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Enabling Teacher Learning in Rural Districts: A Focus on Classroom Support

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ABSTRACT This study is focused on a professional development program for rural mathematics and science teachers, which included a classroom support component. The purpose was to explore the teachers' and mentors' perceptions of the nature of the learning they experienced. The participants in the study were eight teachers and eight mentors. Data was generated from questionnaires, interviews and written reflections. The findings reveal that the intervention resulted in learning gains for both teachers and mentors. The teachers were pleased with the level of support and encouragement they received, which improved their confidence, and teaching skills. The mentors too extended their own content understanding while they learnt more about the realities of the teachers. However, the mentors were external to the teachers' situations, which limited future support. It is recommended that the education department should explore possible ways to sustain such classroom support because of the value it offers to teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Learning is increasingly being seen as distributed across multiple sites, with different people, different activities and different resources (Barron 2006; Boaler 2001; Lave 1988). Teacher learning is an example of how learning is often distributed across various sites. Although classrooms are practicing teachers' primary learning setting, teachers often pursue learning resources outside their primary learning setting, for instance, by attending professional development courses. In South Africa, many teachers attend formal courses out of necessity in order to upgrade their status to 'fully qualified'. Teachers who attended colleges of education and obtained a three-year qualification are regarded as being under-qualified because they do not have the minimum four-year qualification (CHE 2010). Paterson and Arends (2009) report that the annual national graduate output from teacher colleges averaged about 25,000 between 1995 and 1998, and many of these college graduates have not been able to improve their qualification levels beyond what they obtained at colleges, leading to large numbers of under-qualified teachers in the education system. Hugo et al. (2010:5) reported that 21,800 teachers in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) did not have a qualification higher than a three-year teaching diploma. Consequently, many teachers have tried to pursue studies that would result in an improvement in their qualification, with some even enrolling for specialization in which they do not intend to teach (Bansilal et al. 2012). See Bansilal et al. (2014) and Brijlall and Maharaj (2014) for details of studies, which have focused on the difficulties that the teachers face with respect to improving their content knowledge.

In this paper, the researchers look at one initiative aimed at upgrading teacher development designed for senior phase teachers in mathematics, science and technology. This program was launched by the national department of education in collaboration with a university in KwaZulu-Natal. The participant teachers were from the northern KZN districts of Obonjeni, Ulundi and Vryheid, three of the most rural and impoverished districts in the province (Hugo et al. 2010).

The professional development program was underpinned by the understanding that teacher knowledge involves knowledge of curriculum, content knowledge, pedagogic knowledge and pedagogic content knowledge. The teachers completed written examinations and worked on assignments that were focused on developing

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their content knowledge, pedagogic content knowledge, pedagogic knowledge and their role as professionals. These examinations were conducted at the university site. Since there was a concern about whether teachers' learning in the program had translated into improved teaching in the classroom, a classroom visit component was introduced into the program. This component of classroom support was directed at working with the teachers in their primary learning setting-that of the classroom-by observing their practices and then providing feedback about what was observed. These visits were used to generate an assessment score that contributed to the teachers' performance in the formal program.

Thus, the teachers as learners were simultaneously engaged in many settings, for example, in the formal classes aimed at professional development at the university, in their classrooms where they were learning while teaching, and during the one-to-one classroom support visits forming part of the assessment in the program. The different learning settings that contributed to the teachers' learning resonate with Barron's (2006: 195) description of a learning ecology, which she defines as "the set of contexts found in physical or virtual spaces that provide opportunities for learning". Barron emphasizes the unique contribution made by each setting that is a consequence of its "unique configuration of activities, material resources, relationships, and the interactions that emerge from them" (Barron 2006: 195). In this study, the various settings provided different experiences, which must all be synthesized in the classroom, since the latter is the site where teacher learning manifests in order to promote the learning of the learners.

In this paper, the researchers look at this case of classroom-based support that was offered to these rural teachers as part of a teacher development program. The mentors who were engaged in the visits were university tutors who also taught on the program. The purpose of the study was to identify the perceptions of participant teachers and the mentors, about ways in which their own learning was enabled by the intervention. The researchers also addressed issues around how such learning settings could be enhanced for rural teachers.

