Student Teachers' Perspectives of Qualities of Good Mentor Teachers

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ABSTRACT Mentoring of students during teacher training is an important component in developing competent teachers. Mentor teachers assist students in bridging the gap between theory and practice and give students an insight into the real world of the teaching profession. Thus, to be adequately prepared to commence a career in teaching, the role of the mentor teacher cannot be over-emphasized. Good mentor teachers play a vital role in the training of competent future teachers. The purpose of this article was to obtain student teachers perspectives on the qualities of good mentor teachers. A structured questionnaire was used to obtain data on what student teachers perceived as qualities they would like their mentor teachers to possess. The findings include qualities of mentor teachers that students perceive as good (for example, knowledgeable, honest, respectful) as well as those that they would not like their mentors to possess (for example, controlling). Based on the findings, the study draws conclusions and makes certain recommendations that will assist in enhancing the mentoring experiences of student teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Student teachers are recipients of mentoring and it is important to consider their perceptions and perspectives in any mentoring program. Hobson (2002) points out that many writers and previous research has demonstrated that learners' (in this case student teachers) preconceptions and expectations are a major influence on their subsequent learning. He argues that if a student teacher perceives that there is a lack of support (from mentors), there would appear to be some problems relating to effective student teacher learning. In view of the foregoing, this study seeks to obtain student teachers perspectives on the qualities of good mentor teachers. Identifying these attributes that student teachers perceive as significant for mentors to possess, will be beneficial not only to the student teacher but also for the mentors, mentor trainers, schools that may be required to identify possible mentor teachers as well as teacher training institutions. It will assist in enhancing the mentoring that student teachers receive, thereby contributing in the training of effective and competent teachers.

Mentoring is a very complex process and difficult to define because it varies from one situation to another (Mc Kimm et al. 2003). It is also a challenging task and requires significant investments of time and energy (Rowley 1999). Mentoring is a developmental relationship that in-volves organizational members, of unequal status, or less frequently, peers (Bozionelos 2004: 25), that involves an intense long-term relationship between a senior, more experienced individual (the mentor) and a more junior, less experienced individual (the protégé) (Eby and Allen 1997: 456). The mentors provide young adults with career-enhancing functions, such as sponsorship, coaching, facilitating exposure and visibility, and offering challenging work or protection, all of which help the younger person to establish a role in the organization, learn the ropes, and prepare for advancement (Kram and Isabella 1985: 111). Mentoring is a developmental relationship, typically occurring between senior and junior individuals in organizations (McManus and Russell 1997: 145). The mentor is usually a senior, experienced employee who serves as a role model, provides support, direction, and feedback to the younger employee regarding career plans and interpersonal development, and increases the visibility of the protégé to decision-makers in the organization who may influence career opportunities (Noe 1988: 457 - 459). Traditionally, mentors are defined as individuals with advanced experience and knowledge who are committed to providing upward mobility and support to protégés' careers (Ragins 1997b: 484). A mentor may generally be a higher-ranking, influential individual in a work environment who has advanced experience and knowledge and is committed to providing up-

ward mobility and support to one's career (Ragins et al. 1996: 37-41). Scandura and Schriesheim (1994: 1589) have conceptualized supervisory mentoring as a transformational activity involving a mutual commitment by mentor and protégé to the latter's long-term development, as a personal, extra organizational investment in the protégé by the mentor, and as the changing of the protégé by the mentor, accomplished by the sharing of values, knowledge, experience, and so forth. Mentors are individuals with advanced experience and knowledge who are committed to providing upward support and mobility to their protégés' careers (Singh et al. 2002: 391). The term 'mentor' refers to a more senior person, who takes an interest in sponsorship of the career of a more junior person (Smith et al. 2005: 33). Mentoring relationships, according to Tepper (1995:1191), facilitate junior colleagues' (protégés), professional development and career progress. A mentor is a person who oversees the career and development of another person, usually junior, through teaching, counselling, providing psychological support, protecting, and at times promoting or sponsoring. The mentor may perform any or, all of the above functions during the mentor relationship (Zey 1984:7). These definitions of mentoring although general in nature are useful in gaining an insight into what the mentoring of student teachers would entail.

