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Mentoring pre-service teachers in situated learning: A case study of a Zimbabwean teacher training college

Sithulisiwe Bhebhe *

Faculty of Education, University of Eswatini, Kwaluseni, Eswatini.

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Abstract

Mentoring pre-service teachers on teaching practice is an important part of the teacher development process. Pre-service teachers initially did teaching practice in schools where they could put what they had learned in their teacher education institute into practice. Teaching practice is now possible in virtual classrooms. This connects mentorship to the situated learning theory, which holds that effective education necessitates learning rooted in authentic contexts of practice, where pre-service teachers will participate in activities within social communities. Two teaching practice coordinators, eleven lecturers, seventeen pre-service teachers, and ten mentor teachers who were purposefully selected to participate in the study were interviewed using qualitative research approaches. Face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions were used to gather information. In this paper, I discuss the aspects that contribute to effective TP mentoring implementation as well as the contextual learning theory. Collaboration, introspection, coaching, multiple practice, acquisition of new abilities, and authentic situations are among the factors shown in the study. The mentor teacher serves as a knowledge provider, facilitator, and mediator. In the college under study there is great emphasis on that pre-service teachers get attached to mentor teachers in their practicing schools.

Keywords: Situated learning; E-learning; Mentoring; Pre-service teachers; Teaching practice; Professional development

1. Introduction

Mentoring pre-service teachers on teaching practice is an important part of teacher education. This is a procedure that takes place in physical or virtual classrooms in schools. It establishes vital links between the theories students teachers learn in college or university lectures and the practice they put into practice during teaching practice. Mentoring also aids the pre-service teacher's professional and personal development while simultaneously providing professional development for the mentor teacher [1]. Mentoring appears to be a supportive connection, a helpful process, a teaching and learning process, a reflective process, a professional development process, and a formalised procedure [Barrett, Mazerolle, & Nottingham, 2017]. Student teachers go through many stages of learning how to teach while being mentored. This approach benefits both the mentor and the mentee in some way, such as role modelling, coaching, and emotional support. The next topic will be mentoring as professional development through role modeling.

2. Mentoring as professional development through role modelling

Mentors provide a model for the student teachers [2]. This could include a model in the form of behaviour, a demonstration lesson or particular teaching strategy or in the form of suggested lesson plans, ideas for activities or specific recommendations to take to overcome particular difficulties [3]. Student teachers take the examples and copy

* Corresponding author: Sithulisiwe Bhebhe
Faculty of Education, University of Eswatini, Kwaluseni, Eswatini.

or sift from observed practices, ideas and strategies with which to experiment. Mentor teachers mentoring student teachers undergoing teacher training in colleges or Universities are expected to be hard workers and they are expected to lead student teachers by example. Lesson presentations which they demonstrate are expected to have sequential activities and relevant learning and teaching materials [4]. In mentoring pre-service teachers the mentor teacher is expected to be an example of an active and creative expert who is able to demonstrate outstanding performance in lesson preparation and delivery so that the mentee can copy the good observed practices and use them. The next section discusses mentoring as professional development through coaching.

3. Mentoring as professional development through coaching

This process of mentoring involves consistent support, structures, observation and follow up discussions coupled with repeated practice of strategies or skills [5]. Through coaching, the mentor imparts professional knowledge to the student teacher by a combination of shared actions and verbal as well as non-verbal contact. Mentors communicate their knowledge, understanding and practical skills by relying on three strategies, namely joint experimentation, where mentor and student teachers work together to solve a problem; follow me, in which the mentor talks through own work; and hall and mirrors, where the mentor's aim is to expand the alternative ways in which the student teacher may view a particular situation [6].

Through coaching, teacher training institutes expect mentors of their student teachers to prepare lessons together with the student teachers to equip them with strategies for lesson presentations. The neatness of the mentor in record keeping and the quality of the pupils' written work could be reflected in the pre-service teacher's work. Use of varied strategies employed by the mentor could also be seen in the pre-service teacher's lesson presentations [7]. Through the 'follow me' strategies, mentees can be fascinated by the mentor's artistic skills, hence become excellent professionals in the teaching profession. Pre-service teachers also require emotional support during the mentoring process. The next section discusses emotional support to pre-service teachers through mentoring

4. Emotional support to pre-service teachers through mentoring

Pre-service teachers could experience uncertainty and self-doubt as they learn to teach. The support and encouragement that they get from the mentor teacher could be a source of inspiration in maintaining motivation, involvement and persistence to solve classroom teaching problems [8]. A supportive mentor could avoid a situation where a pre-service teacher who is in the early stages of teaching practice, is discouraged by his or her teaching attempts. When the mentor and the mentee support each other in the teaching and learning process, they both get motivated in the mentoring process [9]. Teacher education institutes entrust their pre-service teachers to mentor teachers and they expect mentor teachers to be supportive of their pre-service teachers.

