

## The Connection between a Mentor and a Mentee in Higher Education: A Case of a Primary Teachers' Training College in Zimbabwe

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**ABSTRACT** This study sought to establish the nature of mentoring relationships that exist between a mentor and a mentee during teacher training. The main focus of this study was on the connections that existed during the teaching practice (TP) mentoring of trainee teachers from one primary school teacher training college of education in Zimbabwe. The study examined the experiences and perceptions on Teaching Practice mentoring by student teachers and classroom mentors as key stakeholders in process. A purposive sample of 17 student teachers and 10 mentor teachers from the schools that the teachers' college collaborated with in training student teachers was selected. The study employed a qualitative case study research design in which one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions were used to collect data. Data were analysed for content and conclusions were drawn. The main conclusions of the study were that various kinds of relationships exist between mentor teachers and student teachers these are either positive or negative. The study concluded that good mentoring relationships benefit both the mentor and the mentee. The main recommendations are that mentor teachers and trainee teachers be made aware of the importance of mentoring relationship for a successful mentoring process. The roles of a mentor need to be clearly defined according to the job specification to avoid overloading mentees. Lastly the study concluded that mentor teachers should be equipped with skills of establishing mentoring relationships for positive results.

### INTRODUCTION

In higher education, teaching takes place in different ways. Universities and colleges of education are increasingly seeking alternative approaches to education that will supplement traditional methods of training teachers (Colvin and Ashman 2010). The concept of mentoring, was adopted by teacher training colleges and universities worldwide to enhance students' proficiency in the job they are training for. In training teachers mentoring has been used as a strategy that is meant to develop trainee teachers professionally (Raaen 2011; Majeric et al. 2010). This strategy is widely used for imparting teaching and learning skills to student teachers, particularly during their teaching practice period of their teacher training course. This is a situation where in the case of higher education, a qualified and experienced teacher creates and maintains a relationship with a trainee teacher in order to give information, support, and guide the student

teacher to the desired professional development (Hatfield 2015).

According to Mavhunga (2004), mentoring done during the teaching practice is a strategy that requires a concerted effort from both the training institution and the schools (Maphosa and Ndamba 2012). University or college lecturers and school mentors are, therefore, expected to play a collaborative and active role during the teaching practice period by providing and cultivating through TP mentoring the needed teaching and learning skills in student teachers. The proper acquisition of knowledge and skills in teaching lies on the connection that exists between the mentor and the mentee.

The concept of mentoring in the colleges of education in Zimbabwe came into existence in 1995 (Mavhunga 2004). This was during the time when Zimbabwe was going through the economic structural adjustment programme. Introducing the mentoring of student teachers meant that the student teacher was going to work under the supervision of a qualified teacher day-to-day who is expected to provide proper guidance and coaching towards professional development. The intentions aligned to the structural adjustment programme, were that the student

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teacher was no longer going to get a full class teacher's salary, but an allowance. This move greatly cushioned the government's pocket. However, there is still need to establish whether this great economic move really benefited the professional development of a teacher. The relationship that exists between a mentor and a mentee has a great bearing on the success of a mentoring process.

### **The Concept of Mentoring**

The concept of mentoring has been in existence for centuries. Mentoring originated from Homer's *The Odyssey*. A wise man named Mentor was given the task of educating Odysseus' son, Telemachus. When Odysseus went to fight in the Trojan War, he entrusted the care of his kingdom and his son to Mentor, a wise and trusted counselor. But Mentor was more than a teacher. He was all things to all people (Byington 2010). Successful mentoring starts from a good mentoring relationship.

Mentoring then became a common practice in the time of the guilds and trade apprenticeships when young people acquired technical skills from the patronage of more experienced and established professionals (McKimm et al. 2007). In education, Fischer and Van Andel (2002) indicate that mentoring is regarded as the task of an experienced teacher. The experienced teacher has to introduce a young teacher or a trainee teacher to the teaching profession, in order to help him or her learn how to teach, handle learners, relate with other staff members as well as relating to the community and fulfilling the educational requirements of the nation.

