

Mentoring in Teacher Education: Were the Experienced Teachers Ready as Seen By Students?

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Abstract

The study investigated preparedness of experienced teachers to participate in mentoring. Student teachers' views were sought about mentors' knowledge of their role; mentoring; how adults learn, and abilities needed by classroom teachers. Another purpose was to find out how mentors were made to be accountable to Bindura University of Science Education. The population of the study was 58 Part III Semester 2 students and 16, selected through voluntary participation, completed a questionnaire on mentoring. Data was analyzed using frequency counts to determine the views held by the majority of the student teachers. The views were then compared with what literature claimed to be the knowledge and skills expected of mentors. The researcher found out that student teachers' views about the preparedness of mentors were consistent with conventional norms and practices of teaching. This would seem to suggest that mentoring was limited in bringing about reform in teacher education. The study recommends in-service training for teachers in two key areas: principles of adult education and accountability in mentoring. Further research was recommended to seek opinions of experienced teachers about their preparedness to participate in the mentoring programme.

Key words: accountability, adult learners, mentoring, teacher education

Introduction

The Bachelor of Science Education Honours students at Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE) went on school attachment 4 times as part of their degree programme requirements: Part I students were attached to a pre-school and primary school for a period of four weeks, in Part II and III they visited a secondary school and focused their observation on Forms I-IV and Forms V-VI each time for four weeks, and in Part IV they went on school attachment for a period of twelve weeks. During the first days student teachers were expected to sit in classes, and with time were given opportunities to teach in the presence of an experienced teacher, herein referred to as mentor. The purpose of school attachment is to afford opportunity to student teachers to observe and learn the job of teaching.

The Department of Education, in principle, expected schools to assign a mentor to each student. The department preferred, for example, a chemistry graduate teacher to be a mentor of student teacher whose teaching subject was Chemistry. In practice, schools found it not always possible to match student teacher with mentor of the right teaching subject. Hence schools, through their own prerogatives, selected a suitable experienced teacher to act as mentor for the student teacher. The experienced teachers were expected to provide on-the-job nurturing and support to the student teacher. The

assumption was that mentoring afforded opportunities for field-based professional development of student teachers. A number of conditions necessary for a successful mentoring programme have been suggested in literature as: the development of a viable relationship between student teacher and mentor, the assignment of a mentor who possessed specific knowledge and skills, and the use of an accountability system (Gomez, 2001). Were experienced teachers ready to participate in the mentoring programme? In order to gain insight into the preparedness of experienced teachers to act as mentors there was need to study opinions of student teachers who had been in the field. The first purpose of the study was to find out prospective mentors' awareness of their role as expressed by student teachers. A second purpose of the study was to find out student teachers' views about their mentors' knowledge and skills of mentoring, how adults learn, and abilities needed by classroom teachers. A third purpose was to find out how mentors were made to be accountable to Bindura University of Science Education.

Research questions

What was the role of mentor as expressed by student teachers?

What were student teachers' views about their mentors' knowledge and skills of mentoring, how

adults learn, and abilities needed by classroom teachers?

How were mentors made accountable to Bindura University of Science Education as expressed by student teachers?

Conceptual framework

The origin of the term mentor is thought to be the character Mentor in Homer's *The Odyssey* and Fenelon's *Les Aventures de Telemaque* (Roberts, 1999). There seems to be evidence that 'The Odyssey' does not portray Mentor as a protective, guiding and supportive figure who acted as a wise and trusted counsellor of Telemachus. He could have been simply an old friend of King Ulysses to whom Telemachus often went to seek advice. It is Fenelon who wrote 'Telemaque', not Homer who endows his Mentor with the qualities, abilities and attributes that have come to be incorporated into the action of modern day mentoring (Roberts, 1999). The two contradictions in Homer's play and Fenelon's play would seem to suggest that some student teachers might be attached to experienced teachers who were not "wise" and others to those who were "wise". The universities that provide teacher education leave their students in the care of schools and experienced teachers the same way King Ulysses left his son in the hands of Mentor. Were the experienced teachers wise as portrayed by Fenelon?

There were many perspectives of mentoring (McNamara, 1999). Traditionally, mentoring might have been described as the activities conducted by a person (mentor) for another person (mentee) in order to help that other person to do a job more effectively and/or to progress in their career. Reh (2005) concurs by saying that a mentor is an individual, usually older, always more experienced, who helps and guides another individual's development. In educational settings an experienced teacher often acts as a mentor for a student teacher on teaching practice or a less experienced teacher on probation.