Literature Review

A central element of this study was the relationship between the mentor (or university tutor) and the teacher. A survey of the many definitions of the concept 'mentor' revealed that there are many interpretations of this term, which Pather (2011) has elaborated upon in detail. The South African Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA 2006) defines mentoring as a process of using experienced people to provide guidance and sound advice to mentees in order to develop their careers. Thus, mentoring involves supporting a less experienced person to become more effective and efficient. In this paper, the researchers subscribe to this view of mentoring. However, during the study in question the university tutors visited the teachers for two purposes, that is, to provide mentorship and to generate an assessment score that contributes to the teachers' overall performance in the program.

The researchers now briefly review studies that have focused on mentoring and thereafter the researchers pay particular attention to the issue of feedback, which is a central component of mentoring.

The classroom support component of a similar program was the subject of research by Sibanda and Jawahar (2012). These researchers studied the impact of classroom-based support on the development of 163 mathematics and science teachers in KZN. In the study by Sibanda and Jawahar, the classroom support was provided by six retired teachers. It was found that more than ninety percent of the teachers were positive about the feedback they received from the mentors who visited them. Teachers commented that the visits helped them improve their lesson preparation and their teaching approach and enriched their content knowledge. However, the classroom mentors were a little more restrained about the gains made by the teachers from the mentorship, with some describing it as just satisfactory. Sibanda and Jawahar voice concerns about the limited evidence that teachers were able to integrate the theory encountered in the formal course into the classroom practice, despite the positive comments made by the teachers themselves.

The abovementioned study shows that mentoring, which is usually offered to novice teachers, can be of benefit to mature teachers who may be entering a different field of specialization or who are improving their qualification levels, as in the case of the teachers in this study. Mentoring is an integral aspect of continuous professional development and should be linked

to promoting good teaching and teacher learning (Feiman-Nemser 2003). Halai (2006) found that improvement in subject content knowledge was seen as a significant purpose of a mentor's job. In Halai's study, mentors suggested that teachers need to be exposed to new ideas, new knowledge and understanding that could foster growth through reflection.

Maynard and Furlong's (1993) view is that mentoring occurs in stages related to apprenticeships, competency and reflection. The apprentice stage is relevant at the beginning of the teaching practice, when the trainee teacher works closely with the mentor who acts as a model and assists the teacher in understanding the teaching process. At the second stage, it is the competence model that is most relevant. Here, the mentor assumes the role of a trainer and engages the mentee in a more organized training program that includes observation of lessons and provision of feedback on agreed-upon outcomes. In the reflective stage, the mentor takes on the role of co-enquirer in order to encourage a more critical reflection of the teacher's learning. Mcintyre and Hagger (1993) also opt for a three-stage description of mentoring encompassed by the minimal, developed and extended phases of support. These stages refer to the provision of basic supervision in order to develop knowledge and skills, sharing expertise with mentees and encouraging reflection, and an extension of the support to include issues involving both the whole school and the community. What is common about these two views is that teachers themselves are at different stages of their professional development and thus require different levels of support.

Kwan and Lopez-Real (2005) focused on the mentoring role as a provider of feedback by providing pragmatic and craft-oriented advice to develop the pedagogical skills of the teachers in their study. Since the mentoring process is intended to help teachers improve their practices, an important aspect of mentoring is the provision of feedback to their mentees about how they could improve their teaching. Quality feedback is an important aspect of learning and involves identifying the gap between where learners are and where they need to be (Duijnhouwer et al. 2012; Bansilal et al. 2010). Wiggins (1993: 182) asserts that feedback is "information that provides the performer with direct, usable insights into current performance, based on tangible differences between the current performance and a hoped-for performance". In addition to informing learners of their current achievement, feedback should "indicate what the next steps in their learning trajectory should be" (Black et al. 2003: 42).

Van der Kleij et al. (2012) note that the effectiveness of feedback depends on the type of feedback, the timing as well as the level of feedback that is provided. With regard to written comments, Woolfolk (1995) affirms that written comments are most supportive when they are personalized and provide constructive criticism. However, the value of the comments may be eroded when marks are assigned alongside because students ignore comments when marks are also given. In fact, the value of feedback comments are "eclipsed by learners' reactions to scores or grades" (Young 2000: 409). Black and William (1998) reported that students rarely read comments if these are accompanied by marks. Instead their first reaction on getting work back is to compare marks with their peers, thus reducing the value of the written feedback comments.

