

# Investigating the Extent to Which Mentor Selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 Teaching Practice Enhances Continuous Improvement of Student Teachers' Teaching Skills and Competences

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**ABSTRACT** The study sought to establish the experiences and perceptions of mentors and student teachers on the extent to which mentor selection enhanced continuous improvement in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice. The mixed methods design was used to collect data in two phases. The first phase used questionnaires to collect quantitative data while the second phase collected qualitative data through interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis. The research findings revealed that mentor selection was the responsibility of the school head and that most student teachers were mentored by qualified and experienced classroom practitioners with high teaching experience and expertise, although in some isolated instances student teachers were either being mentored by junior teachers and temporary teachers or were on their own without mentors. The study recommended that teacher education institutions should support school heads through workshops on mentor selection and ensure that qualified experienced mentors are selected to mentor students.

## INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe, all primary teacher education institutions follow the 2-5-2 teacher education model in which student teachers spend the initial two terms (thirty-two weeks) at college learning theory of education, applied education and research methods and then proceed on teaching practice for five terms (eighty weeks) and finally return to college for revision and examinations for two terms (thirty-two weeks) hence is referred to as the 2-5-2 model. Under Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teacher education model, student teachers spend most of their course duration time (55%) on teaching practice in host schools under the tutelage, guidance and supervision of experienced classroom practitioners who mentor them. According to Mapolisa and Tshabalala

(2014), lecturers and other academic members value teaching practice as the bridge between theory and practice. Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2014) cite Kram (2005) who further contends that the process of mentoring is such an indispensable phenomenon in teacher training hence it is important for senior teachers selected to mentor the trainee teachers to be good role models and competent in their conduct and work ethics. The importance attached to school based mentoring of student teachers in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 model where students spend most of their course duration time (55%) or one year and eight months continuously attached to their mentors in host on teaching practice cannot be understated. The role of mentors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice is very crucial; hence the significance of establishing the way mentors are selected cannot be over emphasized.

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## Defining Mentoring

Mentoring is defined by Anderson in Kerry and Mayes (1995: 29) and Musingafi and Mafumbate (2014) as a nurturing process in which a

more skilled or more experienced person serving as a role model teaches, guides, counsels and supports a less skilled or less experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter's professional development. The issue of experience is also foregrounded by Odina (2008: 4) who writes that, "Mentoring is a support given by one, (usually more experienced) person – *mentor* for the growth and learning of another – *mentee*..." and Ngara and Ngwarai (2012), who observed mentoring as a developmental relationship in which a more experienced or a more knowledgeable person is paired with a less experienced or knowledgeable person to help him or her to develop professional expertise. This, therefore, implies that mentors are expected to be selected from among competent, qualified experienced senior teachers of high expertise and ability to guide and assist student teachers towards professional growth (Rwodzi et al. 2011 in Maphosa and Ndamba 2012; Ngara and Ngwarai 2012). Mentors, therefore, have a multi-faceted role and a great deal of responsibility for nurturing student teachers gradually to become effective and efficient teachers, hence they ought to possess the requisite qualities. The importance of establishing the criteria of mentor selection against revelations by Mhandu and Mashava (2001), who revealed that lecturer visits to student teachers in Zimbabwe's teaching practice is erratic and mentors are not trained cannot be over emphasized.

### **Mentor Selection**

Mentor selection plays a key role in students' teaching practice as the attributes of individual mentors have a bearing in assuring the quality of the prospective teachers. Mentors in today's teaching practice are the means by which teacher education institutions achieve their goals and mission of producing effective and efficient prospective teachers to address society's literacy, numeracy, and socio-economic needs. A crop of poor mentors will result in poor prospective teachers since the student teachers spend most of their course time in schools under the tutelage of mentors. Dreyer (1998) contend that the quality of the next generation of teachers depends on the quality of mentorship current student teachers receive, making the mentor selection process very vital. Musingafi and Mafumbate (2014) cite Alger and Kopcha 2009 and Killian

and Wilkins 2009 who revealed that studies have supported the need to provide careful mentor selection procedures hence the role of mentor selection in assuring quality teaching practice in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice cannot be over emphasized.

