Mentorship for students on teaching practice in Zimbabwe: Are student teachers getting a raw deal?

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Abstract
Teaching practice is a very important component of any teacher training programme. A student teacher is given the opportunity to try the art of teaching and face the real world of work before joining the profession. This study makes a closer scrutiny of mentorship, an approach currently in use by most teacher training colleges in Zimbabwe, where student teachers on teaching practice are attached to qualified and experienced teachers who work as their mentors. The study sought to: (a) find out the student teachers' views on the effectiveness of the role played by their mentors in developing them to be experts in teaching; (b) determine the mentors' level of preparedness for their role of assisting and guiding students under their care to professionally grow, and (c) assess the implications for teacher education in Zimbabwe. This study used 222 student teachers who had been on a teaching practice stint and teachers who worked as mentors in 31 Zimbabwean primary schools. The study revealed that in the majority of cases student teachers showed that they had not benefited very much from mentorship. The mentors themselves appeared not to be aware of their role in mentoring student teachers attached to them. There is no doubt that experienced and qualified teachers in schools require constant and thorough workshopping to enable them to help student teachers professionally grow.

INTRODUCTION
Teaching practice is a very important component of any teacher-training programme. A student teacher is given the opportunity to try the art of teaching
and face the real world of work before joining the profession (Kasanda 1995). The mentorship approach is modeled around the apprenticeship-type of learning. This is where a learner is attached to a qualified and experienced professional and learns by following what the mentor would be doing. In mentorship a ‘qualified’ classroom practitioner assumes the role of being a guide, supervisor, counselor, overseer, coach, teacher, model, supporter, critic, collaborator, helper, sponsor, instructor, co-participant, advisor, protector, promoter, assessor and gate-keeper (Kerry and Mayes 1995; Furlong and Maynard 1995; Holloway 2001). The above observation that gives the multi-faceted role of the mentor really goes a long way in revealing the multiple roles of the mentor and shows that being a mentor is no mean task. This shows that mentorship places a lot of responsibility on the role of the mentor of leading, guiding, directing and supervising the trainee’s learning process (Stanulis and Weaver 1998; Gordon and Maxey 2000). The need to have a knowledgeable, thoroughly trained and dedicated mentor cannot be over-emphasized.

Mentorship offers important on-the-job training opportunities. The trainee has to feel that he or she would have been helped after the attachment stint. Poor mentorship is analogous to two blind men leading each other the way. The mentors have to show direction and should know the direction to professional growth of the student teachers attached to them (Fish 1995; Daloz 1999).

The issue of attaching trainees to mentors also revolves around the philosophical assumptions of modeling as Aristotle states that many skills, some of them complex, can be best learnt by emulation of experienced practitioners and by supervised practice under their guidance (McIntyre, Hagger and Wilkin 1995). It is assumed that the model has the necessary qualities that that learner will emulate and imitate and in the process develop into the proper, ideal and desired professional. This translates very well into the school situation where a student teacher is attached to an already trained and experienced teacher whose duty would be to give direction and guidance in the nurturing of the aspiring teacher.

There are some critical aspects of teaching practice in teacher education that should be emphasized in teacher training. These aspects are lesson preparation and lesson delivery (Tomlinson 1995; Chivore 1999; Taruvinga 1998). Mentors should be very competent in these two areas in order to offer effective assistance to the student teachers. Lesson preparation, for example, involves making a lot of documents that assist in the teaching and learning and these are documents like schemes of work, lesson plans, teaching notes, records of marks, remedial and extension work records among others. Philip-Jones (1982) in Kerry and Mayes (1995) talk of the need for joint planning of lessons of the trainee and the mentor with the mentor leading the way. In this regard, the mentor has to be aware of college requirements and standards in the making of such documents if they are to render significant assistance to the trainee.

In lesson delivery, the mentors have to really lead by example. They have to be aware of the critical elements that constitute effective learning in line with current
trends in teaching and learning (Morrison 1996; Gwarinda 1993). Ideally, the mentor has to deliver a number of lessons with the trainee observing and making notes. Follow up discussion of the mentor’s lessons should be made soon after every lesson highlighting strengths and weaknesses of the lesson(s). In this regard, the trainee will also develop the art of self-evaluation, which is vital in professional development. Apart from issues directly linked to actual teaching, there are also several other areas in which the mentors can offer assistance in the school.