Feedback in the form of dialogue is endorsed by several writers (Black and Wiliam 2006; 1998; Askew and Lodge 2000; Linchevski et al. 1999; Freeman and Lewis 1998; Torrance and Pryor 1998). This links with the notion that effective feedback encourages dialogue, and should include a response from learners on the usefulness of the feedback they received (Duijnhouwer et al. 2012; Freeman and Lewis 1998). This feedback, as dialogue between students and tutor, "should be thoughtful, reflective, focused to evoke and explore understanding, and conducted so that all pupils have an opportunity to think and express their ideas" (Black and Wiliam 1998: 12). In considering the teachers as students, these studies emphasize that feedback can be used meaningfully to help improve their learning.

Theoretical Framework

Knowledge, which used to be regarded as a property of an individual, is no longer being seen as simply being used in different settings, but is emerging as a function of the settings, people, activities and goals (Boaler 2001). This is a reference to a situative perspective, which is a broad set of understandings that conceptualize the learning process as changes in participation in a

socially organized activity (Lave 1988). Situative perspectives focus on the social, contextual and distributed nature of knowledge. Barron (2006) comments that tools and resources of the contexts serve as critical mediators of cognitive and social practices. The context-specific tools can create shifts in interaction in the different contexts that contribute to a distributed knowledge system built up by the individual participants. Within a situative perspective, teacher learning is "understood as a process of increasing participation in the practice of teaching and through this participation, a process of becoming knowledgeable in and about teaching" (Adler 2000: 37).

An essential feature of increasing participation is that there must be a community whose membership consists of people who are knowledgeable in and about teaching, and who allow newcomers to progress in participation levels. The mentoring situation, where a mentor supports and offers craft advice to a novice teacher, is an example of how learning can be facilitated by increasing participation. Effective teacher learning can be achieved when experienced colleagues mentor new teachers in a non-judgmental way, which allows for development and growth.

In most education systems, the mentoring role is taken on by a senior teacher, a subject advisor as well as a senior head of department. However, the reality of many rural South African classrooms is that such support is limited. In the early 1990s, the unions did not allow subject advisors to provide classroom visits, which included observations of teaching (Bloch 2009: 100), because the unions regarded this mentoring role as monitoring and not as support. The consequences of that development have been mainly negative in terms of teacher learning, because the component of classroom support from the advisor was removed. Khumalo's (2011) study based on rural mathematics teachers in KZN found that internal school support systems were non-existent. In fact, the teachers in his study did not have an understanding of what support from their head of department meant. There were no records of meetings where curriculum or teaching and learning issues were discussed. The teachers interpreted support to mean 'not against' and had no expectations from their superiors about providing support to them in their practice (Khumalo 2011). Clark and Linder (2006: 68) refer to the state of "constrained individualism" within which the teachers in their study worked. They reported that the teachers had to teach, plan and work alone. These researchers argue that the low level of organizational coherence and fragile authority structures in schools, as well as teacher groupings that are based on interpersonal relationships in the staff room, have a powerful influence on the teachers' pedagogic identities. They fragment relationships, making it seem impossible for teachers to work together. Furthermore, they do not provide the moral support necessary for risking innovative teaching practices. When teachers work in such isolation, the situative perspective of teacher learning suggests that teacher learning will be limited because the community of experienced practitioners is not open to admitting new entrants. One might question the existence of such a community, since a community suggests a grouping of likeminded people with similar purposes. However, there is limited sharing of knowledge in situations where people work in isolation.

Clearly, therefore, an important aspect of teacher learning in a situative perspective is the creation of open, non-threatening spaces where teachers can share their experiences and learn from one another. One such opportunity is that of a mentoring situation that can lead to increased learning for the mentors as well as the teachers (Pather 2011; Waghid and Louw 2008; Smith 2007). In this study, the notion of mentoring as carried out by university tutors (mentors) was explored. The tutors took on the dual role of both mentor and assessor because of the constraints of the situation. Ideally, a mentor would be more closely associated with the teacher and, as the more experienced member of the community, would assist the novice teacher in increasing participation.

METHODOLOGY

The three Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) programs offered at the university were designed to deepen the knowledge of senior phase educators in the three areas, mathematics, science and technology. The contact sessions took place over weekends or during block sessions in school holidays to cater for the needs of the teachers who came from rural areas situated far from the campus. Each teacher was visit-

ed three times during the course of the program to assess his or her teaching practices. The first visit was an introductory visit where teachers were advised about the purpose of the interventions and the assessment process. Although the teachers were observed in this initial visit, the tutors did not generate any assessment mark. The two subsequent visits were used for assessment purposes. Tutors used a scoring rubric consisting of 19 items and also provided written feedback to the teachers. At the end of each visit, the tutor met with the teacher and discussed issues related to the lesson. This created an opportunity for tutor and teacher to engage in dialogue about teaching and learning (Askew and Lodge 2000; Freeman and Lewis 1998).