Mentoring is one strategy that has been used for teaching and learning purposes in a number of professions such as business, education and health. Abiddin (2006) states that mentoring has been generally "a popular approach in education and business." Shaw (1995: 73) adds that "mentoring is supporting a colleague professionally who is less experienced than the mentor." The University of Washington (2005: 5) states that:

*Mentoring is a relationship. At the same time, it is a journey mentors and mentees embark on together. Throughout this journey, two or more individuals help each other arrive at a destination called professional excellence.*

Thus, mentoring occurs when there is a good rapport and understanding between the mentor and mentee. According to D'Abate and Eddy (2008: 363), mentoring is a process that facilitates:

*... guidance and instruction about jobs, career planning, guidance, and orientation to industry, direction regarding interpersonal development, achievement related help and role modelling, and support, coaching, encouragement, feedback and guidance to enhance the learner's growth.*

Mentoring is portrayed as a process that is meant for the development of an individual. Through mentoring an individual is expected to attain a complete and a wholesome professional growth. In the modern days mentoring is a concept that is widely used in education. The mentoring relationship that exists between the mentor and the mentee determines the magnitude of knowledge and skills acquisition.

### **Develop a Mentoring Relationship**

Developing a relationship is a vital process for a successful TP mentoring process.

Relationships need to be built before the process of mentoring takes place. An environment of trust and mutuality must be established. It is important for the mentor and mentee to become acquainted with each other (Kutilek and Earnest 2001; Mincemoyer and Thomson 1998).

Begin each relationship with a getting-to-know-you session. The mentor should greet the mentee warmly and help the mentee identify his or her professional needs and goals. The mentor should learn about the mentee's educational background and experience, and share information about his or her own background and experience. The mentor can then continue to build upon the mentees strengths, needs, and goals throughout the mentoring period (Byington 2010). On the contrary Garringer and Lucovy (2007: 2) state that:

*While establishing a friendship may sound easy, it often is not. Adults and youth are separated by age and, in many cases, by background and culture. Even mentors with good instincts can stumble or be blocked by difficulties that arise from these differences.*

The mentor should take the lead in creating a mentoring relationship that is productive. However, Garringer and Lucovy express that creating a relationship with a mentee may not be an

easy task for the mentor because of age differences, background and culture. A well-constructed mentoring relationship is fruitful.

### ***Mentoring in Education***

Literature has revealed the concept of mentoring in education as the most valuable in producing well groomed professionals. Myers and Anderson (2012) reveal that we often think of mentoring in educational settings as a process that begins with new teachers in their first professional positions. In education mentoring actually starts at college or university level before student teachers complete their teacher education programmes.

Lunenburg and Ornstein (2004) also view mentoring as a strategy that has been employed mainly to assist a student teacher undergoing teacher training or a new teacher to acquire knowledge on the job, adapt and reconstruct their views as a teacher and their teaching methods. Mentoring is generally viewed as a teaching and learning strategy for beginning teachers and student teachers.

In teacher education mentoring is a process that is meant to encourage and assist in the development and growth of a mentee in teaching learners in the classroom. Madeline et al. (2005) view mentoring as a process meant to transmit knowledge, norms and values of an organisation to the mentee, thus, contributing to the mentee's career development and the development of the organisation.

In the education field, mentoring can also be viewed as the guidance in instruction delivery given to student teachers by trained teachers. Ndlovu (2006: 8) states that the process of mentoring includes "*guidance on scheming, planning, record keeping, class and classroom management as well as school management*" This involves classroom activities, co-curricular activities and disciplinary matters. There are certain standards expected of a mentor for a successful mentoring process. It is the way the mentor and the mentee relate that determines how much guidance is given and how much skills acquisition is accomplished (Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education 2014).

### ***The Expectations of a Good Mentoring Process***

It is anticipated in mentoring that mentors pull and push their mentees. Mentoring requires

strength in two different but corresponding behaviors. It is an expectation that mentors must lead by guiding interaction with their mentees. Mentors are expected to invest themselves in their mentees and uplift them to a stage where they are confident to let go. The anticipation is that mentors support their mentees. Mentors are expected to encourage their mentees to become their best by encouraging development in areas of expressed need in their job description.

