their assessments it is recommended that novice mentors should perhaps co-mentor before becoming individual mentors.

There is an indication that schools with a mentoring system exposed more staff members to mentoring and as a result mentors seemed to assess more reliably. It is therefore recommended that teacher education institutions should encourage and support schools to develop a mentoring system. This aspect could even be included in the training of all mentors.

As higher involvement of mentors with their protégés does seem to increase the probability of more reliable assessments by mentors it is recommended that free certified mentor training

(as an incentive) could perhaps be offered to potential mentors as a way of ensuring more positive attitudes and a higher involvement of mentors with the student teachers.

If one combines all the factors that were identified as having an influence on the reliability of mentor assessments a clear picture emerges. What is needed is quality training for mentors with a specific focus on assessment of student teachers. The responsibility for this must surely lie with the providers of teacher education programmes because it is they that expect the mentors (who give their time and expertise free of charge) to do the required assessments (and to undertake other mentoring tasks). It would only make sense that providers should in their turn provide accredited and certificated quality mentor training to all mentors before they are required to start mentoring.

For ODeL institutions which rely even more than contact education institutions on mentor assessments to make final decisions on the competencies of student teachers doing their practical teaching, it is particularly important to have a structured mentor training programme to ensure better mentor assessments.

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