Teacher development through distance education: Mentor perceptions of mentoring

T. G. Mukeredzi
University of KwaZulu-Natal
South Africa
e-mail: tabig2000@yahoo.com

G. T. Ndamba
Great Zimbabwe University
Zimbabwe
e-mail: gtndamba@yahoo.co.uk

Z. L. Weda
Zimbabwe Open University
Zimbabwe
e-mail: zenweda@yahoo.com

Abstract
The article explores perceptions of mentors of Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) students, regarding mentor/mentee relationships, mentor roles and effectiveness, mentor commitment and training, mentoring benefits, incentives and challenges. The study covered two regions of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) as a follow up to an earlier study which explored students’ perceptions. Qualitative questionnaires gathered data from a purposive sample of 39. Although the study is limited due to the absence of a multi-method approach to data gathering, mentor perceptions broadly concur with those of mentees in the earlier study and literature, but with strong emphasis on the need for mentor training, adequate time for mentoring, provision of incentives and the quality issue of grading versus a caring mentoring relationship. From critically analyzing mentor perceptions, researchers concluded that albeit mentors were painting a positive picture of mentoring and their commitment to it, mentoring in the ZOU model was affected by lack of mentor training, incentives and limited time for mentoring. In such circumstances, the institution should embark on on-going mentor training, give mentors incentives, rethink the role of school-based mentors and reconsider assessment in a ‘parent/child’ relationship.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND
Recent discourse on educational reform has emphasized the need for future teachers to learn to teach through the process of teaching in the school arena in which they will eventually be employed (Darling-Hammond 1996; Darling-Hammond and Cobb
Schools and universities are building collaborations which provide insights into and experience in the culture of the teaching profession for the student teacher. Such collaborations offer opportunities to experienced teachers to share their expertise with upcoming generations of teachers as well as retool their own skills (Brookes and Sykes 1997; Valli 1992). This partnership between universities and schools in school-based teacher preparation provides a pathway that allows the student teacher to mature and become socialized into the profession of teaching more quickly under the guidance of a school-based mentor than the traditional student teaching preparation (Levine and Trachtman 1997; Mertler 2006; Zeichner 1997) with split periods of school experience. The purpose of this study was to determine how school-based mentors perceive mentoring in school-based teacher preparation.

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) launched a Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE), an initial in-service school-based teacher education programme in 2000. The programme offers pedagogical skills, through distance education to unqualified teachers with general degrees, practising in secondary schools, who wish to acquire professional qualifications (ZOU 2000). These unqualified practising teachers are trained in situ. In other words, this is a wholly school-based, initial in-service teacher development programme. The student teacher is attached to a school–based, qualified, experienced and practising teacher (mentor) who provides on-the-spot guidance, support and supervision and overall nurturing of the professional development of the trainee throughout the entire duration of the programme.

The programme duration is three-semesters and the major mode of delivery is the module, complemented by 10 hours of face-to-face, non-compulsory encounters per course per semester undertaken by the university (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2005).

These mentees, the PGDE student teachers, are full time teachers on a full monthly salary. Notwithstanding that the mentor and mentee in this scenario are colleagues, practising at the same school and living in the same community, the emphasis on power hierarchies and hierarchical relationship dynamics which position mentor and mentee differently, one as knower/wiser and the other as knowee/learner may not be ruled out.

This study follows up an earlier one (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2005) which explored PGDE student teachers’ perceptions of mentoring. These PGDE students were the student teachers mentored by the group of mentors explored in the study. This earlier study revealed that the majority of mentors were diploma holders mentoring degree holders. While these mentors are professionally qualified, the mentees hold university degrees and consequently are likely to possess a firmer grounding in content. The question is whether these professionally qualified mentor teachers, with lower academic qualifications can effectively mentor these professionally unqualified mentees with higher academic qualifications, raising an issue of academic students versus professional mentors. Given this scenario, it became imperative to explore mentors’ perceptions.