A healthy mentoring practice is expected to be tailored around the needs of mainly the mentee and the mentor. Therefore, a one-size fits-all design might not be effective for proper mentoring practices. An understanding is that mentoring is not a completely spontaneous endeavor based on years of experience, mentors have collaborated and prepared guidelines for the many aspects of the mentoring relationship required (Pierce County Superior Court Local Rules 2015).

Mentees also have a role to play in the mentoring process. Garvey (2000: 20) reveals that mentees need to receive "*just-in-time learning from their mentors rather than just-in-case learning,*" meaning that they need to know what they need to learn, know and practice from the onset rather than later. Mentees also need to be given information and be allowed to ask questions and be directed to take appropriate actions.

It is an expectation that mentees are accepted. They need to be welcomed into communities and schools, valued and treated as colleagues. According to Wong and Premkumar (2007), individuals who have never played the role of mentor may assume that having subject expertise and experience would be adequate preparation for being a mentor. Wong (2005: 52) observed that student teachers learning depends on the effectiveness of the mentor "*the better the mentor is able to manage the classroom and deliver the instruction, the more the student teacher will learn.*" Mentor teachers tasked with mentoring student teachers on teaching practice should be trained on the needed skills in order to perform appropriately.

Reynolds and Cullance (1992) identified communicating honestly and openly with the employee being mentored as an expectation for good mentoring relationship. Good communication relationships encourage the mentee to be to be open and honest. It is the open and sincere lines of communication that help the mentoring process to be successful as it depicts the

strengths to be improved and the weaknesses to be corrected by both parties. Encouraging honest and open lines of communication in the mentoring process helps the mentee to ask for information and attain the desired knowledge. It also helps the mentor to know about the mentee's position in terms of professional development. Hence, successful mentoring relationships lean on the good characteristics of a mentor.

### *Characteristics of a Mentor*

A mentor is characterised by the roles he or she plays in a mentoring relationship. In the historical sense, a mentor is one who is a loyal friend, confidant, and an advisor. A mentor is a teacher, guide, coach, and role model. He or she is entrusted with the care and education of another and has knowledge or expertise to nurture another person of ability. A mentor is willing to give what he or she knows with no expectation of reciprocation or remuneration and also represents accomplishment, knowledge, skill, and virtue.

The most effective mentors offer support, challenge, patience, and enthusiasm while they guide others to new levels of achievement. They expose their mentees to new ideas, perspectives, and standards, and to the values and norms of society. Although mentors are more knowledgeable and experienced, they do not view themselves as superior to those whom they mentor.

With regards to education, Lunenburg and Ornstein (2004) view a good mentor as one who is knowledgeable, trustworthy, truthful, inspiring and reachable. Fulmer and Dembowski (2005) argue that critical mentor characteristics are honesty and the ability to establish a relationship based on trust in which a free exchange of thoughts and ideas are shared without fear of belittlement, embarrassment or damage to the relationship. Ngara and Ngwarai (2012) reveal that the traits of an effective mentor include the mentor being highly knowledgeable about teaching children, warm and also being trustworthy. It is amongst the attributes of good mentorship that the mentor should know the needs of his or her mentee. Abiddin (2006) argues that successful mentoring involves the responsibility or the ability to timely respond to what is needed by the mentee.

Upon being tasked with the duty of mentoring an individual, a mentor needs to establish a productive mentoring relationship. Creating a

positive mentoring relationship would make the work of a mentor and a mentee worthwhile.