The design of this study was a naturalistic, qualitative, interpretive case study, the purpose of which was to understand the reality of the participants who were teachers on the program and the tutors (mentors). A naturalistic inquiry was used as its emphasis is on interpretive dimensions where the goal of the researcher is to understand reality (Cohen et al. 2007). The classroom support component of the program constitutes the case. There were two groups of participants, made up of eight teachers and eight mentors. The data was generated from questionnaires that were completed by the group of eight teachers who had successfully completed the program. The questionnaire contained 22 questions, which were a mix of both closed and open-ended types. The questions probed the teachers about the various aspects of the program, one of which was the classroom visits. A follow-up focus group interview was conducted with the same group of teachers.

The second group of participants in this study was the tutors (lecturers at the university) who acted as mentors for the teachers. There were 27 tutors who carried out three classroom support visits to the various teachers. Of these, eight agreed to participate in the study. Four of the tutors formed a focus group, and a semi-structured interview was subsequently conducted by one of the researchers. A further four agreed to provide their written reflections related to the focus questions presented in the interview. The focus of the interview was on the classroom support that the lecturers had carried out over the 3-4 years of the program.

The data was then scrutinized to identify themes relating to the learning experiences of the teachers and those of the mentors. The analysis of the data at this stage was done in an inductive manner where it is "synthesized inductively to generate generalization" (McMillan and Schumacher 2010: 323). In this approach, theory is developed upwards from the ground up, rather than the top down "starting with specific data and ending with categories and patterns" (McMillan and Schumacher 2010: 367)

FINDINGS

This section is organized under three themes, that is, teacher learning, mentor learning and challenges to implementing the classroom support model. In reporting the findings, the teachers' and tutors' (mentors') written and verbal comments are presented verbatim. They are used to illustrate the categories that were used in the analysis.

Teacher Learning as a Result of the Visits

Each of the teachers expressed positive sentiments about the classroom visits. All except one were pleased with the attitude of the tutors and the advice that was offered. When probed further about whether they found the classroom support visits useful, teachers mentioned encouragement and support as a benefit. One teacher said that the mentors encouraged him to use different methods to teach.

Another teacher wrote that the visit improved his confidence because he had the mentor in the classroom alongside him. Another teacher expanded on this by saying that the visit gave the learners a good impression of their teacher, showing that their teacher was important enough to be visited by people from the university. Another wrote positively about the tutors' attitudes to her: *"They were so supportive."* She also said, *"I was given moral support and encouragement."*

One teacher wrote that the visit helped him improve his planning and organizational skills because he knew that somebody was looking at what he was doing. Another expressed positive sentiments of the tutor's feedback when she wrote, *"I was given positive feedback and recommendations in areas of weaknesses."* Another positive outcome identified by the participants was the discussion after the lessons. One teacher

explained that the discussions helped him concretize the outcomes that they were expected to plan for. Another was grateful for the opportunity to have somebody whom she could ask for help. She wrote, *"It was easy to ask anything you don't understand."* The mentors were impressed by the fact that teachers went out of their way to put things they had learnt into practice. Even principals commented to tutors that the program had improved the teachers' performance, and that they (principals) were excited about the developments.

It was clear that the three visits, carried out during the two years, had helped the teachers improve their teaching. The first visit was not to assess the teachers but just to observe and to then talk about the lesson and to identify gaps or problems. One mentor explained that there was sometimes "antagonism during the first visit based on a fear of the unknown…and not knowing what to expect". The tutors found it useful to speak to the teachers first to clarify the purpose of the program. The teachers' fear dissipated during the second visit, as the teachers then understood the purpose of the visits. Some teachers even looked forward to the visits. Mentors noted that by the next visit there was a marked improvement in teaching.