The selection of a mentor for this programme is the responsibility of the school head, acting upon request from the university. ZOU stipulates that the mentor should
be professionally qualified, in the same specialization as the student teacher and with at least five years teaching experience (ZOU 2000). Given that mentor selection is the responsibility of the school heads/principals as they are better placed to appoint professional specialization experts who are experienced, efficient and effective (Chakanyuka et al. 2006; Shumbayaonda 2004) to act as mentors, the issue of power dynamics may not be ruled out. Students studied by Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2005) indicated that they wanted to choose their own mentors as they were aware of the collegial dynamics within and among staff.

Other institutions, such as the University of KwaZulu-Natal, for instance train professionally unqualified practising teachers through a mixed mode approach where attachment to the mentor is neither clearly structured nor maintained for long periods. ZOU’s model of teacher development where a practising student teacher is attached to the mentor for the entire training period gives the student teacher adequate time to experience the reality of what goes on in the classroom in the process of becoming a teacher. Given that the mentor is centrally placed in this model, being available to the student teacher almost always (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2005) to nurture the professional development of the mentee, their perceptions needed to be established. The knowledge and skills the student teachers gained from modules and face-to-face contact sessions are applied almost immediately under guidance, thereby linking theory with practice (Murerwa 2004; ZOU 2000). The ZOU approach to teacher training is an advantage to the ministry to plug teacher shortage gaps, is cost effective to individuals and their sponsors and to the profession, it enhances immediate implementation of theory into practice (Higher Education Policy 2004; Bourdillon 1999).

The success of the ZOU model depends on altruism and volunteerism of mentors. Given the harsh economic situation in Zimbabwe, with many professionals needing to take on second jobs to supplement incomes, the benevolence of mentors to engage in effective mentoring becomes questionable. As this is an influence factor of context, impacting on location of mentor practice within a broader context it became imperative to investigate how the ZOU PGDE mentors perceive mentoring. Perceptions people hold represent information that is known or perceived on a phenomenon (Morse and Field 1998). Thus, a person’s attitude towards anything emanates from his/her perceptions about that phenomenon. It could therefore be argued that perceptions affect attitudes and behaviors. The study was therefore conducted to determine mentors’ perceptions of mentoring as perceptions have a direct bearing on the level of performance and effectiveness in this programme.

Mentor training for this programme has been a one off, half day activity often at the start of the first semester. Mentors for students enrolled in the second semester are often not catered for. In the absence of training, mentors received literature and some guidelines on what they were expected to do. Consequently, the mentors explored in this study were a combination of the trained and the untrained. Training is critical for mentoring effectiveness. Dart and Drake (1993) in their study of PGCE mentors discovered that initially mentors did not know what they were supposed to do with
student teachers, but after training, mentors were reported to have used strategies to
guide students more effectively. In another study, Moon (1994) found that trained men-
tors develop and perfect their interpersonal skills and become more skillful, versatile
and effective in guiding students on school experience.

JUSTIFICATION FOR THE STUDY

Mentors have assumed a key role in the teacher development of the professionally
unqualified practising teachers in ZOU (ZOU 2000) and with many graduates from this
programme, it was imperative to give mentors a voice ‘. . . to get behind their faces
and skins’ (Bhengu 2005, 45) to understand their perceptions of this model of teacher
development. Giving them a platform was likely to reveal what was going right and
wrong and thus open doors for improvement. This would give ZOU insightful infor-
mation into the realities and demands of this model and thereby enhance reactions to
instructional and other needs of trainees and mentors.

Mentoring schemes should be evaluated, reviewed and monitored regularly for
effectiveness (Hoy, Bayne-Jardine and Wood 2000) and, as pointed out by Darling-
Hammond and Cobb (1995) a strong teaching force is built out of the serious attention
to the preparation and on-going learning of teachers. Literature on mentoring is rich,
but no studies to date have focused on mentor perceptions in initial in-service school-
based teacher development programmes in distance education, a model that ZOU has
adopted to develop teachers. Findings in this research would therefore complement the
findings of a study (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2005) exploring PGDE students percep-
tions of mentoring. This study is, however, limited due to the mono-method approach
to data gathering; trustworthiness of findings would be enhanced if data were collected
through more than one source.