### **The Theoretical Framework**

The present study is informed by the social learning theory. A theoretical framework consists of concepts and definitions of why the research problem under study exists (Labaree 2013). In this study, the theoretical framework is set to express an understanding of theories and concepts that are relevant to TP mentoring relationships in the training of student teachers. Byington (2010: 2) states that:

*The mentor's role is to guide, to give advice, and to support the mentee. A mentor can help a person (mentee) improve his or her abilities and skills through observation, assessment, modeling, and by providing guidance.*

The mentor is expected to model behaviour, give advice, support and provide guidance to the mentee. The social learning theory is suitable for this study because it underscores the significance of observing and modelling behaviours, attitudes and expressive responses of other people. Bandura (1977: 22) states that:

*Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behaviour is learned - from observing others - and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action.*

Observation and modelling become important elements of social learning, which is also called observational learning. Bandura (1977) reveals that observational learning involves processes like attention, retention, production and motivation. Attention involves carefully observing others while retention entails remembering what would have been observed. Production involves the ability to physically and intellectually repeat observed behaviour, while motivation involves the positive reinforcement of behaviour to be repeated. It has to be highlighted that observational learning is not all about mechanically repeating observed behaviour. The learner has to observe and reflect by ascertaining the importance of observed behaviours. For a good model to be produced there has to be a relationship between the mentor and the mentee.

In social learning, behaviour is learnt from the environment through the process of obser-

vation (McLeod 2011). The environment is the school where teaching practice takes place. In the social learning theory, Cherry (2014) identified three basic models of observational learning, namely, live model, which involves an actual individual demonstrating or acting out behaviour for someone to see and learn. Secondly, a verbal instructional model, which involves descriptions and explanations of behaviour for someone to understand why they behave the way they do and lastly, a symbolic model, which involves real or fictional characters displaying behaviours in books, films, television programmes, or online media.

Trainee teachers on teaching practice are expected to observe their mentors demonstrating lesson planning and delivery and then to imitate the good behaviours and even produce improved versions of the modelled behaviour. All this could happen successfully when there is a connection between the mentor and the mentee.

### Research Objectives of the Study

The research objectives of this study were to:

- establish the nature of teaching practice (TP) mentoring relationships that exist between a mentor and a mentee and
- highlight the experiences and perceptions of student teachers and classroom mentors, on teaching practice (TP) mentoring relationships.

### Research Questions of the Study

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- What is the nature of TP mentoring relationships between a mentor and a mentee?
- How do student teachers and mentor teachers view the mentoring relationships that exist between a mentor and a mentee?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was used to conduct the study. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe qualitative research as a set of interpretive materials that make the world visible. The qualitative approach focuses on natural settings and it involves an interpretive naturalistic approach to the world. The naturalistic approach

was important in this study in that the schools in which the researcher visited to conduct the research provided a natural setting of the TP mentoring strategy in use, so as to reveal the TP mentoring relationships that exist. The researcher was in a position to see the real picture of the relationships that exist between mentor teachers and their mentees to provide accurate information needed in the study.

Stangor (2011) views qualitative research as a descriptive research that focuses on observing and describing events as they occur. The goal of adopting a qualitative research approach in this study was to ensure that all of the richness of everyday behaviour was captured with the hope of discovering and understanding what exist between mentors and mentees in the chosen setting.

This study adopted a case study design. A case study is often recognised as one vital approach to qualitative research. The entity used could be as small as one individual or as large as an entire school or community (Litchman 2013). Rule and John (2011: 3) concur with this view by stating that, "*A case might be a person, a classroom, a programme, a process, a series of developments, an institution or even a country.*" What makes it a case is its singular and distinct nature that warrants it to be studied. The researcher, in this study chose the schools that the teachers' college under study places its student teachers to, for teaching practice. The case study also afforded the researcher an opportunity to fully investigate and understand perceptions and events that might have happened or are still happening in TP mentoring.

This study established the nature of mentoring relationships that exist in the practicing schools. Purposive sampling was used to select the respondents. According to Palys (2008: 697), "*Purposive sampling is virtually synonymous with qualitative research.*" The sample chosen, in this research was able to provide the data needed to enhance the research study. Responses came from 17 student teachers who were purposely chosen because they were under the supervision of a mentor teacher, and 10 mentor teachers from various schools working hand in hand with the teachers' college under study to train student teachers. A variety of respondents were selected in order to get different views on TP mentoring relationships. Information got from one-on-one interviews and focus group discus-

sions enabled the researcher to capture narrative views from participants (Gledhill et al. 2008).