In today's teacher education, the quality of teaching practice is assured by placing greater responsibility and emphasis of student teacher supervision and development in the hands of mentors who do most of the supervision, mentoring and assessment of student teachers as they are with the student teachers for most of their teaching practice period (Lourdusamy 2005). In Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teacher education model, student teachers spend most of their course time (55%) on teaching practice in host schools, attached to experienced classroom practitioners, with emphasis on-the-job training. The time student teachers in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 model spend on teaching practice is close to that of other countries such as Hungary, Finland, Britain, Canada, United States of America, Australia and New Zealand where student teachers spend more than 66% of their course duration in schools (Forlin and Gibson 1997; Sorensen 2004). In this partnership model, student teachers rely more on their mentors to supervise, nurture, coach, guide and help them translate the theory that they would have learned in the teacher education program into practice and develop classroom management skills while lecturers make limited lesson observations visits per student teacher during teaching practice (Musingafi and Mafumbate 2014). Lourdusamy (2005) argued that under the partnership model, where students spend most of their course duration with mentors in schools, lecturers act as 'quality controllers' and help mainly to validate the grade suggested by the school. In this kind of partnership association between schools and teacher education institutions, student teachers are expected to benefit from the daily contact, guidance, close monitoring and supervision on practical teaching practice issues by the experienced classroom teachers hence the quality of mentors becomes the mainstay of the teaching practice program.

According to Chakanyuka (2006) in Britain, the HMI (1991) report acknowledged the critical role schools play in teacher education while in Zimbabwe the realization came about in early 1995, when all teacher education institutions were

instructed to attach student teachers to school-based mentors (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2005). In all instances teacher training shifted from being the sole responsibility of teacher education institutions to that of partnership between schools and teacher education institutions in which schools have become the key site for student teachers' teaching practice activities. This partnership model places greater responsibility of integrating theory of education with real practical teaching in the hands of skilled and experienced classroom practitioners who assume the role of school based teacher educators and do most of the supervision, mentoring and assessment of student teachers they are with for most of their teaching practice (Dreyer 1998; Lourdasamy 2005). In the partnership arrangement, mentors play a pivotal role in supervising, assessing and nurturing the student teachers on teaching practice that are attached to them hence the process of selecting mentors has a direct bearing on the quality of prospective teachers and cannot be overlooked.

The selection of mentors is a great challenge for the school heads in Zimbabwe and elsewhere. Not all senior teachers, no matter how experienced and how good they are at their own work, would automatically be suitable candidates for the mentoring and initiation of student teachers (Dreyer 1998; Nyaumwe 2001; Maphosa and Ndamba 2012). This role is clearly for an excellent teacher who can teach an adult learner, inspire confidence and trust and be accountable for his/her mentoring actions (Ngara and Ngwarai 2012). Chakanyuka (2006) and Maphosa and Ndamba (2012) contend that in many mentoring programs, the responsibility of selecting mentors, in teaching practice, has been left to heads of schools who know their teachers best. Heads know which teachers are experienced, qualified and expert classroom practitioners and it is for this reason that institutions rely on school heads to select mentors (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2005). Contrary to the above belief that school heads know which teachers are capable of mentoring, a study by Maphosa and Ndamba (2012) indicated that some schools have a 'rotational policy' for mentoring so that all teachers eventually have a chance to mentor students on teaching practice regardless of whether they have the capability to mentor or not.

According to Tomlinson (1995), a mentor should be an experienced senior teacher who

takes on an agreed role, displays capability in classroom teaching, demonstrates superior achievement, uses a variety of teaching techniques or skills and also sympathizes and empathizes with colleagues. Dreyer (1998) and Ngara and Ngwarai (2012) identify the defining characteristics or attributes of effective mentors to be knowledgeable, interested, dedicated, exemplary, experienced, enthusiastic, receptive, informed, eloquent, reliable, thorough, open-minded, sensitive, able to guide, wisdom and personal involvement. It is then clear from these guidelines that even the experienced senior teachers, will need training to become effective mentors as most of them would lack some of the characteristics and/or the knowledge of teaching adults.