METHODOLOGY

A purposive sample of 39 PGDE students’ mentors, comprising 28 men and 11 women
drawn from 2 regions of ZOU; namely Masvingo and Midlands, participated in the
study. These were mentors of the PGDE student teachers involved in an earlier study
(Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2005). Mentors were selected from schools visited for teach-
ing practice supervision in the second semester of 2005, as this provided easy access to
mentors and administering the instrument. Further, these mentors were specialization
experts and mid-career teachers with at least five 5 years teaching experience and could
thus reflect on the situated nature of their mentoring.

The centrality of the mentor in this initial in-service school-based teacher develop-
ment programme was pivotal to the development of key questions: What perceptions
do mentors hold in relation to: mentor roles and effectiveness, mentor commitment
and training, mentor/mentee relationship, and, mentoring benefits, incentives and chal-
lenges? To explore these questions, a qualitative questionnaire was used to elicit data.
The researchers met the mentors at their particular schools, requested their consent and asked them to complete the questionnaire. In a few instances where mentors could not finish responding to the questionnaire, they were given envelopes in which to seal them in and give the student teachers who would then bring them to the ZOU Regional centre (campus) during the subsequent contact session. Data gathering was finalized in the second semester of 2006.

The selective or highlighting approach as outlined by Van Manen (1990) was followed for data analysis. Each response text was read several times and statements that appeared to be revealing were highlighted. Themes were identified by highlighting material in the response that spoke to the question. We then selected the highlighted phrases or sentences and tried to capture as fully as possible what meaning the highlighted response conveyed. We discussed and refined the themes, looked for commonalities and differences and identified the overall themes that best spoke to the question. The general positive and negative responses were counted. The themes were then repositioned in the overall contexts from where they emerged to view the relationships and the analysis was scrutinized and put together into a story, relating it to the big picture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In their earlier study of PGDE students’ perceptions of mentoring (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2005) students appreciated the significance of mentor training and pointed out that those mentors who had participated in the ZOU mentor training workshop, were subsequently portraying mentoring dispositions more positively than before the training workshop. A lot of literature alludes to the notion that mentoring is not instinctive but consists of a set of skills that have to be learnt. ‘. . . mentoring is an active process . . . to mentor is to teach . . . if teachers cannot mentor in a teacherly way, who can?’ (Chakanyuka et al. 2006, 9). There is a knowledge-base to teacher education into which mentors need to be inducted (Dart and Drake 1993; Davies 2005). Hence, it is only through training that mentors can gain a range of target skills to benefit trainees as they become more proactive and demonstrate reflective qualities essential for effective mentoring supervision.

Close liaison and dialogue between university lecturers and mentors is critical. Shumbayaonda (2004) in a Zimbabwean study of school heads and mentors noted that they were unsure of what was to be expected of a student teacher on practicum in Zimbabwean schools and such lack of clarity adversely affected the smooth running and effectiveness of mentoring. He concluded that poor relations between schools and teacher education institutions are among the major weaknesses that negatively impacted on mentoring effectiveness in primary teacher education in Zimbabwe.

Further, PGDE students studied (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2005) indicated that university lecturers and mentors rarely spend much time together, as one respondent pointed out; ‘. . . our lecturers come in lightning visits’. Consequently, the nature of supervision tended to affect different aspects of development of the student teacher.
Dialogue between lecturers and mentors in this programme would confirm ZOU expectations and ensure quality. Such liaison establishes good relations, enhances mentor confidence and paves the way for effective and quality supervision. It also gives mentors confidence and a feeling of shared responsibility for producing good quality teachers. The ability of institutions to engage in issues of quality and course evaluation involving universities and mentors is critical for effective mentoring (Mawer 1996; McIntyre et al. 1994; McIntyre 1996).