## RESULTS

This study established the type of teaching practice mentoring relationships that exist between student teachers as mentees and qualified, practicing teachers as mentors in the schools that a primary teacher training college in Zimbabwe attaches its trainee teachers to. Through one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions, all participants who participated in this study were asked to explain the mentoring relationships that exist between student teachers and mentor teachers. Views from the different participants are presented below.

### Positive TP Mentoring Relationships

Efficacy in mentoring is attained through good mentoring relationships. Efforts have been made to ensure that every student teacher on teaching practice has a mentor. In a focus group discussion a mentor expressed that:

*We have a transparent working relationship which extends even to social, suppose my son is not well and I have to take him to the doctor she has to be aware that I may not be coming to work but gone to attend a social problem I have.*

Explaining the kind of relationship she has with her mentee, one mentor teacher stated that *"If she has problems at times I do counsel her like my daughter or my young sister."* This kind of relationship is likely to produce a holistic person who is able to tackle both profession and social issues hence become an integral part of a real community.

There are a number of factors that may influence the type of a mentoring relationship between a mentor and a mentee. Student teachers were asked to explain the kind of relationship that exists between them and their mentor teachers. All student teachers started by indicating that the relationship is good. One student teacher further explained that:

*As long as you work hard and always engage each other in a professional manner the relationship becomes excellent.*

The student teacher believes that as long as one is ready to get advice then he or she benefits from the process of mentoring. Maintaining

professional mentoring relations between a student teacher and a mentor teacher leads to a student teacher's improved performance in teaching practice. Contrary to the stated views one student teacher indicated that:

*As long as I do my mentor favours and do three quarters of the work on my own the relationship remains excellent.*

The student teacher reveals that they have created good and positive relations with their mentor teacher through doing most of the work in the classroom. This is a very imbalanced treatment which is really unfair on the part of the student teacher because the mentor teacher earns while having done a third of the work they are supposed to do, while the student teacher who does not earn does most of the work in class with other teaching practice assignments on top of that. In this case a positive mentoring relationship is created through undeserved and unjust means.

In a one-on-one interview a mentor described her relationship with her mentee as strong because the mentee is free to ask questions whenever she has problems. In essence there are positive relationships noted between a mentor and a mentee.

### Negative TP Mentoring Relationships

A positive mentoring relationship is vital for the professional development of a trainee teacher. However negative relationships also exists. The researcher enquired on the relationship that exists between the student teacher and their mentor teachers with regards to mentoring in the teaching and learning process. In a focus group discussion student teachers expressed that the relationship they have is not a healthy one for professional development as they get little assistance from their mentor teachers. The student teachers expressed that their mentor teachers tend to concentrate their teaching on the examinable subjects and neglect the non-examinable subjects. This becomes unfair to a student teacher who is learning to teach all subjects and even to the learners who have to learn all subjects in the curriculum.

Mentor teachers should possess skills that are central to effective mentoring. These skills should enable them to create relationships that work positively towards the professional development of a trainee teacher. Such skills include interpersonal communication skills, key knowledge possession and competence. The research-

er wanted to measure the extent at which these mentors display that competence. One mentor teacher in an interview expressed that she does not really understand the character of her mentee and declared that, *"I am trying by all means to accommodate him the way he is."* It is a characteristic of good mentoring that the mentor teacher should be in a position to contain some traits of a mentee for the sake of progress and skills acquisition. It is the duty of the mentor teacher to direct, guide and coach the trainee teacher. When asked to describe the kind of mentoring relationship the mentor teacher had with the student teacher she was mentoring, mentor number revealed that:

*We are still working on our relationship, when I try to advise him on some issues he refuses and says he got it from his lecturers (at college) and he refers me to consult his lecturers and I let it go like that for the sake of peace.*

Similar to the view of the mentor above, another mentor teacher expressed that, *"My mentee is hyperactive and I find it difficult to keep him in class all the time."*

The relationship reflected by the mentor teachers in the quotes above is not a healthy one. It indicates the need to bridge the gap between the college and the school. If this gap is not closed it may cause resentment on the part of the mentor hence mentoring loses its value.

The challenge revealed here is a one of personality. Some mentoring relationships become negative because of the character of a mentee. Mentor teachers find it difficult to work with some student teachers at times because of the student teacher's behaviour which strains their relationship and poses a negative impact in the mentoring process.