The teachers too indicated that the experience of the three visits was a growth curve. Although it was evident that the teachers found the first visit to be intimidating, they all felt more comfortable with the subsequent ones. One teacher said she was nervous initially when she knew the lecturer was going to watch her teach, but the lecturer was friendly and helpful and was "there just to help you improve". Another said, *"You feel like it is the first day that you are going to be a teacher; you are just afraid…for the few minutes and then we find those people are friendly and helpful."* Another commented, "I was developed a lot during these visits." Yet another wrote, *"The classroom support visit was useful because it was not aimed as criticizing but at developing"*. Thus, these teachers all agreed that they had found the visits to be a learning experience.

In summary, it can be seen that all the teachers were positive about the role of the visits in their own learning. Particular contributions mentioned were that the visits improved their confidence and developed their organizational and planning skills. Furthermore, the experience was seen as a growth curve, with teachers being apprehensive about the first visit and thereafter seeing it as providing opportunities for learning. The teachers' comments also reveal that the majority were pleased with the attitudes of the tutors/mentors who visited them.

Mentor Learning as a Result of the Visits

The mentors found that visiting the teachers was a reality check for themselves. As university tutors, they found themselves insulated within the ivory tower of the university, away from the everyday realities of the teachers. One mentor said, *"We forget what the conditions are at rural schools."* One mentor reflected about his reaction when he saw children learning under a tree:

I would hear about these things and I never thought that I would see it, it taught me a lot about the reality out there and the kind of conditions the teachers are working under and for the students [referring to the teachers who were actually their students] it is very difficult for them and you can see they are doing a lot.

Thus, the experience prompted introspection among the mentors about the relevance of their own teaching as university tutors because they often planned their program without understanding the conditions under which many rural teachers work. This is supported by a mentor who said, *"You come there with your planning but in school they want something else."* These experiences of the mentors helped bring the two extremes closer so that there was a "synergy between what is happening in schools" and what is being presented at university. One mentor reflected that the benefits of the support visits are that "we are closing the gap between theory and practice".

One mentor alluded to the fact that the experience also deepened their own pedagogic content knowledge, whereby they watched different presentations of the same topic, and analyzed what made certain ones more effective than others. They would then "refer [others] to the strategy used by the teacher to help others improve". Another benefit for the tutors was the opportunity of following up with these students by going into their classrooms to ascertain the extent to which the teachers had taken up what they had been taught during the program. One tutor explained that as lecturers they would never

really know whether what they taught the teachers was being applied in the teachers' practice by saying, *"The challenge was always, does it really translate into what happens in the school?"* This tutor welcomed the opportunity to engage with the teachers about ideas they were a bit hesitant about implementing. He said, *"Maybe they fear some challenging issues and if you have the time you can elaborate on this issue so it really helps on our side as well."* Thus, the visits helped the tutors with following up on ideas they had introduced during the university contact sessions.

On the same point of observing how teachers put into practice ideas they encountered at university, one tutor was disappointed at some teachers' interpretation of group work as seating the learners in groups, while the teacher continued teaching at the chalkboard. *"The system about grouping of students that I did not understand like where learners are grouped in a group of four or six and they are facing the other side of the chalkboard. I found it very foolish."* This tutor's disappointment of the poor adoption of ideas presented in his lectures is somewhat similar to the disappointment of a tutor who discovered that when teachers complain of a lack of resources it is sometimes not quite an accurate representation of the situation. *"When you talk to them [at university], they don't have a lab, but when you went there to the school you will actually find that there is a lab but it is used for something else. It is packed with books or old desks."* Thus, this experience also served to make the tutors aware of teachers' excuses regarding lack of resources limiting the innovations that they could implement.

At the end of each observation, the tutor would meet the teacher on a one-to-one basis to discuss issues that had arisen during the lesson. All the tutors felt that the one-to-one post-lesson interaction was very useful because it helped them understand the teachers' context. The teachers too were very positive about these post-lesson discussions, saying that it was helpful when the tutors discussed the written feedback with them. This facet provided an opportunity for mentors to engage in dialogue with the teachers as colleagues who are co-learning, and in some cases teachers revealed more than they intended. One tutor was impressed that a teacher was putting into practice some technique that was introduced in their method lectures, only to find out during the conversation that the teacher "was trying to impress you about the things they learnt but it is not what they usually did in their teaching". It was a case of 'teaching to impress' instead of 'teaching for the learners' benefit'. This is interesting because when learners do the same and insist on 'learning for the test' instead of 'learning for understanding', most teachers complain about this shortsighted attitude of their learners.

