

The effectiveness of mentoring in the Distance Teacher Education Programme at the Lesotho College of Education: student teachers' and tutors' perceptions

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In response to the need for more qualified primary school teachers in Lesotho, the Lesotho College of Education (LCE) introduced the Distance Teacher Education Programme (DTEP), an in-service training programme for unqualified and underqualified teachers. As part of the curriculum in this programme, the more than 1 200 student teachers who were enrolled needed to be supported and mentored, but were served by only 16 tutors in six different regions. As one of the tutors and mentors in the DTEP, the researcher (LM-M) undertook a qualitative perception survey through focus group discussions with student teachers and tutors in the DTEP. The researcher was able to evaluate the mentoring system in the DTEP according to the functions of effective mentoring, as identified in a literature review. The strengths and weaknesses identified in the survey are highlighted and recommendations are made for different stakeholders on how the mentoring system can be improved.

Keywords: distance education; Distance Teacher Education Programme; learner support; Lesotho College of Education; mentoring; primary education; teacher education

Introduction

In order to improve the quality of teaching in Lesotho primary schools, the National Teacher Training College (NTTC) introduced the Distance Teacher Education Programme (DTEP) in 2001 in order to respond to the need for further enhancement of quality and quantity in primary school teaching (NTTC, 2001:1). In 2002 the NTTC became autonomous and was named the Lesotho College of Education (LCE).

In the July 2002 report on learner support activities at the NTTC, Roberts and Seligman (2002:3) stated that the Government of Lesotho, as part of the policy for poverty alleviation, had introduced free primary education in 2000. The aim of free primary education is said to ensure that every *Mosotho* has access to relevant quality basic education at all the centres of basic education in Lesotho. Free primary education has, however, caused overcrowding in primary schools and more teachers of higher quality are therefore needed to cope with the situation. However, in 2000 most of the primary school teachers were merely Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC) graduates with no formal teacher training. Consequently they were viewed as unqualified to teach.

The adoption of a distance education mode for the teacher training programme at the LCE was aimed at ensuring that the training and development of primary teachers are carried out effectively and efficiently. Dilley and Roman (1998:82) state that in southern Africa students and governments opt for distance education because it provides access to learning skills and competencies which would otherwise be unavailable. It also minimises disruption to the learners' working, social and family lives. However, students tend to engage in distance education without the skills needed for independent learning. Therefore they need an adequate support system which will provide them with the relevant environment to develop the required skills.

Dilley and Roman (1998:82) also argue that mentoring has become an important method of supporting learners in distance education. This method has moved the concept of distance education from passive lectures and information delivery towards more interactive student learning. Tutors or mentors do not lecture but promote discussion and guide responses with students or groups of students at one place or in many places simultaneously. Some distance learners are, however, in remote areas and have little or no access to communications devices and technology. Distance learners, irrespective of location, also have different needs. Effective mentoring is one such need.

Research problem

Only COSC graduates with at least two years' primary school teaching experience were recruited for the DTEP. In 2002 the first intake of the DTEP was 500 student teachers. In 2003 the number increased by 250 student teachers with very few dropouts. In 2004, another 471 applicants were admitted. This brought the number to 1 221 student teachers in 2004. The student teachers were spread all over the country at 40 sites. They needed effective mentoring, but had to be mentored by 16 tutors only. The tutors were all formally trained primary, secondary or high school teachers with at least five years' teaching experience and were therefore eminently capable of coaching and guiding student teachers. However, each of them was given the almost impossible task of mentoring between 60 and 90 students at two or three of these sites.

According to Portner (1998:7), in order for mentoring to be effective, a mentor has to function by relating, assessing, coaching, and guiding. These mentoring functions do not occur in isolation; they consistently overlap and complement one another during the mentoring process.

The main problem investigated in this study was whether these mentoring functions were indeed effectively implemented in the DTEP. The investigation was therefore informed by the following overarching research question:

How effective is mentoring in the DTEP at the Lesotho College of Education?