It appears from the above discussions that mentorship is a very useful approach in teacher training. This being an approach used by teacher training colleges in Zimbabwe for students on teaching practice is not only unique to the country alone as in countries like the United States of America newly qualified teachers are placed under the mentorship of experienced teachers (Huling and Resta 2001; McIntyre and O’Hair 1996). It is against this background that this study sought to find out how, in the Zimbabwean context, the intended beneficiaries of mentorship, the student teachers, and find its usefulness to them.

METHOD

Participants

This study was carried out in 2005 and 2006 at a teachers’ college using final year students who had returned from teaching practice in primary schools in four provinces of Zimbabwe. Sixty-two mentors in thirty-one different primary schools were also interviewed in order to triangulate findings from student teachers. Most of the interviews were held during teaching practice supervision excursions by the authors as general discussions on students’ progress. The interviews with mentors were meant to find out the level of awareness and preparedness the mentors had on their crucial role of nurturing and developing aspiring teachers. They were also meant to find out how the mentors set out to assist trainees and the areas in which they assisted them as well as find out the problems they encountered in mentoring.

Sample

Two hundred and twenty two (222) student teachers, who constituted more than half of the total number of final years (140 male and 82 female) at the teachers’ college who had worked as mentees to qualified and experienced teachers in the said four provinces were asked to complete a questionnaire. All students used in this study were from one teachers’ college and hence, the findings cannot be generalized. The number of schools from where mentors were taken was a result of purposive sampling as these were accessed by the researchers during teaching practice supervision excursions hence the need not to generalize the findings as well. Yet the findings still yield useful insights into the benefits or otherwise of mentorship.
Instruments

A questionnaire and interviews were used in this study. Student teachers were also asked to state the nature of assistance they expected to get from the mentors when they were on teaching practice, the actual areas in which they were assisted and the areas in which they were not assisted. Student teachers were also asked to rate the effectiveness of the mentorship they received. Twenty-two student teachers were also interviewed as a follow up to some responses in the questionnaire. Sixty-two mentors were also interviewed on the level of their preparedness to offer mentorship to student teachers.

Procedure

This is a descriptive survey where data was solicited from a sample of more than half of the entire population of student teachers who worked as mentees. Data collected were analyzed thematically. The themes were derived from the key research questions. Student teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire and were interviewed on their return from teaching practice while interviews with mentors were conducted on visits to schools. With the permission of college authorities the researchers managed to collect data from student teachers. Data were collected specifically on the following areas; (a) the nature of help the students were offered by mentors, (b) The mentors’ level of preparedness in offering mentorship and (c) the student teachers’ perception of the effectiveness of mentorship.

RESULTS

The major findings of the study that reflect problems associated with mentorship are presented in Tables 1 to 5. As shown in Table 1, of the 222 student teachers who were asked to complete the questionnaire, 94 per cent (N = 208) of them confirmed that they worked directly under mentors. This shows that the majority of the students were attached to mentors when they were on teaching practice. Only 6 per cent (N = 14) of responses indicated that they did not work directly under mentors but stated that they were assigned mentors who had their own classes. It is only a minority of the student teachers who did not work under mentors. The statistics conform that mentorship is a method of teacher training in use in the Zimbabwean teachers’ colleges, as most students are really required to work under mentors in the schools.

Table 1: Student teachers’ responses on whether or not they worked under mentors during their teaching practice (N 222)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students who worked directly under mentors</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students who did not work directly under mentors</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mentors’ years of experience: The second part of the first question required information on whether the mentors they worked under were qualified and experienced teachers. All the respondents indicated that their mentors were qualified, as they had acquired at least a basic teaching certificate. Mentors were also experienced teachers. Table 2 shows that 18 per cent (N = 41) of the respondents indicated that their mentors were in their first year of teaching. However, 82 per cent (N = 181) of the respondents indicated that their mentors had teaching experience. It is important as Campbell (2001) notes to have well experienced teachers as mentors as the assumption is that owing to their experience they may be in a position to ably assist the mentees. Mentors who have some experience in teaching have more to offer to students than those who do not have any teaching experience. This finding reveals the attempt to attach students to experienced teachers who are in a position to assist them.