In summary, the mentors saw these visits as important because it gave them the opportunity to learn more about the contexts in which their students practiced as teachers. Furthermore, these experiences would prompt them to plan programs that would be more relevant to their students' needs. An interesting learning experience that was cited was the deepening of the mentors' personal pedagogic content knowledge. The intervention also allowed the mentors to critically assess the teachers' adoption of the methods that they (as university tutors) advocated in the classes. Finally, it was evident that the mentors also welcomed the post-lesson discussions with the teachers. This allowed them to critically assess the teachers' intentions and motivations behind the lessons they presented.

Challenges to the Classroom Component of the Program

The biggest challenge to the classroom support element was that of the financial cost. The teachers worked in rural areas and the mentors who visited had to hire cars and stay overnight at hotels. It is not common for tutors to carry out classroom support visits to teachers enrolled in an in-service course because of the great expense involved in accommodating lecturers overnight and hiring cars for the visits. The exorbitant cost may be why many institutions do not offer classroom support visits. Another reason is that the travel time required for the mentors is unproductive. It is therefore gratifying that this program was able to offer at least three visits to each teacher.

Another challenge was that the teachers themselves are not accustomed to being observed in their classrooms. Perhaps one reason for that is that since the unions stopped subject advisors from entering teachers' classrooms for monitoring and support, many teachers find the experience of being observed, strange. An in-

tegrated quality management system (IQMS) requirement is that school managers must visit teachers in their classrooms, to assess them. However, the mentors reported that this is more of a monitoring exercise and does not happen as regularly as expected, as revealed by some principals and teachers.

One mentor noted that because teachers were unsure of what was expected of them they were bewildered and nervous the first time, but this improved in subsequent visits. It was suggested that supervisors should be allocated the "same students to ensure ongoing supervision and monitoring" as the teachers developed because as the teachers became accustomed to the mentors, "there was improvement in subsequent visits". Despite the initial fear, all the teachers agreed that they had learnt from the experience of the visit.

The mentors reported that teachers generally refused to teach if the mentor arrived at their school without notifying them in advance. "When the supervisor goes to school without having made contact, the student would refuse to be evaluated although the letters were distributed earlier indicating the period for classroom support visits." This implies that the university should ensure that the communication systems are accurate, so that teachers are given correct information. However, the teachers' refusal is cause for concern because it suggests that some teachers saw the visit as a test or monitoring and evaluation rather than support.

Some teachers took on a class that was not theirs just to teach a lesson in the specialization they had studied. It appeared as if teachers 'put up a performance' just for the benefit of the mentor. One mentor said, *"They had to organize lessons in the Grade 7 class just for the support lesson."* They needed this special arrangement because the teacher was not teaching in the phase that they received the training in. The tutors were disappointed at the frequency of such experiences since it was contrary to the agreement between the school and the department, namely that the teachers should be teaching the subject for which they were receiving training. This type of situation created an artificiality that did not impress the tutor. *"The classes they taught were not their own classes so there was no relationship between the teachers and the learners in this case."*

An aspect that concerned all the mentors was the issue of teachers who prepared special lessons to impress them. One mentor said, *"Students want to impress you, to show you what they think you want to see."* The mentors were not sure whether the teachers would teach what they had witnessed when they were there or whether they would go back to their old ways. It was felt that ideally this type of support should be scaled up and that it would even be possible for teachers to receive unplanned visits. The mentor expressed concern that since they were external to the school, the support they offered would come to an end. *"The question arises how sustainable such visits were."*

One mentor felt strongly that the school did not support their endeavors:

The idea of a mentor doesn't always work, because schools are letting us down – we train them, we assist them but when they get to school, the support structure is just not there. Sometimes the teacher there is not teaching the subject that they were trained for. But when they are visited, then they may be teaching another subject but for the case of the visit, they are allocated a relevant class, which they do not teach normally.

This mentor was expressing a concern that the ideal situation for classroom support should be for mentors to work closely with teachers and to be based at their schools, so that teachers do not have to 'put up a performance' for the visits. This comment demonstrated the frustration of the tutor because the teachers who had trained in the program did not have continued support. Ideally, classroom support should be a joint undertaking between school, district and department of education, yet in some cases principals neglected their duty to such an extent that the teachers were not teaching the subject for which they had trained, thus diluting the benefit of the program.