In order to establish the effectiveness of the mentoring process, the study proposed to answer the following subsidiary research questions:

- What are the functions of effective mentoring in the context of distance teacher education?
- To what extent are these functions of effective mentoring implemented in the mentoring undertaken by DTEP full-time tutors?
- How best can this mentoring process be developed and improved?

To measure the effectiveness of mentoring in the DTEP, it was important to investigate the functions of effective mentoring as outlined in the literature on mentoring and distance teacher education. These functions then formed the yard-stick against which the effectiveness of mentoring in the DTEP was evaluated.

Research design and methodology

The research design employed in this study included a literature review on distance teacher education and mentoring, followed by a qualitative perception survey involving focus group interviews during September 2004.

The target population for the study consisted of two groups, namely, student teachers from the Maseru region and full-time tutors from different sites. The Maseru region was preferred

to the other six regions because it was the most accessible to the researcher, typifying the sampling procedure as convenient. The sample was also chosen purposefully by using the maximum variation strategy, to ensure maximum differences of perceptions about a topic among information-rich informants or groups. The sample consisted of both year two and year three student teachers. The researcher excluded first-year students because they only joined the programme in July 2004. Twenty-four student teachers were purposefully selected from the Maseru region. Of the 24 student teachers who participated in the study, 12 were females and 12 males. Ten full-time tutors were also selected from different sites. There were eight females and two males. They were chosen because it was easy for them to meet at a central place with the researcher, typifying the sampling procedure as convenient.

The focus group interviews were characterised by open-ended questions based on the topical areas to be covered. The researcher held three focus group interviews with 24 DTEP student teachers. Each group consisted of eight participants. The two focus groups with DTEP full-time tutors each consisted of five participants. The researcher facilitated the discussions, using interview schedules. The researcher assured all the participants of the confidentiality of their perceptions. They were also informed about the purpose of the study and why they had been selected. The researcher worked hard to ensure that all the student teachers and tutors were comfortable and could speak openly and honestly.

The constant comparative method was used for the analysis of the qualitative data collected because it searches for categories and patterns of meaning. The researcher studied the data in order to familiarise herself and to be able to form appropriate categories.

Lincoln and Guba (in Page, Digregorio & Farrington, 1997:3) recommend that qualitative researchers assess the trustworthiness of their research by using the following alternative criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

According to Zambo (2004:85), credibility is the stability and plausibility of data. In this regard, the researcher had prolonged engagement with student teachers and tutors at the focus group interviews. Each focus group interview took 40 minutes to an hour, until no new data were revealed. The researcher's observations were persistent so that various perceptions could be identified from the participants. The researcher also shared her insights and problems with her colleagues. They listened, prompted, and helped to clarify insights and decide which direction to take next.

Transferability

Transferability, according to Babbie and Mouton (2001:5), refers to the extent to which the findings can be applied in other contexts or to other respondents. The results of this qualitative study are mainly applicable to the student teachers and their tutors who participated in the study. However, the transferability of this study could also be evaluated by the readers of the detailed report prepared by the researcher.

Dependability

A study should provide its audience with evidence that, if it were to be repeated with the same participants in the same context but with a different researcher, findings would be similar (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:5). To ensure dependability, the researcher collected information from different sources (a literature review together with focus group interviews with the

participating student teachers and tutors, respectively) in order to compensate for the possible weakness in one source with the strengths of the other.

Confirmability

Confirmability is achieved with processes that ensure that data collected were neutral and objective (Zambo 2004:86). To ensure confirmability, the researcher kept audiotapes and transcriptions of focus group interviews as an audit trail.

Distance teacher education and mentoring

One of the most critical problems facing the development of education in Africa is an acute shortage of qualified teachers. There is an increasing demand for education, yet governments fail to supply an adequate number of qualified teachers through conventional teacher training. This is usually due to a lack of resources. Therefore, the use of distance education for teacher training becomes a viable option for consideration (Mohammed in RSA DoE, 2004:27). In fact, Robinson and Latchem (2003:1) indicate that governments, institutions, international agencies, and teachers have great interest in the use of distance education methods and technologies. Distance education methods and technologies are increasingly used for initial training and the continuing professional development of teachers.