Sergiovanni and Starrat (2002: 265) provide a definition of mentoring that is specifically directed to mentoring of student teachers. They define mentoring as a process that is intended to help new teachers successfully learn their roles, establish their self-images as teachers, figure out the school and its culture, understand how teaching unfolds in real classrooms, and achieve other goals that are important to the teachers being mentored. Mentoring is also intended to help new teachers improve their effectiveness in demonstrating the schools' standards for teaching.

In order for mentoring to be successful, the mentor and mentee need to develop a relationship. Reiman and Edelfelt (1990) have highlighted the following as critical attributes necessary for a productive mentor/protégé relationship in educational settings:

a willing and empathic mentor who understands the problems of the beginning teacher;

a mentor who acknowledges a novice teacher's strengths;

a mentor who is willing to listen and learn from the protégé as well as guide the protégé thereby establishing a mutual partnership;

a willingness by the mentor to model reflective practice and establish a rapport open to questioning;

an ability by the mentor to provide constructive and corrective feedback to the novice teacher;

a mentor willing to become an advocate for the beginning teacher; and

a mentor who models multi-tasking abilities and responsibilities without becoming   inundated with the workload.

These attributes of the mentor/mentee relationship focus mainly on what the mentor's contribution to the relationship and can be ascribed as the qualities of the mentor.

Mc Kimm et al. (2003) outline the following values and principles that underpin the mentoring process: recognising that people are okay; recognising that people can change and want to grow; understanding how people learn; recognising individual differences; empowering through personal and professional development; encouraging capability; developing competence; encouraging collaboration not competition; encouraging scholarship and a sense of enquiry; searching new ideas, theories and knowledge; reflecting on past experiences as a key to understanding; looking forward and developing the ability to transfer learning and apply it in new situations and realizing that we can create our own meaning of mentoring. The mentor who subscribes to these values and principals ought to possess the qualities that mentees would want their mentors to possess.

The following, according to Mc Kimm et al. (2003), are qualities that characterise good mentors: good interpersonal skills, objectivity, role model, flexibility peer respect, demonstrable competence, reflective practitioner, non-threatening, attitude facilitator of learning, allowing the development of initiative and independence, open mindedness, approachability, self-confidence and self-awareness advocacy, sincerity, warmth, commitment, understanding, aptitude for the role, understanding of level of competence of newcomer, understanding of difficulties posed by transition to personal professional accountability, understanding of difficulties of integrating into new work setting, ability to help newcomer set learning objectives, to assist with transition

process and to apply knowledge in practice and able to provide objective assessment of progress. Rowley (1999) expands the array of characteristics of a good mentor by including the following as further characteristics of a good mentor: committed to the role of mentoring, accepting of the beginner teacher, effective in different interpersonal contexts, a model of a continuous learner and one who communicates hope and optimism.

The mentee on the other hand, needs to be willing to learn and develop, willing to participate, intelligent and learn quickly, ambitious, keen to succeed, able to accept power and risk, loyal, committed, conscientious, able to develop alliances, flexible and adaptable, self-aware, well organized, able to accept a challenge.

Teaching practice or school experience forms an important component of teacher training. Its purpose is to provide an opportunity for students to develop their teaching competence. During teaching practice student teachers are assigned to mentor teachers. The role of the mentor is to guide, advice and prepare the student to become a fully fledged teacher. Students have certain expectations of their mentors as they spend a considerable amount of time at schools doing teaching practice. In this time they are assigned to a mentor teacher, usually referred to as a host teacher at the school. Before students visit their schools, mentor teachers are invited to a meeting at the university where they are appraised on what the university requirements for practice teaching are and what their role is. They are also provided with a mentor teacher handbook. The mentor teachers thus understand what their role is in mentoring the student teachers. The schools at which students are assigned select mentor teachers using their own criteria. The university does not prescribe to schools any criteria for the selection of mentor teachers. In view of the above, this study investigated what student teachers perceive as qualities of good mentor teachers. Identifying these qualities will assist mentors and teacher-training institutions in providing good quality mentoring to student teachers. Mentor training programs could be enhanced by considering training mentors whose qualities match the needs of student teachers.