Fish (1995) and Hanover Research (2014) indicated that school heads should use clearly defined and understood criteria for selecting mentors to reduce friction amongst teachers and ensure support and participation in the mentoring program by all the teachers, such as selecting senior teachers with requisite qualities, qualifications, experience and expertise to take up the mentoring responsibilities. According to Hanover Research (2014), informal selection of mentors runs the risk of being seen as favoritism and impairing the ability of the mentors to build rapport with their colleagues. Mhandu and Mashava (2001) and Maphosa and Ndamba (2012) in their study in Zimbabwe observed that school heads did not appoint teachers to be mentors using professional criteria such as competence and ability to guide and assist student teachers. Tomlinson (1995) suggested that teachers close to student teachers in age may be better placed to understand the student teachers and be flexible enough to accommodate new ideas and skills as opposed to long serving teachers who may find it difficult to be flexible and appreciate new ideas student teachers bring with them from teacher education institutions. In the interest of concentrating on student teacher development and assuring quality teaching practice, selected mentors should not hold positions of responsibility in the school as that would interfere with their mentoring responsibilities (Maphosa and Ndamba 2012). Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2005) and Maphosa and Ndamba (2012) advise that school heads should not appoint as mentors those practicing teachers who are already overloaded with other responsibilities as this would not allow these

mentors adequate time to perform quality mentoring duties and this excludes the school heads and heads of departments from mentoring student teachers.

In Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice, where student teachers spend most of their course time (55%) attached to experienced classroom practitioners, mentors ought to be selected from class teachers with high expertise, experience and qualities, yet indications from studies by Nyaumwe (2001) and Maphosa and Ndamba (2012) are that some heads selected mentors for wrong reasons such as friendship, teachers with additional responsibilities such as heads of department or deputy heads and even school heads themselves mentored some students as it is assumed that mentors with student teachers do lighter work than others. Such findings suggest that mentors with additional responsibilities off loaded their teaching responsibilities over to student teachers for them to focus on the additional administrative duties. Fish (1995) argued that administrative responsibilities and mentoring are incompatible hence one of the two is likely to suffer. Mentors selected for such wrong reasons may lack the requisite qualities, qualifications, time, experience and expertise and de-motivate other experienced teachers from participating in the mentoring program. Maphosa and Ndamba (2012) cite Nyawumwe (2001) and Ndamba et al. (2008) who argued that student teachers attached to mentors with additional responsibilities were unlikely to benefit much since the mentor would be frequently away attending to other school duties which have nothing to do with classroom business. Mentor selection plays a key role in students' teaching practice as the attributes of individual mentors have a bearing in assuring the quality of the prospective teachers. It is therefore the concern of this research study to establish the extent to which mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice enhances continuous improvement of the students' teaching skills and competences resulting in the production of quality prospective teachers.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this study was to examine the extent to which mentor selection in Zimbabwe 2-5-2 teaching practice enhances continuous improvement of student teachers' teaching skills and competences. The specific objectives of the study were to;

- ♦ To investigate the extent to which mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice enhances continuous improvement of student teachers' teaching skills and competences.
- ♦ To determine the implications of mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice.
- ♦ Offer recommendations for improved mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The mixed methods design was preferred for this study because it enabled the researchers to use both qualitative (case study) and quantitative (survey) approaches in a complementary manner and provided some interaction rather than a dichotomy between these approaches (Gelo et al. 2008). The use of Mixed Methods enabled the researchers an opportunity of checking or explaining findings from one method against findings from another hence provided a more complete analysis of the research problem through comparing data produced by the different methods. The mixed methods research design enabled the researchers to overcome the limitations of purely quantitative or qualitative approaches by maximizing the advantages and minimizing the disadvantages connected to the single application of one of the two approaches (Creswell 2007; Gelo et al. 2008; Maree 2007).

The mixed methods design enabled the researchers to triangulate the quantitative and qualitative methods and data sources as well as provided a convergence and corroboration of results from the different methods and designs in studying the same phenomenon (Creswell 2007; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). The use of mixed methods in this study produced different kinds of data on the same phenomenon that allowed the researchers to see and understand the problem under study in a more rounded and complete fashion than would be the case had the data been drawn from just one method. Through mixed methods the researchers were able to collect data in two separate phases. The first phase used survey questionnaires to collect quantitative data while the second phase used interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis to collect qualitative data.

### Population and Sampling

The target population comprised all three teaching practice lecturers, all final year student teachers and their mentors at each of the ten (10) national primary-teacher education institutions in Zimbabwe that responded. The target population was too large for all members to participate hence the researchers drew a sample of the final year students and that of their mentors from the ten primary teacher education institutions that participated.