According to Suen and Parkes (2003:1) distance is the most unique feature of distance education — i.e. the educator and learner are physically separated from each other by time and place. This has a number of implications for learning and assessment processes. The learner is isolated from resources, support, and peers. The lack of contact with other learners can have a significant effect on the learner's motivation. According to the Commonwealth of Learning (COL, 1999:51), learner support is an important element of any distance education programme. The Working Group on Distance Education and Open Learning (WGDEOL, 2002:84) argues that distance learners who study without the provision of quality support from their institutions are unlikely to be successful. The provision of learner support depends on the capacity and resources at the disposal of a particular institution, but it has to be effective in order to facilitate effective learning.

Limited face-to-face meetings in distance education are still a possibility and may take the form of tutorials, learner-learner interaction, library study, practical sessions and mentoring (Butcher & Hope, 2001:1). In distance education, a mentor may be formally provided to the learner, or the learner can choose a mentor informally for advice. An educator may play the roles of tutor, guide, counsellor, and mentor simultaneously by providing appropriate guidance in learning, listening, clarifying, reflecting, and summarising skills. It is therefore clear that the skills required of mentors in a formal face-to-face support role are a combination of tutoring and counselling skills.

The functions of effective mentoring

The concept of mentoring originated in Greek mythology. Mentor, a trusted family friend of King Odysseus, was appointed by the king to look after his son, Telemachus, when he left for the Trojan Wars (Maharaso, 2001:6). Historically, mentoring has been considered as the way in which the old assist the young to achieve their goals and to become the next generation of wise people (Rapuleng, 2002:57). Mentors are therefore advisers, educators, counsellors and role models who pass their experience on to less experienced people.

Worldwide, mentoring is considered as a valuable process which assists professional and

personal development (Garvey & Alred, 2000). McIntyre and Hagger (1996:121) assume that, as a mentor, a more experienced person facilitates the professional development of a new teacher or someone new to a particular stage in a career. This confirms that mentoring is also used to make newcomers aware of how a specific workplace operates. This aspect of mentoring is partly relevant to the mentoring process in initial teacher-training where tutor-mentors have to teach student teachers the principles of teaching and learning (Edwards & Collison, 1996:7).

From the teaching perspective, mentors are referred to as skilled educators who actively assist less experienced educators to obtain the expected experience and skills (Tomilson, 1995: 20). Portner (1998:5) therefore states that a mentor has to be committed and dedicated and should have been trained in mentoring skills. Inexperienced people, who are assisted or supported by mentors, are called mentees.

All teachers have to be inducted at the start of their careers and mentoring can help to ease the mentee's transition from student to qualified professional. Mentoring can also play an important role in the development of teachers in new and unfamiliar senior positions (McIntyre & Hagger, 1996:140). Effective mentoring reduces professional isolation, provides support and feedback with regard to performance and gives confidence to mentees.

Portner (1998:7) states that student teachers have to develop the capacity and confidence to make their own informed decisions. They also need to enrich their knowledge and improve their abilities regarding teaching and learning. Therefore the primary role of the mentor is to enable mentees to reach these levels. The mentor can play this role well by implementing the following functions of effective mentoring:

Relating

A mentoring relationship usually consists of individuals of senior and junior status, but it should be a relationship in which the older member is trusted and experienced to guide the younger (Sands, Parson & Duane, 1991:176). The relationship between mentor and mentee is built on mutual trust, respect, and professionalism. Relating behaviours create an environment conducive for mentors to understand mentees' ideas and needs and to encourage honest sharing and reflecting of their experiences. A mentor is expected to develop and maintain a productive relationship with a mentee from the beginning. This can be achieved by establishing trust (Portner, 1998:7; 14). Without a firm basis of everyday trust, mentoring is likely to become frustrating and difficult for both the mentor and the mentee (Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 1997:31).

Assessing

A mentor assesses whenever he/she anticipates what a mentee needs in order to grow professionally. In assessing mentees, mentors gather and diagnose data about their mentees' ways of learning and of teaching; they determine their mentees' competency and confidence to handle a given situation; they identify unique aspects of the school and community culture; and they take note of the local school district's formal and informal procedures and practices (Portner, 1998:8).