The mentors differed on the issue of the value of allocating a score to teachers at the end of the visit. Some felt that on "the one hand…a good mark may boost the teachers' confidence and esteem, thus [they will] work harder", while on the other hand "a teacher may be discouraged by it thus comments may be what is only needed". Another mentor was adamant that the mark served no good purpose. *"Most of them were only interested in the mark rather than focusing on the areas of improvement in order to become better teachers."* This perspective was supported by another comment saying,

"…It became a presentation for a mark". One of the mentors felt that awarding a mark or not was irrelevant because it "has more to do with improvement rather than the mark as such". This mentor suggested that building in an aspect of reflection would have been a better idea. *"Now we don't really know if they grasped what they should improve."* This comment hints at the important issue of feedback being in the form of conversations, rather than just one-sided, especially in this case where the teachers are already engaged in practice.

One mentor alluded to the difficulty in maintaining consistency in allocating scores to the different teachers. *"At times you would see the score one being equal to another because it becomes very difficult you can score something."* Although this comment is not so clear, the mentor implies that a score [mark] cannot be a measurement of a teacher's ability. If teachers were given equal marks, it could not mean much because it was not clear what was being compared. Although there was an accompanying rubric of 19 items that could be assessed in five levels (A, B, C, D and E), the tutors did not find it helpful. One tutor remarked, *"The rubric had items that were not easy to measure in one lesson"*. Another said that not all items were relevant to all the lessons, so he ignored them. Some felt that because of the many items, the tutor sometimes ended up paying more attention to completing the rubric than observing the lesson. On the same point one tutor said, *"It became very difficult for me…I can only do one thing, you listen and you look for the whole lesson…and now itemizing it into elements and then scoring it, and giving a person 90, it does not tie up."* These comments point to the challenge of giving attention to the rubric while trying to concentrate on the lesson. There is also an implied suggestion that even though a teacher may have satisfied all the criteria, and is awarded a high mark, the mark may not match the quality of the observed lesson. However, the tutors agreed that their comments were influenced by the assessment rubric checklist.

Another said he found "the scoring system too general". Another tutor complained about the many aspects that were required to be checked, yet there was not a criterion about whether a lesson plan was produced or not. Thus, one of the criticisms was that the written plans were not valued because the rubric did not provide for allocating a score for the lesson plan. Another point of criticism was related to the variety of lesson plans produced. There was no common format, and some were based on school formats, which lacked details, or they were too vague, or did not focus on the critical components. Some tutors suggested that teachers should be given a common lesson format to use for planning.

In summary, the financial implications for running such a support component were serious, because of the teachers being located so far away. Further constraints that were identified relate to the dissemination of information of the planned visits as well as the fact that the teachers were not accustomed to having somebody observing their lessons. It also emerged that a lack of a whole-systems approach to teacher support results in a situation where mentors are external to the schools. This external element means that the improvement in the teachers' practices may not be sustained once the mentors stop their visits. There is also no guarantee of future support for the teachers. The issue of whether assigning a score is helpful or harmful was raised, with mentors taking opposing stances in this case. Clearly this is an issue that needs to be interrogated further. However, in terms of the scoring template that was used, all the participants agreed that it needed to be revised and made simpler.

DISCUSSION

The study has shown that in the situation sketched in this paper both the mentors and the teachers improved their learning through the mentoring program. Many researchers support the view that in a mentoring process both the mentor and the mentee reap the benefits of mutual learning. In this study, the mentors (tutors) themselves acknowledged that by watching the various teachers, they learnt new things, which they were able to share with other teachers. The experience deepened the tutors' understanding of the contexts in which the teachers work. The effect of this may be that in future they will attempt to design curricula that are more relevant to the teachers' needs.

This finding relating to the mutual learning that took place supports Pather's call for a view of mentorship within a humanistic perspective, which "emphasizes the need for a critical co-

learner, critical dialogue between mentor and mentee" (Pather 2011: 27). The relationship in a humanistic perspective is characterized by its interactional, mature and interdependent nature, which is between colleagues rather than between a more learned supervisor and novice teacher.