Purposive sampling procedure was used to select 28 teaching practice lecturers from the ten national primary teacher education institutions that responded. Due to the geographical spread of host schools in which student teachers were deployed and the prohibitive travelling cost involved, the researchers used convenience sampling to select host schools from which 100 mentors and 100 student teachers who had previously responded to survey questionnaires in the first phase of this study were drawn. Convenience sampling also enabled the researchers to sample the college of employment for one co-researcher as the case to study and to select host schools from which three mentors and three groups of six student teachers were identified for face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions respectively. The survey questionnaires generated 200 general overview responses, while interviews and focus group discussions generated in-depth understanding of the extent to which the provision of mentor support services in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice enhances continuous improvement of student teachers' teaching skills and competences.

### Data Collection Procedure

The researchers used the survey questionnaires to collect quantitative data in the first phase of the study. The survey questionnaires provided a general overview of perceptions and experiences held by mentors and student teachers on the extent to which mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice promoted continuous improvement of student teachers' teaching skills and competences and that of the teaching practice program. The survey questionnaires collected quantitative data in the first phase and comprised of both open-ended and closed-ended questions that were administered

to final year students on teaching practice, their mentors and teaching practice lecturers. Qualitative data was collected in the second phase through semi-structured interview schedules that comprised a few structured questions that were followed by unstructured open-ended questions which enabled the researchers to collect descriptive data from the information rich respondents. The interview schedule enabled the researchers to document real events, record verbatim what people said and observe the behaviour of participants who were immersed in the natural setting of everyday life in which the study was framed (Maree 2007; Neuman 1997). The semi-structured interview schedule enabled the researchers to recognize several nuances of attitude and behaviour that could have escaped the researchers had they used other methods. The use of focus group discussions enabled the researchers to acquire in-depth understanding of student teachers' experiences and perceptions on mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice. The researchers also analyzed available teaching practice documents which reflected the practice of mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis enabled the researchers to systematically search, organize, synthesize, present and transform data from questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis into manageable units and increased the researcher's understanding of the phenomena under study (Borgden and Biklen 1992; Leedy 1993). In the first phase, the quantitative numerical data collected through survey questionnaires was summarized through a table of frequency distributions and percentages (Neuman 1997). The table of frequency distributions was manipulated to reveal patterns, relationships and trends of student teachers' experiences and perceptions (Creswell 2007; Maree 2007) on the mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice. The qualitative data was organized on the basis of themes, categories, general ideas, concepts and similar features that related to the main research question. In analyzing qualitative data, the researchers summarised what had been observed and heard in terms of common words, phrases, themes or patterns that aided the understanding and interpretation of that which was

emerging (Maree 2007). This study transcribed verbatim the audio taped interviews and the results were cross-checked with the participants before their analysis. After the quantitative and qualitative data had been analysed and interpreted separately, inferences from the separate findings were made and integrated for interpretation. The qualitative data served to confirm the results of the quantitative data in instances where all the responses pointed to similar conclusions. In instances where responses revealed incongruities, the qualitative data did not confirm the quantitative data.

## RESULTS

Mentors can be viewed as the agents of transformation in the training of student teachers as they help student teachers to relate the theory they learnt at college and the practical teaching in the real classroom with real learners on daily basis. The key role played by mentors in the training of student teachers in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice makes mentor selection important for successful teaching practice hence the importance of this study. The results of this study are presented under the following sub-headings; mentor selection as the head's responsibility, mentor selection as based on teacher expertise, mentor selection as based on age closeness between mentors and student teachers, mentors as selected from teachers with additional responsibilities and mentors as selected from weak teachers.

### Mentor Selection is the Head's Responsibility

The study sought to establish whether mentor selection was the responsibility of the school

head. Data in Table 1 items 1.1 and 1.2 show that the majority of the sampled mentors (62%) and student teachers (85%) indicated that school heads were responsible for selecting the ideal teachers to mentor students while 33% mentors and 9% students differed and 5% mentors and 6% students were not sure. The 33% disagreement by mentors suggested that there were other means of selecting mentors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice other than by the school heads. The data from the majority of both mentors and student teachers conclusively reveal that mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice was the responsibility of school heads as they knew their teachers best.