The experienced teacher happens to be the student teacher's main source of information about teaching, advice and feedback about one's practice, and counsellor when things do not work during school attachment. The experienced teacher often acts as a model, as a coach (Schön, 1983; 1987), as an initiator of practice-focused discussion, as a host for structuring the classroom context, as an emotional supporter (Elliot and Calderhead, 1993) and as a designer of learning experiences. Such a diversity of responsibilities demanded that experienced teachers should possess a multitude of skills: discussing teaching, demonstrating a variety of practices, counselling, target setting, identifying good teaching,

building relationship and developing collegiality. The student teacher in turn would learn good teaching practices by observation and imitation. For purposes of this study a mentor was an experienced teacher helping a student teacher adjust successfully to the work of teaching (Mudavanhu and Majoni, 2003).

Student teachers require knowledge and skills of interacting and motivating learners, helping learners relate new knowledge to what they already know, helping learners learn how to apply new knowledge to a new context, and integrating teaching strategies with learning processes (Curran-Everett, 1999). How do they learn how to teach? Curran-Everett (1999) identified four possible avenues of learning how to teach: joining a teacher education institution that offers seminars or workshops related to teaching and learning, discussing teaching with colleagues, observing colleagues teach, and interacting with teachers and students. A teacher education department could therefore be seen as a place where students learnt theoretical foundations of education, courses in pedagogy and applied science education. It was in Applied Science Education where student teachers got opportunities to discuss teaching, to observe teaching in action, the opportunity to interact with experienced teachers and pupils as well as to practice teaching. Applied Science Education, through mentoring gave student teachers opportunities to learn to teach through the four avenues identified by Curran-Everett (1999).

Mentors could be viewed as powerful change agents where an accountability system was put in place. To be accountable was defined as being responsible, liable or answerable to another (Moore, 1999). Student teachers needed mentors who could encourage their strengths and at the same time who reveal the blind-spots (Moore, 1999). Any teacher education institute that made use of mentoring needed an accountability system with procedures to ensure regular meetings and observations between mentors and student teachers (Gomez, 2001). Such regular meetings and observations were deemed useful for purposes of assessment of classroom teaching, constructive feedback and sharing, and modelling of sound pedagogical techniques (Gomez, 2001). The mentors could keep professional portfolios to display student teachers' professional development and growth. In addition, face-to-face meetings between participants could be considered valuable for partnership purposes between schools and universities. Another benefit was that reliance on a system of self-monitoring by mentors could result in laxness or even negligence of responsibility (Gomez, 2001). Lack of regular reports by mentors and student teachers prevent opportunities for self-reflection and dialogue with school heads and university lecturers.

Research Methodology

The study was a survey of opinions of student teachers. The research instrument was the questionnaire. From a population of 58 Part III Semester 2 students 16, selected through voluntary participation, completed questionnaire on mentoring. The major weakness of a questionnaire is the low rate of return. The researcher considered 16 (28%) an adequate return rate to proceed with the study. The student teachers had completed a school attachment for a period of 4 weeks observing teaching and learning at Advanced Level. The same students were preparing to go on a Final Applied Science Education attachment.

Results

Biodata of respondents

Distribution of respondents by gender was 14 (87.5 %) males and 2 (12.5 %) females. Thirteen student teachers (81 %) said that their mentors were male while 3 (19 %) were female. Distribution of student teachers was almost the same as distribution of their mentors by gender. All the student teachers, who participated in the study, were in the age group 21-30 years while the majority of the mentors (11 or 69 %) were aged 31-40 years. The researcher found that in the majority of cases mentors were male and older and this was also the preference of most student teachers (56 %). The distribution of respondents by subject area was: Biology (5), Chemistry (3), Geography (4), Mathematics (4) and Physics (0). BUSE often enrolls few candidates who study Physics in Part III and IV.

Role of mentor in the attachment programme

The student teachers' views were scored as follows: 1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Disagree and 5 = Strongly disagree. Strongly agree and agree were then collapsed into agree and a mean score <1.5 meant the majority agreed with the statement. The majority of the student teachers (81 %) agreed that

their mentors were their guide, confidant 63 %, and assessor (75 %) as shown in Table 1. Despite the majority of student teachers viewing mentors as assessors, the Department of Education did not use the marks to determine overall performance of student teachers in Applied Science Education. The university did not view mentors as assessors. Student teachers were equally divided when they were asked to decide whether mentors were their models. 50 % agreed while the other 50 % were either not sure or disagreed. A minority of respondents (44 %) agreed that mentor was student teacher's counsellor. Majority of respondents (75 %) agreed that mentor was student teacher's assessor contrary to practice at BUSE, where mentor's mark was not used to compute final grade in Applied Science Education.