The tutors identified the need to provide the teachers with increased opportunities for reflection, suggesting that they see themselves as taking on the role of co-enquirer and not of assessor only. Maynard and Furlong (1993) see mentoring as occurring in three hierarchical stages with reflection being the final stage. At this stage the mentor takes the role of co-enquirer in order to encourage a more critical reflection of the teaching and learning of the trainees. Reflection is a key component of teacher learning (Bansilal and Rosenberg 2011; Brookefield 1995; Hatton and Smith 1995; Maynard and Furlong 1993; McIntyre and Hagger 1993). Both the teachers and the mentors agreed that the post-lesson discussion where both the tutor and the teachers shared their opinions about the lesson, added an important reflective component to their learning. Timperley (2001) contends that conversations between mentors and novice teachers conducted in a collaborative way tend to help improve the quality of the conversations. This implies that if mentors establish a rapport with mentees, then the level of discussion is heightened, which consequently permits a higher quality of feedback that is accepted as in a relationship between colleagues. Van der Kleij et al. (2012) have also emphasized that detailed and specific feedback is more effective than general comments.

Research highlights the isolation within which most teachers work (Khumalo 2011; Bloch 2009; Clark and Linder 2006). This isolation is more prevalent in rural areas where the turnover of teachers is likely to be higher than in urban areas that are more convenient to live in. Mentoring can relieve teacher isolation when done in a manner that encourages dialogue and conversations between mentee and mentor, as shown in this study. Pather (2011: 61) contends that engaging teachers in collegial support involves providing "opportunities for contributing, listening, supporting, discussing, giving feedback, reflecting on teaching…interrogation of the content by teachers". Duijnhouwer et al. (2012) recommends that instructors should tailor the feedback to particular mentees through a feedback dialogue process. Although the classroom support intervention reported in this paper was limited to three visits per teacher, the perceived benefits have been impressive as revealed in the data.

An important concern was whether the allocation of a score was beneficial to the teacher, because it often eroded the value of the feedback comments. Other researchers (Young 2000; Black and Wiliam 1998) also hold this view. The question is whether tutors should stop allocating marks because of the negative effect it may have. Smith (2007) cautions that removing this element may create other limitations on the role of the mentor. Not all the tutors were pleased with the list of competencies, seeing it as too unwieldy and focusing on technical aspects that detracted from seeing the lesson as a whole. An important value offered by mentors is written feedback (Askew and Lodge 2000; Black and Wiliam 1998; Woolfolk 1995) but this was limited by the long list of competencies. Perhaps future templates need to provide the opportunity for more detailed written feedback, which could act as prompts for the teachers' reflections long after the visits, providing them with food for thought. In the researchers' view it is overly optimistic to assume that a tool consisting of a checklist, based on a few observations, could be used as a valid measurement of a person's competence as a teacher.

CONCLUSION

This case study has shown that these rural teachers are eager for support in their teaching, and found it easy to ask the mentors questions about things they did not understand. Thus, an important benefit was the breaking down of the isolation within which rural teachers work. Although the classroom support initiative was of limited duration, and has not been able to develop a community of practice, which is a condition for learning according to the situative perspective, it has demonstrated that such conditions can exist. Thus, initiatives, which focus on developing non-threatening spaces for teacher participation (and hence learning), must be prioritized. The differing perceptions of whether it was helpful or not to allocate a score for the classroom observation highlights the fact that the tutors themselves are on a learning curve. As they gain more experience of mentoring, they

may also make shifts in moving towards a humanistic perspective instead of viewing themselves as the custodians of assessment of teacher competencies.

In addressing rural realities there should be consolidation, collaboration and cooperation amongst the role players. If the stakeholders in the education system could work together in developing classroom support mechanisms that are available to the teachers more regularly this could lead to more effective classroom support mechanisms. A situative perspective highlights the demanding role required by a mentor in order to oversee a novice teacher and guide him/her to increased participation in effective teaching practices. The creation of an open, non-threatening environment, which is conducive to a healthy mentor–mentee relationship, can only be met if an integrated approach can be supported by all education stakeholders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that these visits should be used for support purposes, and the evaluative aspects should be simplified to identifying whether a teacher has developed to the extent of being able to teach effectively without needing further interventions or whether he/she needs more intensive support. Teachers who are identified as having poor skills should be provided with further visits and intensive mentoring, in order to help them develop further.

It is important to note that this intervention was a first experience for the tutors. As mentors, they are starting on a learning curve themselves, and also need support to develop appropriate skills.

It is further recommended that all tutors should participate in a workshop before carrying out the visits, since this could help them develop a shared vision of what they want to accomplish and how it could be done. Most importantly, their experiences could be utilized in jointly developing an improved tool that may be used to provide useful feedback to the teachers. Tutors also need the teachers' views on the value of the feedback that was offered. Opportunities for sharing the teachers' reflections would be valuable for both teachers and the tutors.

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