METHODOLOGY

As the study aimed to obtain students perceptions of qualities of good mentor teachers, the researcher opted for a quantitative study that is descriptive in nature (Leedy and Ormrad 2005: 94,197). Leedy and Ormrod (2005) suggest that a survey research refers to almost any form of descriptive, quantitative research. Hence a structured questionnaire was administered to thirty nine (39) final year Bachelor of Education students at a South African university to ascertain students perceptions of the qualities that they look for in a good mentor teachers. Students had to indicate, from a list of qualities, which qualities they would prefer their mentor teacher to possess. This paper therefore focuses on the data collected from the students to identify qualities that student teachers look for in selecting mentor teachers. The purpose of identifying qualities that student teachers look for in mentor teachers is to ensure that the student receives mentorship in relation to his or her needs.

Data Collected

The students were required to indicate which qualities they would like their mentor teachers to possess. In the questionnaire, students were also required to indicate if they there were any additional qualities that their mentor should possess. It is interesting to note that only one respondent (out of 39) indicated that mentors should be democratic and lead by example. Hence qualities not mentioned in the questionnaire were not considered in the discussion of results that follow. It is however acknowlededged that there are many other good qualities that mentors possess, but they do not form the scope of this study. The qualities mentioned and discussed in this study may thus form a basis for the selection of mentor teachers (with the inclusion of other good qualities), so that the mentoring experiences of student teachers could be enhanced.

Analysis of Data

Table 1 indicates the students preference of qualities that they require their mentor teachers to possess. Only descriptive statistics were used to analyse data. Percentages were calculated for the various questionnaire items and conclusions were made. The analysis and discussions reflect only the actual responses received from students for the various instrument items.

Table 1: Students preferences of qualities of mentor teachers

Qualities	Percentage of students preferring this quality
Knowledgeable	94.9
Experienced	89.7
Honest	84.6
Respectful	92.3
Fair	84.6
Controlling	25.6
Flexible	89.7
Understanding	89.7
Accommodating	79.5
Strict	30.8
Autocratic	15.4
Organized	82.1
Sympathetic	71.7

DISCUSSION

If the 50th percentile is used to separate the qualities that student teachers would like their mentors to possess from those that they would not like their mentors to have then, from a student teachers perspective, the data suggests that student teachers would like their mentors to be knowledgeable, experienced, honest, respectful, fair, flexible, understanding, accommodating, organized and sympathetic. These findings are consistent with the findings of Hobson's (2002) research which suggests that mentors be supportive, reassuring, be prepared and make time for students, offer practical advice and ideas relating to the students teaching and provide constructive feedback on their teaching attempts (Hobson 2002:16), as well as the characteristics of good mentors cited by Mc Kimm et al. (2003). Student teachers do not prefer to have mentors that are controlling, strict and autocratic. A possible explanation that is offered as to why students do not prefer controlling, strict and autocratic mentors lies in the fact that students have become accustomed the university environment that affords them a greater degree of freedom as opposed to a school environment that is characterized by a stricter adherence to rules (for the maintenance of discipline).

The Knowledgeable Mentor

Ninety- four percent of the respondents expect their mentors to be knowledgeable. According to Hudson (2008), mentors need competent knowledge, skills and professional proficiency in the chosen field. Mentors are expected to pass on their years of professional knowledge to the less experienced student teacher (Hudson 2008). Student teachers especially those in their final year are on the verge of entering the teaching profession. Through the training that they have received at the university, they have acquired the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that they require to become competent teachers. There are however areas where there are gaps between the theory that they have studied and practice. The knowledgeable mentor's role is to bridge this gap between theory and practice. This ought to happen during teaching practice.