Mukeredzi and Ndamba defined a mentor as an experienced professional responsible for the growth and supervision of the student teacher, ‘ . . . a facilitator who empowers the mentee with the necessary skills for classroom practice’. This facilitator is a ‘ . . . qualified and experienced practising teacher charged with the responsibility of initiating a protégé into the teaching profession’ (2005, 20). This definition suggests powerful yet intangible processes with mentoring attributes and roles: nurturing, role-modelling, mentoring functions (teaching, sponsoring, encouraging, counselling and befriending), promotion of professional and/or personal development and on-going caring relationship. Given this conception of mentoring, Blunt and Connolly (2006) affirm the responsibility of mentoring as worthwhile.

From Mukeredzi and Ndamba’s (2005) study, the PGDE students studied indicated a cordial relationship between them and mentors. What remained was for the mentors to concur or contradict. As socially situated practices, teaching and learning are embedded in interactions and relationships (Engestrom 2004). The mentor’s ability to develop own self in exhibiting personality and character qualities is critical in bringing out the best in others and, often the mentor gets delight in the progress and professional development of the protégé (Edwards and Collison 1996; Mawer 1996; Mertler 2006). Thus, as a teaching and learning process, the success of this mentoring process is therefore dependent on the mentor/mentee relationship. How he/she conducts mentoring duties determines whether he/she wins or loses the mentees’ trust and confidence.

Considering that the student teacher is academically more qualified than the mentor, he/she may be a source of the latest information in his/her specialization and teaching methodology for the mentor. Given this conception, mentor benefits therefore emanate from and revolve around joint planning, joint teaching, mutual monitoring and, joint analysis and reflection (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2005; Feimen-Nemser 1999). When the student teacher begins to move focus from him/herself (de-centre) to children’s learning, the mentor switches role from being a model and instructor to a colleague (Mawer 1996; McIntyre 1996).

At this stage, the mentor becomes a co-enquirer to promote critical reflection and jointly question and problematize traditional practices and methods of teaching, investigating why things happen the way they do (Edwards and Collison 1996; Talvitie et al. 2000). They jointly analyze the teaching and learning process, making constructive self-criticism and openly challenging beliefs and values in as much as they affect children’s learning (Stephens 1998; Zehava and Salman 2007). Turner (1992) and David and Roger (2002) contend that the formation of reflective thinking hinges on
experience of surprise. Hence in the absence of surprises and conflicts, development of reflective thinking is often retarded as changing previously held ideas encompasses interrogating earlier classroom traditions and practices. Such interrogations often occur when the trainee experiences conflict between his/her opinions and those in classroom practice (McIntyre 1996).

Notwithstanding the influential role of mentoring, the PGDE students (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2005) indicated that mentors were often too busy with heavy teaching loads and other duties to devote adequate time to mentoring. Often the most effective teachers are usually the busiest and hardest pressed in the school community as effectiveness is often the credible criteria for delegation of responsibilities. Such mentors therefore are unable to execute their mentoring duties effectively notwithstanding the will to do so. Mukeredzi and Ndamba also found that mentors were unhappy because the university did not give them incentives and this impacted on their commitment. Citing Blackwell (1990), Blunt and Connolly (2006) highlight another challenge in mentoring, pointing out that mentors often do not mentor students who are different from them but make an attempt to replicate themselves through their protégés either consciously or unconsciously. These findings tally with findings (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2005) where student teachers revealed that their mentors often did not allow them to engage in trial and error but wanted to see themselves through their protégés, by using the methods they themselves had used.

FINDINGS

Mentor roles and effectiveness

Mentors viewed the development of reflective skills in their mentees as their role and they claimed to do this through evaluation of schemes of work and daily lesson plans and post lesson observation discussions. Giving instructional feedback was seen by the mentors (95%) as another key role. As one respondent put it, ‘It is my duty to tell the student teacher how they are teaching’. Feedback was usually given in the post-lesson discussion. In this activity, the mentees were given time by all the mentors to reflect and to suggest ways of improvement.