Table 1. Views about mentor's role in mentoring (n = 16)

Q	Mentor was my	Agree	Mean
8	Model	50 %	2.69
9	Guide	81 %	1.88
10	Confidant	63 %	2.19
11	Counsellor	44 %	2.75
12	Assessor	75 %	2.31

Knowledge and skills of mentoring

The majority of the respondents agreed as shown in Table 2 that mentors knew student teachers' needs at different stages of professional development (69 %), were good listeners (75 %), had a good knowledge of counselling (75 %), were good guides (63 %), showed confidence in their protégés (81 %), and challenged the student teachers to use their talents (88%). Student teachers' view that experienced teachers had good knowledge of counselling contradicted the earlier opinion that mentors were counselors expressed by a minority (44 %). The student teachers believed that mentors possessed knowledge and skills of mentoring.

Table 2. Views about mentor's knowledge and skills of mentoring (n = 16)

Q	My mentor	Agree	Mean
13	Knew my needs at different stages of my professional development	69 %	2.13
14	Was a good listener.	75 %	2.19
15	Had a good knowledge of counselling.	75 %	2.19
16	Was a good guide.	63 %	2.38
17	Showed confidence in me.	81 %	1.94
18	Challenged me to use my talents.	88 %	1.75

Knowledge of adult learners

The study made the assumption that student teachers were adult learners such that mentors were supposed to possess knowledge of adult learners. The student teachers' views about mentors' knowledge of adult learners were sorted and recorded in Table 3. The majority of the respondents (69 %) were agreed that mentors treated them as self-directed learners giving evidence that experienced teachers understood adult learners. Another characteristic of adult learners was that they were problem-centred. However views expressed by respondents show that they were equally divided on whether experienced teachers understood adult learners to be problem-centred. 50 % agreed while the other 50 % were either not sure or disagreed. A third characteristic of adult learners was that they were role-related learners. Fifty-six percent of the respondents agreed that mentors saw them as

Knowledge of abilities needed by classroom teachers

The student teachers were learning to be classroom teachers such that mentors were expected to possess knowledge of abilities needed by classroom teachers. Student teachers' views about their mentors' knowledge of abilities needed by classroom teachers were sorted and are shown in Table 4. The researcher found that 75 % of the respondents agreed that mentors were able to show student teachers how to engage pupils in critical thinking. The views were consistent with what literature says about adult learners. The majority of respondents (69 %) agreed that mentors were able to help student teachers to develop interpersonal skills (69 %), and conflict resolving skills in respectful manners (56 %). Effective classroom management, in principle, required teachers to develop interpersonal skills important in classroom interaction and skills to resolve conflicts in respectful manners. Development

Table 3: Views about mentors' knowledge about adult learners (n = 16)

Q	My mentor treated me as	Agree	Mean
19	A self-directed learner.	69 %	2.00
20	A problem-centred learner	50 %	2.50
21	An experiential learner.	44 %	2.56
22	A role-related learner.	56 %	2.44
23	Someone who needed modelling and guidance to become self-reflective.	63 %	2.31

role-related learners. Adult learners learnt through modelling and guidance in order to become self-reflective. Sixty-three percent of the respondents agreed that mentors were aware that student teachers needed modelling and guidance to become self-reflective. The fifth characteristic of adult learners was that they were experiential learners. Literature suggested that adults learnt through actual observation and sharing experiences. The study found out that a minority of respondents (44 %) agreed that mentors treated student teachers as experiential learners. Student teachers in the study may not have understood what experiential learners were. According to literature mentoring programmes were based on experiential learning.

of interpersonal skills and skills to resolve conflicts would seem to be considered less important by student teachers (and mentors) as compared to abilities to engage learners in critical thinking. The researcher found that 44 % of the respondents agreed that mentors were able to show them how to incorporate effective educational technology usage in pedagogy. Literature on effective classroom teaching suggests that teachers needed to possess abilities of how to incorporate effective educational technology usage in pedagogy. Assessment was highly valued. The majority of respondents (63 %) agreed that mentors were able to show them how to use appropriate assessment techniques. The researcher concluded that experienced teachers were knowledgeable about abilities needed by effective classroom teachers.

Table 4. Respondents who agreed with statements of their mentor's knowledge of abilities needed by classroom teachers (n = 16)

Q	My mentor was able to	Agree	Mean
24	Show me how to engage students in critical thinking.	75 %	2.06
25	Help me to develop interpersonal skills.	69 %	2.25
26	Guide me in resolving conflicts in a respectful manner.	56 %	2.44
27	Show me how to incorporate effective educational technology usage in pedagogy.	44 %	2.63
28	Show me how to use appropriate assessment techniques.	63 %	2.31

Accountability

Student teachers' views about accountability in mentoring were recorded in Table 5. According to student teachers, mentors were made accountable in three ways. They held at least 3 meetings during the mentoring programme in a majority of cases (56 %). Mentors conducted at least 3 observations of student teacher teaching in most cases (81 %). Mentors allowed student teacher to observe at least 3 lessons conducted by mentor in a majority of cases (75 %).