The Experienced Mentor

The majority of respondents (90%) would prefer to be mentored by mentors who are experienced. A male novice teacher articulated his preference in the statement: 'When I need help, I will ask an experienced, wise colleague' (Kanan and Baker 2002). From a mentoring perspective there are a number of dimensions to experience that need to be explored, firstly the experienced teacher is one who has many years of experience as a teacher and no experience mentoring students, secondly the experienced teacher who has many years of teaching experience as well as many years of experience as a mentor teacher, thirdly the relatively inexperienced teacher in terms of number of years of teaching experience but has considerable amount of experience mentoring students. The student needs to consider which of these teachers he or she can derive the most benefit from. The question arises as to whether mentors undergo any type of mentor training. It would be advantageous to the student if his or her mentor has had mentor training. It ought to be noted that the mentors of the respondents in this study have not, do not receive and are not required to receive mentor training before being appointed as mentors. Mentor training would make them aware of their roles and responsibilities as a mentor to teachers in training and enhance the mentoring process.

Having an Honest Mentor

Student needs to know their strengths and weaknesses to develop and grow as a teacher.

The mentor needs to be honest to the student if the student is to become a competent teacher; hence 84.6% of students see honesty as an important quality that their mentors should possess. Kanan and Baker (2002) and Brookes et al. (1997) point out that students prefer a mentor who is honest, forgiving and fair. If the mentor is honest to the student and points out his/her weaknesses, the student can work towards overcoming these weaknesses and improve as a teacher. Honesty needs to be displayed by the mentor in reporting of assessment of the student to the student and the university. Mentors need to report their assessment of the student to the student as well as the university. Often students report to lecturers and record in their journals that their mentors are satisfied with their performance, but the assessment report that the mentor submits to the university is an adverse report. This displays dishonesty on the part of the mentor, which can be detrimental to the student. It is possibly for is reason that students would like their mentors to be honest with them.

Being a Respectful Mentor

In an environment where there is emphasis on human rights and dignity of individuals, it stands to reason that respect for individuals is of utmost importance. The mentor therefore has to show respect for the mentee. Ninety- two percent of respondents want their mentors to show them respect. Kiggundu and Nayimula (2009) suggest that student teachers appreciated mentors who treated them with respect. To be respected one has to show respect. The South African Council of Educators Act requires educators to respect their colleagues. Student teachers/mentees are regarded as colleagues and therefore need to be respect by the educator mentor.

The Mentor Who is Fair to Students

Eighty- five percent of students would like their mentors to treat them fairly. Students are often required to take over the responsibilities of the mentor while they are practice teaching at a school. Sometimes mentors make unreasonable demands on students like having them to do all the marking of learner's books, assignments and assessment exercises. While students need to gain experience in these areas as well, it is unfair to expect the student to be "saddled" with all of the work that the teacher ought to be doing. Marais and Meier (2004) note that the imposition of exorbitant demands on students in terms of workload, may be regarded as exploitation and abuse by mentors. This constitutes unfair treatment of students by mentor teachers, hence students prefer mentors that are fair to them.

The Controlling Mentor

Seventy- four percent of students would not like to be assigned to a mentor who exercises control over them. Rice (2004) points out that an area of concern for student teachers was the dominance of the mentor in the relationship, however for mentors who are committed to equalizing the power relations within the mentoring relationship, relinquishing power would seem to be unproblematic. A controlling mentor would exert his/her authority over the student. This mentor will not give the student latitude to exercise any freedom in any aspect of the learning and teaching situation. The student will hence not be able to implement any new and innovative ideas and techniques that he/she might have learnt, researched or read about. This can be very restrictive to the enthusiastic student. Further, students value their freedom, and if not given the opportunity to express themselves freely in the classroom they can become despondent and de-motivated. They could begin to view the teaching profession in a negative light.

The Flexible Mentor

The majority of students (ninety percent) have a preference for a mentor teacher who adopts a flexible approach towards the student. As opposed to the controlling mentor, the flexible mentor gives the student the opportunity to express him/herself in an appropriate and acceptable manner in the classroom. This helps to build the confidence of the student, places fewer restrictions on him/her and enhances the self-esteem of the student. The student becomes more willing to assist both the mentor and the learners. The student, mentor and learners derive benefit from the relationship, as it serves to strengthen their relationship. Flexibility also allows for innovation on the part of the student, encouraging debate and discussion, which is an important component of the learning and teaching situation.