Assessment behaviours like classroom visits, asking direct questions, observing learners' interaction, as well as other professional performance and perceptions, are usually employed by mentors (Harnish & Wild, 1994:198). These behaviours ensure that the mentees' professional needs are identified and that mentoring decisions can be based on a thoughtful consideration of a variety of data (Portner, 1998:8).

Coaching

Portner (1998:41) states that coaching is the role whereby relating, assessing, and facilitating behaviours are directly used in order to improve a mentee's performance. Portner (1998:41) also points out that a mentor has to observe a mentee while teaching so that he/she can help the mentee to perform well. If student teachers are left to their own devices, they will learn how to survive and satisfy their own needs, but they will not learn how to facilitate effective learning (McIntyre & Hagger, 1996:123). Coaching also involves the following:

The pre-class conference

Before visiting a class, the mentor and the mentee should have a conference to discuss what will be taught (Portner, 1998:42). The discussion should be about the lesson plan, learning objectives, teaching strategies, students' activities, and other important issues. The mentor's task is to ask probing questions that will encourage the mentee to come up with ideas to enrich the lesson plan and provide him or her with the opportunity to gain confidence as a practising teacher (Winberg, 1999:73).

The classroom visit

A mentor should remember that while observing the mentee in class, he/she should remain objective and take into consideration that his/her unfamiliar presence in the classroom can be an influence on what is being observed. He/she should avoid the temptation of participating while observing with the main aim to guide, advise, and provide feedback (Portner, 1998:45; Winberg, 1999:72).

The post-class conference

After the classroom observation, the mentor must discuss the proceedings of the class in detail and provide the mentee with verbal and written feedback. The mentee needs to realise that the feedback provided is meant to improve the past performance (Edwards & Protheroe, 2003:229; Winberg, 1999:72).

Guiding

A mentor's task is to guide a mentee to become an independent teacher. Teaching involves constant decision-making; a mentee has to be guided to make his/her own decisions. The mentor's guiding task is to ask the right questions in the right way and at the right time. These questions should encourage the mentee to reflect on his/her decisions. In guiding the mentee's professional development, a mentor has to decide which relating, coaching, and assessing behaviours to use in different situations that he/she encounters. The most important thing to consider, as a mentor, is identifying and clarifying mentees' problems (Portner, 1998:8; 55).

Possible strengths of mentoring

The benefits of mentoring are not meant for mentees only; mentors and organisations also gain much from mentoring (McIntyre & Hagger, 1996:113). The following are some strengths of mentoring as identified from the literature.

A vital investment

Mentoring is a vital investment in the development of mentees and mentors, as well as the institutions involved (Maharaso, 2001:61).

Acquisition of indispensable skills and knowledge

Mentors are able to share their knowledge and skills with mentees (Boyle & Boice, 1998:161; Stephenson & Sampson, 1994:117).

Relationships and self-image

The mentor and mentee relationship enables mentees to become aware of their potential and to be successful in teaching (Boyle & Boice, 1998:162).

Team teaching

A mentor and a mentee can teach jointly in order to support each other (Lefuo, 2003:37; Winberg, 1999:49).

Stability

Mentoring brings stability among staff and creates a feeling of oneness (Nias, Southworth & Yeomans in Rapuleng, 2002:69).

Possible weaknesses of mentoring

Although mentoring is widely considered an essential process, it does have some weaknesses. The following weaknesses of mentoring were identified from the literature.

Selection of mentors

Many institutions consider lecturers as the most relevant people to conduct mentorship programmes. However, some of these lecturers may not be willing or fully committed to the mentoring process (Rapuleng, 2002:71; Stephenson & Sampson, 1994:174).

Co-teaching

Co-teaching may become problematic if the mentor's skills cannot match those of the mentee (Kirkham, 1993:116; Winberg, 1999:50).

Scarcity of resources

Scarcity of resources for both mentors and mentees may also influence mentoring negatively (Winberg, 1999:50).