### Mentor Selection is Based on Teacher Expertise

The study sought to establish whether mentor selection was based on the individual teacher's expertise. Data in Table 1 items 2.1 and 2.2 show that sampled mentors (58%) and student teachers (72%) indicated that mentor selection was based on the individual classroom teacher's expertise while (39%) mentors and (25%) student teachers disagreed and (3%) mentors and students were not sure. The 39% mentors and 25% student teachers who disagreed, suggested that there could be other means of mentor selection other than teacher expertise being used in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice. In the main, data from the majority of both mentors and student teachers however indicate that mentor selection was based on teacher expertise though there is evidence that there could be other criteria of mentor selection being used.

**Table1: Responses from mentors and student teachers on mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 practicum**

| <i>Item</i>   | <i>Agree</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>Dis-</i><br><i>agree</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>Not</i><br><i>sure</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>Total</i> | <i>%</i> |
|---|--------------|----------|-----------------------------|----------|---------------------------|----------|--------------|----------|
| 1.1. The head's responsibility-mentors                          | 62           | 62       | 33                          | 33       | 5                         | 5        | 100          | 100      |
| 1.2. The head's responsibility-students                         | 85           | 85       | 9                           | 9        | 6                         | 6        | 100          | 100      |
| 2.1. From expert teachers-mentors                               | 58           | 58       | 39                          | 39       | 3                         | 3        | 100          | 100      |
| 2.2. From expert teachers-students                              | 72           | 72       | 25                          | 25       | 3                         | 3        | 100          | 100      |
| 3.1. On age closeness-mentors                                   | 4            | 4        | 92                          | 92       | 4                         | 4        | 100          | 100      |
| 3.2. On age closeness-students                                  | 19           | 19       | 76                          | 76       | 5                         | 5        | 100          | 100      |
| 4.1. From teachers with extra responsibilities-mentors          | 17           | 17       | 77                          | 77       | 6                         | 6        | 100          | 100      |
| 4.2. From teachers with extra responsibilities-student teachers | 26           | 26       | 66                          | 66       | 8                         | 8        | 100          | 100      |
| 5.1. From weak teachers-mentors                                 | 7            | 7        | 88                          | 88       | 5                         | 5        | 100          | 100      |
| 5.2. From weak teachers-students                                | 1            | 1        | 95                          | 95       | 4                         | 4        | 100          | 100      |

### **Mentor Selection is Based on Age Closeness Between Mentors and Mentees**

The study also sought to establish whether mentor selection was based on closeness in age between the mentor and student teacher to facilitate flexibility and acceptance of new ideas students brought from teacher education institutions. Data reflected in Table 1, items 3.1 and 3.2 show that the majority of the sampled mentors (92%) and student teachers (76%) indicated that the closeness in age between mentors and student teachers was not the criteria used to select mentors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice. The data conclusively show that the age closeness between mentors and student teachers is not a criterion of mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice.

### **Mentors are Selected From Teachers with Additional Responsibilities**

The study further sought to establish whether mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice was from among teachers with additional responsibilities such as school heads, deputy heads and heads of departments. Data in Table 1 items 4.1 and 4.2 show that the majority of the sampled mentors (77%) and student teachers (66%) indicated that mentors were not specifically selected from among teachers with additional responsibilities. An interview with one mentor revealed that some students were attached to the head or deputy head in order to alleviate their teaching loads. However, the 17% mentors and 26% student teachers who agreed suggest that there could be instances where some mentors are selected from teachers with additional responsibilities. The data from open ended questionnaire responses also showed that mentors were not mainly selected from classroom teachers with additional responsibilities.

### **Mentors are Selected from Weak Teachers**

The study also sought to establish whether mentors were selected from among weak teachers with the hope that learners would benefit from additional assistance from student teachers. The majority of the sampled mentors (88%) and student teachers (95%) reflected in Table 1 items 5.1 and 5.2 conclusively reveal that mentors were not selected from among weak teachers

in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice. The data showed that the mentor selection process sought to assure quality teaching practice as mentors were not selected from among weak teachers in an effort to benefit the learners.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Mentor Selection is the Head's Responsibility**

Analysis of the data shows that mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice is the school heads' responsibility as they know their teachers best. The findings of this study concur with those of Chakanyuka (2006), Maphosa and Ndamba (2012) and Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2005) who contend that in many mentoring programs, the responsibility of selecting mentors has been left to heads of schools who know which teachers are experienced, qualified and expert classroom practitioners hence it is for this reason that institutions rely on school heads to select mentors. In the same vein, in a study by Maphosa and Ndamba (2012) 81% of the mentors on being asked how they had become mentors indicated that they were simply asked by the school head to be mentors. Fish (1995) seems to be in support of the idea of school heads selecting mentors, and concurs with Hanover Research (2014), in that school heads should use clearly understood criteria of selecting mentors to reduce friction amongst teachers and ensure support and participation in the mentoring program by all the teachers. Maphosa and Ndamba (2012: 79) however seem to differ and argue that there is "no guarantee that the mentors would be committed and give of their best if the school head used his or her authority to pick on teachers who were not willing to be mentors".