The Understanding Mentor

Ninety percent of students would like to have mentors who are understanding. McKimm et al. (2003) point out that one of the principles of mentoring is to understand how people learn (understanding of: level of competence of newcomers, difficulties posed by transition to personal professional accountability and difficulties of integrating into a new work setting), understanding is a personal trait, according to Gray and Smith (2000) that mentors should possess. Students are faced with pressures and demands, have to meets deadlines with regards to submission of assignments and tasks and hope that their mentors would understand the situation that they are placed in and not require to be pressurized further.

Accommodating

Students prefer mentors who are accommodating, allowing them the opportunity to put into practice their own teaching methodologies, techniques and ideas. The accommodating mentor thus allows the student to link the theory to practice and develop teaching competencies which can be utilized by the student when he/she qualifies. The accommodating mentor helps to increase the student's confidence level. Student teachers were often excluded from many school activities and were made to feel insignificant which greatly demoralized them (Kiggundu and Nayimula 2009). This could be one of the reasons why students would want their mentors to be accommodating.

The Strict Mentor

The strict mentor would want student to follow a rigid routine. Seventy percent of students in the study have indicated that they would not prefer to have such mentors. The strict mentor dampens the enthusiasm of the student, not allowing the student latitude to be flexible. On the other hand, some students (30 percent) would prefer having strict mentors who provide them with a structured and disciplined approach to the teaching and learning situation. This seems to suggest that strictness need not be regarded as a negative quality in a mentor.

The Autocratic Mentor

The vast majority of students would not like to have autocratic mentors. The autocratic mentor will not give the student the opportunity to develop his/her own ideas, beliefs and teaching methodologies. The student will be moulded in the likeness of the mentor thereby destroying the individuality of the student. The student needs to be creative and innovative so that he/she can be given the opportunity to have an impact to addressing the diverse needs to learners.

The Organized Mentor

Majority of students (eighty- two percent) want their mentors to be organized. Organisational skills include: planning, contracting, recording, structuring sessions, time management, scheduling, evaluating, assessing, report writing, maintaining boundaries, action planning, prioritizing, and facilitating (McKimm et al. 2003). If the mentor is organized, it helps the student to emulate the mentor. Being organized allows for a more meaning engagement between student and mentor. The student gets meaningful and constructive advice and guidance from the organized mentor. Learners in the classroom benefit when the student teacher has been mentored by an organized mentor.

The Sympathetic Mentor

The task of teaching, for the student teacher, is often stressful and demanding. Being sympathetic towards the student provides psychosocial support to the student and may help students overcome their "stressful, conflict-laden situations" (Stokes and Stewart 1994: 34). The student has to adjust from the university environment where he/she is "lectured to", to a school environment where he/she is placed in a position of authority and responsibility. It is the mentor's task to assist the student to make the necessary adjustment by being sympathetic to the student. Hence, seventy two percent of students would prefer mentors who are sympathetic towards them.

CONCLUSION

Qualities of mentor teachers, as perceived by student teachers may be divided into two

categories: those qualities that are desirable by student teachers and those that are not desirable. Some of the qualities that student teachers look for in mentors are that they should be knowledgeable, experienced, honest, respectable, fair, flexible, understanding, accommodating, organized and sympathetic. These qualities that are desirable by students are by no means an exhaustive list of qualities, however they do provide some insight into the student teachers perspectives of qualities of good mentor teachers On the other hand, students do not want the mentors to be controlling, strict or autocratic. The question that arises out of this research is how to identify mentors that possess qualities that students perceive as desirable in the mentor teacher.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Students could identify possible mentors at a school, based on the recommendations of the school principal, and by means of an informal discussion with each of the possible mentors. This will assist them in identify the mentor that they believe will be best able to assist them in their professional development. Universities can further assist students in the choice of mentors by conducting research and developing a data base of competent and experienced mentors who have mentored students successfully in the past. Further research need to be conducted on developing criteria that student teachers could use in selecting mentor teachers.

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