Dependency

Mentees' dependence on mentors may prevent them from becoming creative, innovative, and developing personally and professionally (Daresh & Playko, 1992:112; Hamilton, 1996:69; Wunsch, 1993:358).

Student teachers' and tutors' perceptions of mentoring in the Distance Teacher Education Programme

The strengths and weaknesses of mentoring in the DTEP, as perceived by the focus group interviewees, were identified after the data had been summarised and categorised.

Weaknesses

Student teachers' and tutors' problems are discussed in terms of the four major functions of effective mentoring, namely, relating, assessing, coaching, and guiding.

Relating

The interviewees in the focus group interviews with student teachers complained about the relationships between some of the student teachers and their tutors. They felt that some tutors did not listen to their problems. For example, one of the student teachers said, "*Tutors know that some of us are slow learners, but they become impatient when they are asked questions*". In general, however, the student teachers' comments did show that they experienced good relationships with their mentors. The tutors, on the other hand, argued that some student teachers did not open up to their tutors. They also indicated that they were willing to help student teachers with their problems, but only if they would tell them about their problems.

Assessing

The student teachers complained that classroom observations were not performed regularly, yet these observations were used for assessment purposes. "*There isn't enough guidance in our actual teaching but we are assessed through classroom observations*", one of the student teachers responded. The student teachers also criticised the marking of assignments as being inconsistent. Some full-time tutors and part-time tutors did not use marking memoranda. One of the student teachers complained: "*Our assignments are not marked in the same way because when we compare our assignments, we find that some learners have higher marks than others for the same work done*". They also remarked that some tutors were very strict in the marking of assignments.

The student teachers also complained about delayed feedback from some of the tutors. Learners received the feedback of the first assignment after they had submitted the second one or even after the submission of the third assignment. Their concern was that this delay affected their performance, as the marked assignments were meant to help learners improve on the next assignment through the comments of the educators. Another problem raised was that some of the delayed assignments had no comments or that the comments that were supplied were not detailed. One of the student teachers said: "*We are not satisfied with the marking of our assignments; there are no comments to show where one has done well and where to improve and in some cases there is no tick at all. We see only the scored marks!*"

The tutors, on the other hand, argued that they were not informed in time of administrative and academic changes at the college so that the learners could be made aware of these, e.g. changes in the dates for the residential workshops. Sometimes these changes affected ways in which the student teachers had to be assessed.

Coaching

The student teachers felt that monthly and residential workshops needed to be extended in order to provide adequate support. They were also concerned about the shortage of tutors. They indicated that at the monthly workshops some courses did not have tutors. Part-time tutors were employed to assist in the tutoring, but there was still a shortage of tutors. Tutors complained that, although they were oriented on how to deal with distance learners, they still lacked some mentoring skills. Additionally, their own progress was not monitored well by the DTEP management.

Guiding

The student teachers indicated that tutors did not pay regular visits to their schools, although they needed guidance in teaching. They also complained about how little time they spent with

their tutors at the sites and at the workshops. One student teacher argued, "*If it were not because of our busy tutors, who are also module-writers, we could still have more time with them at the sites*".

The tutors in turn complained that they were not provided with adequate support by the college in order to assist and guide the student teachers. They indicated that they were oriented on how to deal with distance learners, but they still lacked mentoring skills. One of the tutors remarked, "*Student teachers have all the hope and trust that they are being guided by experienced tutors with relevant skills and expertise*".

The tutors (with only one exception) also complained about a lack of accommodation at the different sites. This made it difficult for them to provide enough support to the student teachers at the different sites. Another problem raised by the tutors was that of the high numbers of student teachers. The tutors were no longer able to visit every student teacher and provide proper guidance. They pointed out that the single vehicle that was provided per region was insufficient since there were so many sites within each region. They also felt that module writing, as one of their roles, kept them busy and away from the student teachers for a long time. They pleaded with the college to seek other alternatives so that DTEP full-time tutors would be enabled to assist the student teachers adequately.