Accountability was low or non-existent with respect to producing three written reports. A minority of respondents agreed (25 %). Further, only a minority of respondents (38 %) agreed that mentors kept a portfolio of student teachers professional growth. 44% of the respondents agreed that mentors carried out at least 3 face-to-face post-lesson meetings with student teacher to discuss professional development. Twenty-five percent of the respondents agreed that mentors carried out at least one face-to-face meeting with BUSE lecturer(s) to discuss mentoring. Only 19 % of the respondents agreed that mentors carried out dialogues with the school administration about the mentoring programme.

Table 5. Views about mentors' accountability (n = 16)

Q	My mentor	Agree	Mean
29	Held at least 3 meetings with me during the four weeks.	56 %	2.56
30	Conducted at least 3 lesson observations of me teaching.	81 %	1.88
31	Conducted at least 3 lessons while I observed.	75 %	1.88
32	Produced at least 3 written reports of my lessons.	25 %	3.25
33	Kept a professional portfolio to display my development and growth.	38 %	1.94
34	Carried out at least 3 face-to-face post lesson meetings with me.	44 %	2.75
35	Carried out at least 1 face-to-face meeting with my lecturer(s).	25 %	3.81
36	Carried out dialogues with school administration about the mentoring programme.	19 %	3.39

The researcher concluded that despite mentors playing an important role in hosting BUSE student teachers, BUSE had not put in place adequate accountability measures. Schools, mentors and student teachers were left on their own to put up accountability measures.

Discussion

The researcher found out that student teachers were of the opinion that experienced teachers were knowledgeable about the role of mentors. Such a belief would seem to suggest that student teachers had confidence in the guidance they received from experienced teachers. While it might not be possible to draw up a comprehensive list of knowledge and abilities mentors should possess in order to be effective in the mentoring programme, experienced teachers were expected to be model, guide, confidant, counselor and assessor (Gomez, 2001). As such, the experienced teachers who happen to be the potential mentors, were supposed to be knowledgeable about the above named roles.

An understanding of student teachers' expectations would form a solid base on which to plan and carry out mentoring activities. With time the mentoring roles could be adjusted as a direct response to the changing needs of the student teachers (Gray and Gray, 1985 as cited in Schuck and Segal, 2001). Good and effective mentors were expected to possess knowledge and skills of mentoring. BUSE student teachers believed that experienced teachers were knowledgeable and skilled in mentoring. The student teachers were likely to be receptive to the guidance and help provided by their mentors. Further, it implies that the student teachers believed that experienced teachers were ready to participate in the mentoring programme.

The researcher assumed that student teachers were adult learners and mentors were, in principle, expected to be knowledgeable about adult learners. Student teachers believed that their mentors were knowledgeable about three dimensions of adult education: adults as self-directed learners, as role related learners, and that adults needed modeling and guidance. The student teachers neither believed that experienced teachers knew that adults were problem-centred nor experiential learners. A possible explanation suggested by this study could be that student teachers neither viewed themselves as problem-centred nor experiential learners. Assuming that the views held by the student teachers were consistent with their experiences in schools, it would appear that experienced teachers needed in-service training in order to learn about the principles of adult education.

Literature on effective teaching has identified the following as abilities needed by classroom teachers: ability to engage students in critical thinking, ability to develop interpersonal skills, ability in resolving conflicts in a respectful manner, ability in incorporating educational technology usage in pedagogy, and ability to use appropriate assessment techniques. The study found out that student teachers were of the view that experienced teachers possessed knowledge of all these abilities with the exception of incorporating educational technology usage in pedagogy. The implications were that experienced teachers hardly integrated educational technology in their lessons, and student teachers under their guidance were likely to learn that educational technology was not important in science instruction.

The researcher found that the BUSE student teachers believed that the experienced teachers were made accountable in only three areas. The mentors were accountable in as far as they held meetings with student teachers, conducted lesson observations of student teachers, and allowed the student teachers to observe them teaching. The activities cited above

were the 'traditional' supervision activities any head of Department would carry out. The experienced teachers were not accountable with respect to documenting mentoring activities, that is, writing reports, keeping portfolios, meeting lecturers and discussing mentoring with school administration. The researcher recommends that BUSE should in-service experienced teachers in report writing, keeping professional development portfolios, and conducting dialogues among stakeholders in the mentoring programme. There was also need to find differences in professional development between student teachers attached to a mentor as portrayed in Homer's play and in Fenelon's 'Telemaque'.

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