Interviews with mentors revealed that some school heads used wrong reasons in selecting mentors such as friendship, classroom practitioners with additional responsibilities and weak teachers hoping that student teachers will provide better quality teaching than the weak class teachers. The findings of this study concur with Nyawumwe (2001), Ndamba et al. (2008), Maphosa and Ndamba (2012) and Hanover Research (2014) in that, the informal selection of mentors runs the risk of being seen as favoritism and does not enhance continuous improvement of student teachers' teaching skills and competences in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice.

tice and does not resonate well with global practices in mentoring. How then can continuous improvement in teaching practice be assured if students are mentored by inexperienced junior teachers and by unqualified temporary teachers who are not accredited with teaching qualifications? Under such circumstances it is difficult to ensure the production of quality prospective teachers. While it can be argued that the school heads know their teachers best and, therefore, know who can best serve the role of mentoring student teachers the teacher education institutions cannot afford to totally neglect the key aspect of mentor selection during training of their students as they are the custodians of the teaching standards of student teachers (Dreyer 1998). Hence the provision of supporting guidelines to school heads in mentor selection to ensure continuous improvement of students' teaching practice cannot be over emphasized.

#### **Mentor Selection is Based on Teacher Experience and Expertise**

The study revealed that mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice was mainly based on classroom teachers' expertise, experience and competence. An interview with one mentor revealed that at their school mentor selection was on the basis of competence, experience and expertise from among qualified teachers who were capable of mentoring student teachers and did not need close monitoring to ensure that the student teachers acquired valuable teaching experiences. The findings of the research concur with the mentor attributes identified by Tomlinson's (1995), Fish (1995), Dreyer (1998), Ngara and Ngwarai (2012) and Hanover Research (2014) in that school heads use clearly defined and understood criteria for selecting mentors from among effective and experienced senior teachers who are knowledgeable, exemplary, experienced, display capability in classroom teaching, demonstrate superior achievement, use a variety of teaching techniques or skills and are able to guide and observe. Such mentoring attributes are only attainable from among experienced, competent and expert senior teachers. The selection of mentors by school heads from among classroom practitioners' with the requisite competences, experience and enhances continuous improvement of student teachers' teaching skills and competences reso-

nates well with current global practice in mentoring student teachers.

While selection of mentors according to expertise is lauded, the study however also showed that there were some, though very few instances where mentors were selected from among junior teachers and temporary teachers and some student teachers operated without mentors. Such a calibre of mentors is likely to have a poor idea of the aims of practice teaching as was the case in a study by Mutemeri and Chetty (2011) in which all the focus groups interviewed indicated that most of their mentor teachers had poor understanding of the teaching practice aims. This inconsistency in mentor selection points to a need for close monitoring of strict adherence to the policy of student teacher attachment to experienced classroom practitioners and to provide school heads with mentor selection guidelines by the teacher education institutions to ensure that only qualified and experienced senior teachers are selected to mentor student teachers.

#### **Mentor Selection is Based on Age Closeness Between Mentors and Mentees**

The study also sought to establish whether mentor selection was based on closeness in age between the mentor and student teacher to facilitate flexibility and acceptance of new ideas student teachers brought from teacher education institutions. The data conclusively show that the age closeness is not used as criteria for mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice. The findings of the study, therefore, in a way disagrees with Tomlinson (1995) who suggested that classroom practitioners close to student teachers in age might make better mentors as they might be flexible enough to accommodate new ideas and skills student teachers brought from college as opposed to long serving teachers who might find it difficult to be flexible and appreciate the new ideas. In any case, teachers whose age is close to that of student teachers tend to be equally young and inexperienced in the teaching practice hence are not well equipped and ideal to mentor students

#### **Mentors are Selected from Teachers with Additional Responsibilities**

The study showed that the majority of mentors were not selected from among teachers with additional responsibilities such as school heads,



deputy heads and heads of departments. These findings of the study concur with Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2005) who advised that school heads should not appoint as mentors those practicing teachers who are already overloaded with other responsibilities as that would not allow such mentors adequate time to perform quality mentoring duties. On the issue of relief of additional responsibility, Maphosa and Ndamba (2012) found that, although, some mentors volunteered to school heads that they wanted to mentor student teachers for genuine reasons, it appears that others volunteered for wrong reasons, particularly when they thought that their work load would be reduced.