Table 2: Mentors’ years of experience (N = 222)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mentor’s number of years of experience</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 year or less</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 years or more</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Load sharing between mentors and student teachers: As Table 3 shows, the sharing of loads between mentors and student teachers was unfair. 93 per cent (N = 193) of the respondents indicated that their mentors did not teach their share while only 7 per cent (N = 15) of the respondents indicated that their mentors taught their share. 77 per cent (N = 161) of the respondents stated that they were not happy with the load-sharing scenario. Only 23 per cent (N = 47) of the respondents indicated they were happy with the way loads were shared. There is, however, a problem in such kind of mentorship as the students ended up taking full loads with mentors taking a back seat. This is contrary to the concept mentorship, in which students have to do a lot of observing and learning and not to be given full charge of classes when they would still be learning the trade.

Table 3: Load sharing between mentors and student teachers (N = 208)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did the mentor teach his share?</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you happy with load sharing with mentor?</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Guidance offered to student teachers by mentors:** As shown in Table 4 a larger number of the respondents 83 per cent (N = 184) indicated that their mentors did not help them in lesson preparation. Only a few of the respondents 17 per cent (N = 38) confirmed that their mentors helped them in lesson preparation. A larger number of respondents, 89 per cent (N = 195) also indicated that their mentors did not demonstrate effective teaching. A small figure, 11 per cent (N = 27) of the respondents indicated that their mentors demonstrated effective teachings. Most of the respondents, 93 per cent (N = 207), also indicated that there was never any discussion of taught lessons with their mentors and only a small number of the respondents, 15 per cent (N = 15), confirmed ever discussing taught lessons with their mentors. A very high number of respondents, 98 per cent (N = 217), also showed that they were not offered any skills in marking pupils’ work. Only 2 per cent (N = 5) confirmed that they were offered help in marking. 97 per cent (N = 215) of the respondents indicated that they were not offered help in the development of chalkboard skills and only 3 per cent (N = 7) confirmed they were helped in the development of chalkboard. 99 per cent (N = 220) of the respondents also indicated that their mentors did not talk of professionalism to them and only 1 per cent (N = 2) confirmed that their mentors talked of professionalism to them. On the issue of help in co-curricular issues, 85 per cent (N = 189) of the respondents indicated that their mentors helped them in co-curricular issues and only 15 per cent (N = 33) indicated that they were not helped in co-curricular issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4: Guidance offered to student teachers by mentors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the mentor help you in lesson preparation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the mentor demonstrate effective teaching?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you discuss your teaching with mentor?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you offered any skills in marking?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you offered help in chalkboard skills?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the mentor talk of professionalism you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you helped in co curricular issues?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Mentors’ level of preparedness to help student teachers:** Of the 62 mentors interviewed, 81 per cent (N = 50) revealed that they were aware of their role in guiding and helping student teachers but none of them had received any kind of training or literature to help them in mentorship. 90 per cent (N = 20) of the student teachers interviewed revealed that mentors could exhibit unprofessional conduct and engaged in unprofessional acts like: (a) absenting themselves from duty frequently and for no due causes; (b) reporting late for duty; (c) beating, kicking, slapping or even pinching pupils; (d) selling sweets and biscuits to pupils even during lessons; and (e) sending pupils on personal errands even during lessons.
Students’ perception on the effectiveness of mentorship: On the overall rating of the effectiveness of mentorship, as shown in Table 5, 3 per cent (N = 6) of the respondents rated mentorship as a ‘Very Effective’ programme, 4 per cent (N = 10) rated it as ‘Effective’, 26 per cent (N = 57) rated it as ‘Moderately Effective’, 40 per cent (N = 88) rated it as ‘Ineffective’ and 27 per cent (N = 61) rated it as ‘Totally Ineffective’. Most responses rated mentorship as ‘Ineffective’. Likert Scale rating calculations based on students’ responses revealed that the Mentorship programme was ‘Ineffective’ in helping them to professionally develop as expert teachers.

Table 5: Responses on the effectiveness of mentorship (N = 222)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Likert Scale</th>
<th>No. of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Effective</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately Effective</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately Effective</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ineffective</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totally Ineffective</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

It was revealed in the study that most student teachers on teaching practice worked under mentors. This was evidenced by the fact that 94 per cent of the student teachers worked directly under mentors and only 6 per cent did not work directly under mentors. Teacher education trends keep changing (Ndawi 2000; Chivore 1997) and use of mentorship is certainly one of the changes. In the past, student teachers took full charge of classes while on teaching practice. Mentorship has tried to change this scenario and attach student teachers to already qualified and experienced teachers. From the study, student teachers who did not work directly under mentors gave varied reasons and some of the reasons included the shortage of trained teachers in the schools hence they were asked to man classes on their own while others had mentors on different types of leave. They all agreed that they were assigned some senior teachers to work as their mentors. It appears, then, that students on teaching practice worked under mentors either directly or indirectly.