Conducting demonstration lessons was another role that most mentors (74%) carried out. This they did in order to assist the mentees with difficult content or teaching approaches and to overcome previously diagnosed difficulties. A few admitted they had never carried out demonstration lessons and their reasons were: timetabling did not allow, they did not teach the same subject as the mentee and they had ‘never thought of it’. Other roles that the mentors apparently performed were lesson observation, book and record inspection and generally assisting the student teacher to learn the ropes of the profession.

Most of the respondents (72%) viewed themselves as effective in playing their role since they said they were giving adequate support to the mentee. This support was in
the form of assistance with various teaching approaches and methods, understanding of content, design and acquisition of instructional material, classroom organisation and maintenance of discipline. Those few respondents who said they were not giving adequate assistance to the mentee cited shortage of time and inflexible timetabling for their failure.

Commitment and training
Almost all mentors (95%) said they were committed to mentoring. One respondent declared, ‘I am committed since I sacrifice my time and effort to help the mentee’. The respondents expressed that they derived pleasure in assisting a colleague to upgrade themselves (59%) and enjoyed being associated with the success of the mentee (34%). Those respondents who said they were not committed to the mentoring process claimed that they were not committed because they were not being rewarded for their effort.

The majority (80%) of the mentors felt they needed training in mentoring so as to improve their effectiveness, and to act in tandem with the university lecturers in student assessment. One respondent expressed this in the following manner, ‘Mentors need training so that they are together doing one thing with the ZOU lecturers’. A few mentors felt they had the requisite skills to handle the mentees and therefore did not require any training. Lack of training was also listed by 62 per cent of the respondents as one of the major problems they faced in mentoring.

Relationship between mentor and mentee
There was a cordial relationship between mentors and mentees as affirmed by the majority, (87%) of the respondents. One respondent wrote, ‘There is a cordial relationship between us and we discuss frankly and professionally in a friendly atmosphere’. Those few, who said they did not have a cordial relationship claimed to be maintaining objectivity during graded supervision and avoided friendly relationships with their protégés.

All 39 respondents claimed that there was collaboration between them and their mentees and, they maintained a dual approach to problem solving, planning and lesson evaluation. The mentor who wrote, ‘Whenever there is a problem we work together to solve it’ epitomised the mentor-mentee relationship described here. The majority of the mentors (90%) perceived themselves as sensitive to the mentee’s social and professional needs and viewed themselves as receptive to the suggestions and ideas from the student teacher. ‘I try to be there for the student teacher’, wrote one of the mentors. Most of the mentors (82%) also viewed their mentees as receptive to their constructive criticism as they usually responded to the criticism by making practical changes as one respondent put it, ‘. . . he always tries to implement the changes that I have suggested’.

A large proportion (69%) of the respondents claimed that they give the mentees a chance to experiment with new approaches. This seems to indicate that mentors trust
their mentees. Those who claimed that they did not give the student teacher a chance to experiment claimed that it would be unethical to experiment with the pupils.

Mentoring benefits, incentives and challenges

All mentors agreed that the mentoring process contributed to their professional development. The benefits mentioned by most of the participants (72%) were related to their professional rejuvenation i.e. the acquisition of the latest information, trends, teaching approaches and up to date information about their teaching areas brought by the student teachers. ‘It refreshes’, that is how one of the mentors expressed the benefits of mentoring. Being compelled to read around their subject, (53%) and being given a chance to reflect on their own practice, (36%) were all perceived as benefits of mentoring.

Most mentors (92%) claimed to be enjoying the mentoring. The reasons that they gave for enjoying mentoring were that mentoring contributed to their professional development and they took delight in contributing to the professional development of another individual. ‘I enjoy mentoring because it is a pleasure to help someone to develop’. A minority (1%) said that they did not enjoy mentoring and gave the following reasons: ‘Lack of time and being taken advantage of by ZOU by being made to work for no pay’.

The main problem faced by mentors was to do with limited time as this was perceived as an extra responsibility (79%) for which they hardly had enough time. Lack of training as mentors (62%), unclear ZOU expectations (38%), sporadic visits by ZOU lecturers (1%), lack of remuneration from ZOU (18%) emerged as other problems. The feelings about remuneration were aptly expressed by the respondent who said ‘I don’t enjoy mentoring because I am being used by ZOU and not being paid’.