However, data from some interviews with mentors revealed instances where student teachers were attached to school heads or deputy heads in an effort to ease their teaching loads so that they could perform their administrative duties. This revelation concurs with findings by Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2005) and Nyaumwe (2001) that also showed the existence of student teachers under the mentorship of school heads and deputy heads in Zimbabwe's teacher education. A recent study by Maphalala (2013) discovered that the general practice in allocating mentors was that student teachers were placed under the care of the heads of departments as their mentors. The findings of the study concur with Maphosa and Ndamba (2012) in that attaching student teachers to teachers with additional responsibilities who spent most of their time away or in the office leaving the student alone to run the class do not guarantee mentor commitment and continuous improvement of students' teaching skills and competences in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice. Student teachers who are attached to mentors with additional responsibilities are not likely to benefit much as the mentors are frequently away on other school errands (Nyaumwe 2001; Ndamba et al. 2008).

The study further established that students under the mentorship of teachers with additional responsibilities such as school heads, deputy heads and heads of departments were not directly supervised on a regular basis in comparison with those students who were attached to classroom teachers without additional duties. The contact time between the student and mentor with additional responsibilities was rather limited or reduced as compared to that of those

students who were attached to the teachers without added responsibilities. In this regard, Maphosa and Ndamba (2012) argued that a student teacher attached to a mentor with other responsibilities is unlikely to benefit much since the mentor would frequently be away attending to other school duties which have nothing to do with the classroom business. The findings of the study further concur with those of Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2005) and Nyaumwe (2001) who observed that student teachers under the mentorship of teachers with additional responsibilities such as school heads, deputy heads and heads of departments were assessed rather than mentored. Such mentors were always away performing school administration duties leaving student teachers on their own and only surfaced when they wanted to make assessment reports. The study, therefore, shows that allocating student teachers to school heads who spent most of their time away on administration business left the students to run the class on their own hence did not benefit much from the attachment practice as they were not constantly supervised in comparison with other student teachers who were attached to classroom teachers without additional responsibilities.

### **Mentors are Selected from Weak Teachers**

With regards to the selection of weak teachers as mentors hoping that student teachers would offer additional assistance to the weak teachers and benefitting the learners, the research conclusively revealed that mentors were not deliberately selected from among weak teachers. The data therefore showed that the mentor selection process sought to assure quality teaching practice as most mentors were selected from among the experienced and competent teachers and not from among weak teachers. The study revealed overwhelming evidence that most student teachers were mentored by qualified and experienced classroom practitioners with high teaching expertise. The findings of the study concur with Dreyer (1998) who argued that the quality of the next generation of teachers depended on the quality of mentoring current student teachers received hence weak mentors are likely to produce weak prospective teachers.

While the majority of the respondents indicated that mentors were not selected among

weak teachers, as already shown, there still existed pockets of schools where some student teachers were under the mentorship of junior and temporary teachers while some were on their own and without mentors. How then can continuous improvement in teaching practice be assured if students are not mentored or are mentored by unqualified and inexperienced personnel who are not accredited with teaching qualifications? The existence of junior teachers, temporary teachers as mentors and student teachers operating without mentors confirmed findings by Mhandu and Mashava (2001) who observed that school heads in Zimbabwe assigned student teachers to mentors without using professional criteria in selecting mentors. In the same vein, a study by Mutemeri and Chetty (2012: 512) confirmed the existence of weak mentors when they cite a student teacher in their findings who lamented that, "*they [lecturers] need to evaluate the teachers that they are sending us to because some of the teachers we get sent to are horrible... we don't learn anything from them.*" This scenario calls for teacher education institutions to closely monitor and ensure strict adherence to the policy of attaching student teachers only to experienced and qualified classroom practitioners and providing school heads with mentor selection guidelines. Allowing student teachers to be mentored by junior and temporary teachers while some are left on their own without mentors does not resonate well with current global practices in mentoring hence is not recommended.