The fact that mentors in schools were both qualified and experienced goes a long way in showing the need to have the appropriate people to lead students (Odell and Huling 2000; Wilkin 1992). The previous scenario where student teachers were in charge of their own classes could also have been a case of the need to have manpower to handle classes. Upon attainment of independence in 1980, there was a rapid expansion of the education system. The large number of students in schools impacted on the number of teachers hence even student teachers operated as full-fledged teachers (Zvobgo 1994; Zvobgo 1984). This could be traced back to how qualified teachers view students. In some cases we
could see the student teachers as knowledgeable ones who do not require help from them. The situation is further compounded by the fact that many of the mentors would have manned classes on their own when they were students. There would be a need for the mentors to be adequately prepared for their roles as mentors.

The relationship between mentors and student teachers needs to be clearly defined in terms of workload sharing. This study revealed a skewed relationship to the advantage of mentors. The revelation that mentors regarded student teachers as relief teachers is quite an unfortunate one. The mentors may only perceive student teachers as helpers to make their teaching work light. This may be seen as the root cause for poor mentorship where the mentors have wrong perceptions of having student teachers attached to them. The ideal approach in mentorship would be that the mentor operates normally in his or her classroom with the student observing operations and discussing critical areas of operation with the mentor. The mentee is then gradually given assignments to do while the mentor observes and advises (Tomlinson 1995; Bey and Holmes 1992). There should not be any stage in mentorship when the trainee takes over the classroom in the early stages of training or worse still does so on his or her own without the mentor’s guidance.

It is the nature of the guidance offered to student teachers by their mentors that showed some frightening revelations as most respondents showed that they were not guided in lesson preparation, which includes among other issues scheming and planning. Lesson preparation being a very important aspect of teaching (Morrison 1996; Gwarinda 1993; Barker 1988), one would wonder how the mentors expected the trainee teachers to perform well in lesson delivery without help in lesson preparation. Interviews held with mentors show that quite a good number of them stated that they assumed the students had already been taught issues on lesson preparation at college. While the assumption could be true it will still be the duty of the mentor to help the student put into practice what was taught at college. Hence the necessity of the teaching practice stint being a pivotal aspect of teacher training. This could also call for coordination between colleges and mentors in order to avoid leaving anything to chance.

Interviews held with student teachers showed that mentors had a ‘business as usual’ approach in which they did their duties without any regard that the trainees needed to learn a lot from their way of operating. A mentor is supposed to guide and lead the trainee all the way until the trainee is able to effectively deliver lessons (Holloway 2001; Wilkin 1992). This guidance is a process marked by demonstrating, giving the trainee the chance to try out, advising on shortcomings, appraising on strengths and encouraging the trainee to keep trying. When all this is not properly done, this could be indicative of shortcomings in real mentorship.

Some of the mentors interviewed stated that they were not very sure of how they were expected to help student teachers on lesson delivery and hoped the student teachers would learn by observing them teach. It may be a case of lack of clarity on college expectations from the mentors. Hence, the need to constantly workshop the mentors in order to adequately equip them as effective mentors. The
purpose of mentorship is defeated if student teachers are left on their own to fumble in darkness and rely solely on information given at college. The college and the mentors are major partners with complementary roles in the development of the student as a full-fledged professional.

In interviews held with both mentors and students, it was also discovered that no mentor kept a student teacher progress record in any form. Such a record would be helpful in monitoring the development of the student and keeping a check on improvement of weaknesses and the amplification of strengths. It was further discovered that mentors did not make any lesson critiques as student teachers taught. Student teachers mainly relied on lesson critiques from school administrators and college-based supervisors. However, it could be the mentors’ lesson critiques that could get closer to a true assessment of the student teacher’s teaching capabilities since there is continuous assessment done in normal daily routine operations. This could be comparatively better than rare and random class visits by external supervisors which at times unsettle the trainee and, invariably, negatively affects performance. Use of the mentor’s lesson critiques in conjunction with those of external supervisors may further strengthen assessment of the real capabilities of the student teacher. In interviews, the mentors were quite forthright in stating that it was never indicated to them that they could keep a record on the student teachers’ performance. They further revealed that the supervision of student teachers’ work was the duty of school administrators and college-based supervisors. There could be a problem of lack of collaboration between mentors and college supervisors, which is vital if mentorship is to be meaningful.