Respondents were unanimous on the need for incentives as this would improve their commitment and motivation. On what form of incentive the respondents expected, one respondent said, ‘Money! Mentees are paying . . . why should the work done by mentors not be paid for? It is an offence to use people and not pay them!’ Other incentives suggested were; training, certificates of appreciation, job opportunities in ZOU, reduced fees when studying with ZOU (82%), clear ZOU expectations of mentor roles (28%) and reduction in teaching loads (23%), promotion at work, availing them with resource material and giving them ZOU T-shirts.

Expectations of mentors

Mentors expected their mentees to be cooperative and willing to learn (67%), enthusiastic (38%), keen to follow university procedure (25%), critical (5%), socialise well with others (1%), confident (1%) and hardworking (1%). The mentors’ expectations about the university were diverse but on the main hinged around the need for information about its procedures and university expectations of them and of the students in their charge (74%). They also expected the university to give them incentives (67%).
Graded supervision

Of the 39 mentors involved in this study 48% felt the danger of straining the relationship was prevalent whilst the rest (52%) indicated that it did not exist. Respondents mentioned that it is the manner in which the grading is done that can harm the relationship. They felt that if the grading is subjective, unprofessional and without any discussion, then it could harm the mentee-mentor relationship.

Choosing the mentor

The person seen by mentors as most appropriate to choose a mentor for the student teacher was the Head/Deputy Head of the school (56%), Head of Department (23%), mentee (18%) and University lecturer (3%). The Head/Deputy Head was chosen because ‘He understands the teaching loads that each teacher has’. Another mentor said, ‘he/she knows very well who is weak and who is good when it comes to teaching’. Others also indicated that this would ensure support of the school administration for the mentoring process. Some mentors (44%) also indicated that they needed to be consulted because they had heavy loads already.

DISCUSSION

Mentors in this study indicated that they were committed to mentoring and performing mentoring roles as expected. Prominent among the mentor functions cited were lesson-observation, provision of feedback and development of teaching skills through collaborative scheming, planning and teaching. Mentors also viewed mentoring as an effective mode of teacher education that ZOU had adopted as it makes teacher-education relevant, appropriate and effective. Notwithstanding, mentors indicated lack of training, incentives and limited time as major challenges in this process. The essence of mentoring, in the light of its historical and etymological genesis, revolves around nurturing, role-modelling, professional and or personal development of mentee and, the mentoring functions, teaching, sponsoring, encouraging, counselling and befriending the mentee (David and Roger 2002; Kerry and Mayes 1995; Stephens 1998). With limited mentoring time and in the absence of adequate mentor training, one questions the effectiveness with which mentors were performing the mentoring roles.

With regard to graded supervision, student teachers (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2005) indicated that there was no danger of straining relations through grading, while mentor responses were almost 50-50 for and against straining of relationships. The connection between the caring relationship (parent/child) and evaluation/grading becomes controversial. Most researchers and teacher educators believe that these two processes must be separate and different. This emanates from a concern for protecting the purported objective and formal nature of assessment as a critical component in teacher development. In this ZOU model, one role of the mentor is to give the student teacher a grade after lesson observation. The power dynamics become problematic. The mentors are
faced with a difficult situation to grade in a parent/child relationship as this may break the system – the relationship. This is a weakness of this model, a quality issue which is problematic. Further, where limitations of adequate time for mentoring exist, one questions the credibility of such grades.

Mentors indicated that they were committed to mentoring. Contrary to this finding, their mentees earlier on (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2005) had indicated that generally mentors lacked the commitment and time for mentoring. In a situation where the mentor says one thing and the student says another thing, it becomes difficult to know what to believe and the tendency would be to align with the student as, more often than not what people do and what they claim to do is different. Further, given the manner in which these mentors voiced the need for incentives and lamented the absence of time and training, their effectiveness and commitment becomes questionable. It therefore becomes an issue of what they do versus what they claim they do, making it difficult to ascertain the quality of mentoring. This is a limitation of self-reported data. It would seem true that mentors were not mentoring as effectively as they were claiming given the challenges.