### Other Methods of Selecting Mentors

Interviews with mentors revealed that there were other strategies of selecting mentors that were used in schools. One mentor had this to say about mentor selection at their school;

*Students are randomly given mentors through preference of their class grade. If they want to go to the infant department or up to the junior grade they can just volunteer to go there but usually they are just randomly given mentors and may be sometimes it depends in the number of student teachers deployed but when they are very few it will be the deputy head, the teacher-in-charge and may be most of the senior teachers who get students in preference.*

The above strategy of random allocation of students to teacher mentors including the head

and deputy head does not indicate a systematic and deliberate process of mentor selection hence does not resonate well with current global practices in mentoring students in higher education. The 'random allocation' of student teachers to mentors is, therefore, not guided by teachers' experiences and expertise but simply responds to student teachers' class or grade preferences or choices hence inexperienced and incompetent teachers are likely to be allocated student teachers to mentor. The issue of random allocation of mentors is also confirmed in findings by Maphosa and Ndamba (2012) who cite a mentor who passed the following comments, "*The policy at this school is that we are asked to mentor student teachers in turns, so this time it was my turn.*" "*The student teacher that I got was assigned to Grade 4 and I happened to be class teacher of that grade.*" Such host school heads can benefit from the provision of mentor selection guidelines generated by teacher education institutions.

The other mentor interviewed indicated another method of mentor selection used at her school which she preferred to call 'fair distribution' in which mentors alternated between student teachers. Under the policy 'fair' policy of allocating student teachers to mentors classroom practitioners at this school are asked to mentor student teachers in turns. Under the 'fair' distribution student teachers are distributed among the effective and hard working classroom practitioners with the requisite mentoring qualities, expertise and experience. This strategy seeks to ensure that all hardworking classroom practitioners are given equal chances of mentoring student teachers and resonates well with current global mentoring practices.

### CONCLUSION

The study revealed that mentor selection in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teacher education system was the responsibility of school heads who mainly selected teachers with the requisite expertise and experience. The study however revealed instances where mentors are selected from among teachers with additional responsibilities, junior teachers, temporary teachers and at times student teachers were not allocated mentors. The study also revealed that the majority of mentors were selected from teachers without additional responsibilities and weak teachers were excluded

from mentoring students. The school heads were not provided with mentor selection guidelines and lacked close monitoring to ensure that students are attached to qualified and experienced teachers only. Failure to closely monitor the attachment system resulted in some students being attached to junior teachers, school heads and deputy heads and heads of departments with some working on their own without attachment.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Like any other study, a few limitations can be isolated for this study. The fact that one of the co-researchers worked at one of the institutions sampled might have resulted in bias as he might have been influenced by other issues not necessarily part of the study. The presence of a second researcher not from any of the sampled institutions however helped mitigate this challenge. Due to the geographical spread of host schools in which student teachers were deployed and the prohibitive travelling cost involved, the researchers used convenience sampling to select host schools and a sample of the whole geographic spread might have yielded different results. The fact that the findings tend to generally agree with findings from literature review however gives solace that the findings are generalizable

### RECOMMENDATIONS

This study focused on how mentors were selected in Zimbabwe primary teacher education institutions. It provides the following recommendations for consideration by teacher education institutions, as well as academics doing research in the field of teaching practice;

- ♦ The teacher education institutions ought to provide school heads with mentor selection guidelines and workshops to ensure that mentors are selected from among qualified, experience and expert teachers.
- ♦ School heads should not select mentors from among teachers who are overloaded with additional responsibilities as these extra duties are likely to interfere with their mentoring duties.
- ♦ School heads should not select mentors from junior teachers and temporary teachers. This caliber of teachers does not ensure continuous improvement of student teachers' teaching skills and competences.

- ♦ The teacher education institutions should provide, closely monitor and enforce the 'attachment' policy of student teachers to senior classroom practitioners with the requisite experience and expertise.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

This study identifies areas for further study. A further study on Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice system could focus on the extent to which external quality assessment of final year student teachers enhances continuous improvement and accountability of the teaching practice programme. An examination of the extent to which teacher education institutions prepare school principals and mentors on the teaching practice process could be another fertile ground for further research.

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