On the issue of helping mentees in developing professionalism, the revelation that nearly all the respondents indicated that their mentors did not talk of professionalism by way of acquainting them with professional regulations that govern professional conduct is quite an unfortunate one. Mentors could be neglecting this because they will not be professional themselves yet the issue of professional conduct is a critical component in the development of a true professional. Hence, it should be given due attention.

While most of the interviewed mentors confirmed that they were aware of their role in mentoring, it is the observation of the situation on the ground that showed otherwise. The fact that most of them could not offer help to students in critical areas of teaching practice aspects showed lack of preparedness. Mentors may require training for their new role. This, then, would call for coordination between college and school activities. Constant workshops and meetings involving college-based supervisors, school-based supervisors and mentors could be very necessary in ensuring that all the stakeholders work on an equal footing.

The fact that student teachers rated the mentorship programme to be ‘Ineffective’ in their development as professional teachers, shows problems in mentorship. This has a serious impact on teacher education insofar as teaching practice is concerned. This could be a reflection that more requires to be done to make sure that student teachers benefit from mentorship as they find it ineffective. The fact
that those who are supposed to benefit from mentorship show that they are not benefiting from it, really calls for improvements in the planning and implementations of mentorship.

**RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The study that sought to find out the benefits of mentorship from the point of view of the mentees found that most student teachers on teaching practice worked directly under mentors and the mentors were qualified and experienced teachers. It also found that the majority of the mentors took student teachers as relief teachers who would help to ease their teaching burden. The majority of the mentors did not offer trainee teachers under their guidance professional advice, demonstrated to them what to do, give them opportunities to try out ideas and discuss their attempts. The majority of the mentors revealed that they were aware of their roles yet what they did proved otherwise. There was also some fear on the part of mentors to involve themselves in offering guidance to students as would possibly be at cross-purposes with what students would have been taught at college.

The study, therefore, concludes that if mentorship is to be really meaningful to student teachers, a lot requires to be done on the way it is operationalized. Real aspects of professional practice should be emphasized as areas of guidance to be offered by mentors. Mentors should be constantly workshopped and empowered to work effectively in leading and guiding student teachers. A lot of literature should also be made available for mentors’ reference. Mentors also need to keep an audit trail of the student’s performance by way of maintaining the student teachers’ progress records. Such records that reflect the progress of the trainee in various aspect of teaching practice may also be useful in the overall assessment of the student teacher. There is a need for collaboration between college supervisory activities and the mentors’ work. Mentors and college supervisors should work in unison to develop the teacher by stressing same aspects of training with equal involvement in order to realize the full benefits of mentorship.

The article attempted to make some contribution to an issue that may ordinarily be taken for granted. It is one thing to attach student teachers to mentors and quite another to have meaningful mentorship taking place. The article’s contribution was by way of making a practical investigation from, primarily, the point of view of the student teachers and from the mentors themselves. It looked at how the student teachers viewed the benefits of mentorship in their own professional development as teachers. The mentors should be very clear of their role as mentors and they should be aware of the critical areas in student development that they should focus on in their guidance. College authorities and their teaching practice departments have to work closely with mentors to ensure coordinated efforts for the enhancement of mentorship in schools.
LIMITATION

The main limitation of the study was the sample size. The sample size was small and cannot represent all student teachers in Zimbabwean teachers’ colleges. The issue of working with students belonging to one teachers’ college is also problematic in the sense that conditions obtaining to students of one teachers’ college may not be the same as those obtaining elsewhere. The sampling of mentors was small and purposive, only meant to triangulate findings from student teachers. A larger sample size would improve the generalizability of results. The study did not look at what the colleges have done in involving schools in the mentorship programme. The main data were collected from students as major participants and beneficiaries of the mentorship programme.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Future research may focus on mentorship on a larger scale by increasing sample size to improve the generalizability of results. Future research may also include the teacher education authorities on their input in mentorship and the extent they have tried to involve the major stakeholders in the programme. Comparisons may also need to be made on the benefits of mentorship when compared to previous teaching practices.

REFERENCES