Strengths

The tutors felt that they had benefited a great deal from the mentoring system in the DTEP. Through mentoring, tutors were able to relate well to the different characters of student teachers; they had acquired skills and knowledge relevant to mentoring; they could assess behaviours appropriately; and they were able to provide adequate support to student teachers. In terms of the four major functions of mentoring, the strengths highlighted by the interviewees can be summarised as follows:

Relating

Mentoring had reportedly increased tutors' self-esteem and self-confidence. Generally, they felt that they had developed personally and professionally. They indicated that the mentoring system had enabled them to acquire interpersonal skills, which allowed them to interact well with different people, including the student teachers.

Assessing

The tutors indicated that they were able to assess the teaching behaviours of their students effectively.

Coaching

The student teachers expressed their satisfaction with the monthly workshops which afforded them the opportunity to share ideas with their colleagues from other sites. They felt that their personal and academic problems were solved at these workshops. One of the student teachers commented, "*We feel free to ask questions at monthly workshops because we are not as many as at the residential workshops*". The student teachers also said that the workshops helped them to develop and integrate learning skills that would encourage learning independence.

The student teachers pointed out that the mentoring system in the DTEP had enabled them to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge for their teaching tasks. They commented that they could imitate those tutors who went to class prepared and presented their work well and

could apply what they had observed from their tutors in their own teaching. These tutors even caused some student teachers to become interested in subjects that they had formerly disliked. The tutors also commented that, through their coaching and guidance of the student teachers, they had eventually acquired skills and knowledge relevant to mentoring.

Guiding

The student teachers commented that, through the guidance of some tutors, they eventually succeeded in preparing and teaching on their own. The tutors also believed they were able to provide adequate support to student teachers.

Lessons learned

Final conclusions about the effectiveness of mentoring in the DTEP were reached after considering the three research questions stated earlier and assessing the effectiveness against the identified functions of effective mentoring, namely, relating, assessing, coaching, and guiding. The concluding answers to the three questions finally provided a basis for the recommendations formulated for different stakeholders in the DTEP. Since the first research question was covered by means of the literature review, discussed earlier, only the last two questions are used to formulate relevant conclusions.

To what extent are the functions of effective mentoring implemented in the mentoring undertaken by DTEP full-time tutors?

In order to answer this research question, the major strengths and weaknesses of the DTEP were identified in terms of the four functions of mentoring.

Weaknesses

Besides the literature review anticipating problems with mentoring in distance teacher education, the findings of the survey also confirmed that the mentoring system in the DTEP had many weaknesses associated with it. These can be summarised as follows:

Relating

Some tutors were impatient. On the other hand, tutors complained that some student teachers did not open up to them.

Assessing

Classroom observations did not occur regularly and led to the following: a lack of guidance and assessment; inconsistent marking of assignments; delayed feedback; assignments without comments; and tutors not being informed about administrative and academic changes.

Coaching

The mentoring system at the DTEP suffered from: a shortage of tutors; a lack of coaching and other mentoring skills among some tutors; and the fact that monitoring of student teachers' and tutors' progress was rarely performed.

Guiding

The mentoring system at the DTEP suffered from the following: a lack of accommodation for tutors at the different sites; inadequate transport for tutors; irregular school visits; little time

for tutors to spend with student teachers; the high numbers of student teachers who had to be supported by only a few tutors; and little guidance in teaching.

Strengths

Similarly, whereas the literature review anticipated a number of strengths of mentoring in distance teacher education, the findings of the focus group interviews, discussed earlier, also pointed to a number of strengths of the mentoring system for both the student teachers and the tutors in the DTEP. They included the following:

Relating

In general, student teachers were free to ask questions and their ability to relate well with different characters was also enhanced.

Assessing

Student teachers received the opportunity to practise what they had learnt; learned from their own mistakes; and improved their teaching performance accordingly.

Coaching

Student teachers had the opportunity of acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge directly from their mentors. Additionally, their ability to reflect was enhanced in this process.

Guiding

The guidance student teachers received from their mentors created opportunities to share ideas; solve their personal and academic problems; enhance their self-esteem and confidence; and contribute to their personal and professional development.