Generally, mentors indicated and supported that it was the prerogative of the head / principal to select a mentor for a student teacher. Mentors, however, indicated that they needed to be consulted rather than having student teachers pushed onto them. Where a mentor does not have the latitude to make a choice, this may impact negatively on delivery of the service. One may view this as having contributed to the said limited commitment and effectiveness. The commonsense notion that teacher trainees must be attached to practitioners viewed as experienced, effective and efficient model teachers needs further exploration. A situation where the triad (head, mentor, mentee) participate in mentor selection would probably help.

Mentors indicated the need for mentor training and liaison with the University. This confirmed earlier findings (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2005) who found that training was considered critical for equipping mentors with the necessary skills to support and guide student teachers. Training makes mentors more capable of handling complex situations when supervising students. They become more open minded, flexible and more democratic when guiding students under them (McIntyre et al. 1994; Maynard and Furlong 1995). Mentor training gives mentors new roles that enable them to carry out supervision with a new lease of life and new esteem (Stephens 1998; David and Roger 2002).

According to mentors, cordial relations existed between them and the student teachers and this confirms findings by Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2005). Cordial relations are critical for the success of any mentoring as the essence of mentoring is in the one-to-one relationship between mentor and mentee. Ideally, the caring relationship in mentoring may be likened to the caring relationship of parent and child, whose absence may adversely affect the mentoring effectiveness.

The success of this ZOU model is enshrined in the interdependent relationship between mentor and student teacher. One cannot rule out the inherent power differentials
in mentoring relationships where one is the wiser (mentor) and the other is the protégé (mentee). Other dimensions also come into play in this relationship; the issues of gender, the collegial dimension and the academic/professional dimension. Thus, while mentors indicated cordial relations, with all these dimensions, an open, objective and critical dialogue confined not only to specific classroom practices and the mechanical teaching skills may not be possible. Key in this aspect is the creation of a favorable, conducive working relationship and atmosphere where trainee needs, concerns and difficulties are clearly, objectively discussed and actioned.

Professional development requires that the trainee gets an appropriate environment and opportunity to openly discuss their personal histories and understandings of teaching/learning (Brooks and Sikes 1997) without pressure from both sides (trainee and mentor) which often exists to confine dialogue to the technical level of teaching (Talvitie et al. 2000). An effective mentor should be able to create an open and trusting working relationship with mentee through active listening skills and provision of relevant feedback in an appropriate manner.

The mentors in this study concurred with their mentees (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2005) that there was collaborative dialogue, scheming, planning, teaching and problem solving. Dialogue must be collaborative to focus on the student teacher’s images of teaching and reconstructing those images as the complex nature of teaching brings inconsistencies and contradictions to light (McIntyre, Hagger and Burn 1994). In the absence of mentor support and provision of opportunities for exploration of dilemmas through trial and error, when the trainee begins to question existing practices in the classroom, he/she may abandon the search and consequently reflection is retarded.

Mentors in this study received literature on mentoring from the university. However, teachers in schools more often than not are constrained than enabled by their organizational circumstances. Time being the biggest challenge in these circumstances, one wonders whether this literature was studied. Where an attempt to study was made, interpretation was likely to vary. The likelihood is that mentors would take the student teachers through the ‘sink’ and ‘swim’ that they would have gone through. ZOU assumed that mentors would study the literature, engage with it, be informed by it and consequently change their practice. In other words, according to ZOU reading literature leads to learning. Researchers are tempted to believe that this assumption was not accurate.