### **Benefits of a Good Mentoring Relationship**

The mentor teachers were asked to explain how they assist their mentees. One mentor teacher expressed that she assists her mentee in:

*Writing objectives, planning, scheming and delivering the lesson, the introduction, lesson development and the conclusion. We discuss about all this and even on how she handles the learners in class.*

Similarly another mentor teacher explained that:

*We first of all discuss the lesson she has to teach. We talk about the lesson introduction,*

*lesson development and the conclusion. After that she plans the lesson on her own, I then look at the plan, correct her, then she does the teaching and we discuss how the lesson was done.*

Further, one mentor teacher highlighted that: *If she is teaching, I am there to correct whenever she makes any mistake so that she perfects her teaching skills and I also correct her on chalk board handwriting and handwriting on charts I show her the correct way of doing it.*

A good TP mentoring relationship brings positive results to the professional growth of the trainee teacher. The trainee teacher is able to learn a number of activities that are vital to the teaching profession like planning, scheming and lesson delivery. During the interviews it was also revealed that it is not only the student teachers who benefit from a TP mentoring relationship. One mentor teacher expressed that:

*I benefit a lot from my mentee, because each time I learn from her and she learns from me. There are some things I did a long time ago while I was still at college, things are changing, so she tells me that this is not how it is currently done and that way I learn.*

Trainee teachers also assist mentor teachers by reviving their knowledge. Mentor teachers also benefit from learners in that they are able to learn from the trainee teachers the current trends of the teaching fraternity.

## **DISCUSSION**

According to The University of Washington (2005), Mentoring is a relationship. This is in line with the findings of the study that reveal that through a mentoring relationship a holistic person who is able to tackle both profession and social issues is produced.

Maintaining professional mentoring relations between a student teacher and a mentor teacher leads to a student teacher's improved performance in teaching practice. This view is in line with the view from Bandura (1977) that Learning is best occurs when one is informed by those who have knowledge and are experienced, not to rely solely on individual efforts.

The student teacher reveals that they have created good and positive relations with their mentor teacher through doing most of the work in the classroom. This is a very unfair treatment which is contrary to the view by Byington (2010)

states advocates that the role of a mentor is to guide, give advice, and to support the mentee and not to overwork the mentee.

The results of the study revealed that trainee teachers have created what they term “good and positive” relations with their mentor teacher through doing most of the work in the classroom. This is contrary to the views by Wong (2005) that a better mentor is one who is able to manage the classroom and deliver the instruction because the student teacher will learn more. A student who is left to do most of the work has limited time to observe and learn

The study revealed that some mentor teachers had a challenge with their mentees’ personality. This is in contrary to the expectations from (Kutilek and Earnest 2001; Mincemoyer and Thomson 1998) that reveal that an environment of trust and mutuality must be established to avoid challenges in mentoring relationships so that the mentor and the mentee become acquainted with each other.

The trainee teacher is able to learn a number of activities that are vital to the teaching profession like planning, scheming and lesson delivery. This is in line with the views from Ndlovu (2006) that good mentoring relationships help mentors to guide trainee teachers on scheming, planning, record keeping, class and classroom management as well as school management.

### CONCLUSION

The results of this study revealed that there are positive and negative mentoring relations that exist between a mentor and a mentee. The study concludes that good mentoring relationships are beneficiary to both the mentor and the mentee. Mentoring is a valuable process that impacts on both mentors and mentees. Literature reviewed reveals that the numerous roles of a mentor in a mentoring relationship depend on the context and the goals to be achieved but, are not clearly defined in terms of what actions occur during the process of mentoring.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The study posed a number of recommendations that could assist in maintaining and improving TP mentoring relationships. There were outlined as:

- a) Mentor teachers and trainee teachers need to be made aware of the importance of mentoring relationship for a successful mentoring process.
- b) The roles of a mentor need to be clearly defined according to the job specification to avoid overloading mentees.
- c) Mentor teachers should be equipped with skills of establishing mentoring relationships for positive results.

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