Conclusion

In the context of the above strengths and weaknesses, it is necessary to consider the frequency of these strengths and weaknesses. Looking at the summary of student teachers' and tutors' comments discussed in the previous section, it should be clear that, as far as the functions of effective mentoring were concerned, more weaknesses than strengths were eventually highlighted by the participants. This was an indication that the mentoring system in the DTEP may be only partly effective and requires serious attention so that it can be improved.

How best can the DTEP mentoring process be developed and improved?

During the focus group interviews, the student teachers and the tutors suggested various ways in which the mentoring in the DTEP could be improved. These were as follows:

- *The college should employ more full-time tutors.*
- *Residential workshops should be extended from two weeks to a month.*
- *Tutors should be readily available at their different sites.*
- *Tutors should be trained in mentoring.*
- *Part-time module writers should be employed to release full-time tutors and make it possible for them to spend more time on mentoring.*
- *More vehicles should be purchased and made available to the tutors.*
- *Appropriate accommodation should be provided for tutors at the different sites.*

Conclusion

It could therefore be concluded that there is still room for improvement in the DTEP mentoring process and that there are ways and means to effect this improvement. The latter are discussed in the authors' recommendations that follow.

Recommendations

The conclusions reached in the study may affect people who are involved in the mentoring system in the DTEP in different ways. Therefore the authors divided the recommendations regarding the improvement of the mentoring system according to the relevant stakeholders. It is the authors' wish that these recommendations reach the relevant stakeholders so that they can be prepared to improve the mentoring system in the DTEP.

Lesotho College of Education

On the basis of the conclusions made, the authors recommend the following for the institution:

- The institution should value mentoring at all levels of educational development. If implemented well, mentoring can provide excellent support, challenges, and development opportunities for both mentors and mentees.
- In order to develop the commitment mentioned, the college should establish clear guidelines for the mentoring system.
- The college should hold workshops to develop mentoring skills among the tutors. Also workshops for the student teachers regarding their own responsibilities and expectations should be held.
- In view of the high numbers of DTEP student teachers and sites, more full-time and part-time tutors should be employed.
- Houses like the one in the Mokhotlong region should be built to provide suitable accommodation for tutors at the sites.

Tutors

The authors would like to make the following recommendations in respect of full-time DTEP tutors:

- Early in the mentoring relationship, the tutors (mentors) should concentrate on building a strong relationship of trust and goodwill.
- Each tutor should be provided with an official college schedule showing the return dates of marked assignments and other forms of feedback to student teachers.
- Tutors should be trained in the marking of assignments and be monitored closely in regard to the comments they write.
- Tutors should develop themselves professionally by furthering their studies in distance education and supervision at higher education institutions. They should attend workshops, seminars, and in-service training sessions on issues such as support services and mentoring.

Student teachers

Finally, the authors wish to make the following recommendations regarding student teachers in the DTEP:

- Student teachers should be encouraged to work as a team.
- Student teachers should be encouraged to form learning groups and be offered training in

group leadership skills so that they can be used as discussion leaders in their own learning group discussions.

- Student teachers should be advised on how to improve their planning skills.
- Student teachers should be helped to develop suitable study skills and to compile their own study schedules.
- Student teachers should be encouraged to take risks in order to become experienced and independent.

Summary and concluding remarks

The authors outlined and discussed the problem of mentoring within the Distance Teacher Education Programme (DTEP), an in-service training programme for primary school teachers in the Kingdom of Lesotho. By means of a literature review and a qualitative focus group perception survey, the authors succeeded in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of mentoring in distance education in general, as well as within the DTEP programme in particular. On the basis of these strengths and weaknesses they were able to conclude that the mentoring system in the DTEP is only partly effective and that it requires improvement. The way in which this improvement can be effected is contained in the recommendations that are finally made in respect of different stakeholders in the DTEP.

Despite the many problems associated with mentoring in the DTEP, the authors still wish to express their support for the institution of mentoring in the context of distance teacher education. The problems identified in the DTEP can be solved easily, making the mentoring system more effective.

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