Consultation and liaison promote sharing of ideas and experiences and consequently more sound advice given to the students by both mentors and lecturers (Hoy, Bayne-Jardine and Wood 2000; Feimen-Nemser 1999). In the absence of meetings between lecturers and mentors, or lecturers, mentors and student teachers, persistent weaknesses noted in the student teachers’ performance remain un-discussed and this affects the quality of student supervision. What is needed is to provide a foundation for a forum and dialogue with university lecturers, mentors and student teachers through meetings, mentor education workshops and well-organised teaching practice supervision programmes to allow all stakeholders to come face-to-face with each other.
Mentor perceptions documented in this study indicate mentor benefits through professional growth. This confirms mentees’s perceptions (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2005) that their mentors benefited through collaboration, guiding and supervising them. Mentoring provides the mentor with an avenue for growth and positive reflection on their practice as well as creativity in the evaluative process. Stephens (1998) and Zehava and Salman (2007) concur that mentors gain opportunities to interact with colleagues in mentoring, participate in student teachers’ success and progress, and, in the process reflect on their own teaching.

The entire mentoring process enhances the mentors’ self-esteem and job satisfaction. Further, practically mentors receive the gratitude of their mentees and other peers, but not many receive any formal tangible gains. Theoretically, development of new and more effective classroom and collegial practices by teachers in a mentoring relationship can diffuse throughout their school and beyond. That is, through mentoring activities, mentor and mentee gain understandings and concrete skills which benefit their students and can be shared with colleagues. David and Roger (2002) describe this as enhancing the status of the organisation and among peers which gives job satisfaction. Mentors can therefore derive lots of satisfaction from their role emanating from feelings of achievement from participating in the professional formation of others and at the same time updating of their skills.

There was concurrence of mentors and student teachers (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2005) on the need for incentives to motivate mentors and boost their morale to enhance mentoring effectiveness and commitment. Such incentives as; time for training, meeting with mentee for observation and debriefing, increased non-contact time, some type of recognition, appreciation certificates, monetary allowances, regular communication, having faith and trust in mentor grading and letters of appreciation could be considered. Given the harsh economic situation in the country, incentives would motivate and win these practitioners’ commitment.

Mentors in this study painted a very positive picture, indicating that everything was going on very well despite the challenges. However, bias cannot be ruled out as these mentors were well known to the researchers. One needs not lose sight of the inherent power relations between researcher and researched which may also have come into play. All these issues may have had some bearing on mentor responses. Another dimension worth considering may also be that the mentors’ responses were influenced by a desire to develop some relationship with ZOU, which relationship they hoped would be enriching.

CONCLUSIONS

The ZOU model for teacher development may be effective for professionally developing the professionally unqualified practising teachers in schools. There is, however, need for more involvement by the university. ZOU should embark on continuous mentor training inclusive of mentor meetings to provide mentors a forum to learn and share
from each other rather than getting it all the time from the university. The university needs to continually ask what skills mentors require to mentor students effectively. There is need for close collaboration and liaison with host schools, giving them adequate information and guidance regarding departmental expectations of mentoring. Such meetings would ensure that needs, concerns and challenges are raised, discussed and addressed.

The university should give mentors some form of incentives to motivate them thereby promoting commitment and effectiveness. ZOU needs to continually review the nature of those incentives to ensure that they attract and win the commitment and effectiveness of these experienced teachers to mentor students.

With regard to time, ZOU lecturers should spend more time in schools and the university needs to rethink the role of school based mentors. One way of increasing effectiveness of action is to adjust roles of lecturers and mentors. University lecturers should spend more time in schools to help mentors to become teacher educators; this enhances ownership of and responsibility in this teacher development programme. Lecturers will also provide support and guidance for teacher trainees, assisting them in integrating theoretical and research-based ideas from university modules and contact sessions into their teaching. In this way, the university lecturers can assume a more far-reaching role as prompts for change taking their expertise to impact on the change process and enhancing schools in overcoming supervisory challenges they may be grappling with.

Another critical issue is to do with assessment. Graded supervision needs serious debate within the university and the department as this is a quality issue in view of the mentor/mentee caring relationship.

While the school-based model may be ideal for ZOU, this article has shown that it can be made more effective with more involvement by the university, offering mentors incentives, embarking on on-going mentor training and reconsidering the issue of graded supervision.

REFERENCES