Most student teachers began teaching practice in physical or virtual classrooms whose learning environments had already been established by the mentors [10]. Thus, student teachers have to fit into this prevailing environment. The mentor teacher, therefore, has an indirect influence on the practices that the pre-service teacher can adopt. The pre-service teacher normally feels there is a need to 'fit in' to the class teacher's way of working as this would be what the pupils are used to [11]. The next section will discuss the factors that contribute to proper implementation of the mentoring process in physical and online classrooms.

4.1. Factors that contribute to proper implementation of the mentoring process

There are factors that contribute to proper implementation of the mentoring process. These are collaboration, reflection, coaching, multiple practice, articulation of learning skills and authentic environments.

4.2. Collaboration in the mentoring process

A situated learning environment supports the collaborative construction of knowledge Collaborative learning is based on the idea that learning is naturally a social act in which the participants talk among themselves. It is through the talk that learning occurs [12] When pre-service teachers are on teaching practice, they are provided with the opportunity to work collaboratively and communicate with their mentor teachers and also with their colleagues. They can even form virtual teams where they discuss matters pertaining to lesson planning or presentation so that they are not limited by time or distance.

In situated learning, collaboration is premised on the understanding that learning depends on rich contexts. In rich contexts, pre-service teachers are able to face real life challenges in the teaching profession, and work to solve them

collectively [13]. Pre-service teachers work together with mentors and colleagues to deal with challenging situations. This inculcates in them important values in the teaching profession of teamwork. [14] note the importance of teamwork in the teaching profession and pronounce that teamwork results in quality teaching and learning. In situated learning, it is important that trainee teachers are given an opportunity to work closely with their mentor teachers and their colleagues in planning their work and also an opportunity to observe how their mentor teachers and their colleagues do their work [15].

Modern trends in teaching and learning place more emphasis on cooperation as opposed to competition. On the importance of collaboration, [16] point out that Collaboration is a promising mode of human engagement that has become a twenty-first-century trend. The need to think together and work together on critical issues has increased. Situated learning provides for collaboration through pre-service teachers working together in problem solving. This also involves sharing ideas and participating in the teaching and learning process as a team. Thus, through the teaching practice process, the pre-service teacher and the mentor teacher work together in solving problems they meet in the classroom.

4.3. Reflection in mentoring pre-service teacher on teaching practice

A situated learning environment would require pre-service teachers to reflect upon a much broader base of knowledge to solve their problems through reflection [17]. Part of reflection is critical reflection, which is the process of analysing, reconsidering and questioning experiences within a broad context of issues [18]. Pre-service teachers should not take things at face value, but they should learn to analyse and provide alternatives. This enables them to be critically reflective and reflexive teachers.

To underscore the importance of a critically reflective teacher, [19] reveal that such a teacher is able to develop an improved consciousness of his or her teaching from as many different vantage points as possible. Situated learning allows trainee teachers to constantly reflect on the way of doing things by questioning teaching approaches through the process of evaluating lessons [20]. Pre-service teachers ultimately develop to become teachers who always seek to better their practice, and this is vital in professional growth.

4.4. Coaching pre-service teachers on teaching practice

A situated learning environment affords coaching at different times or locations of the learning process [21]. This also involves scaffolding in which the teacher or mentor provides skills and strategies, as well as links to support the learner to progress and complete the task. Coaching also involves monitoring pre-services' activities, as well as assisting and supporting them to ensure that they develop the required competencies [22]. [23] points out that the coach, not the pre-service teacher, is in charge of the journey's pace and direction. Set the ground rules, gather the relevant information, access, analyse, and judge the issue, develop the appropriate action plan, prod or push as needed, monitor progress, alter approach as needed, and deliver the goods are all responsibilities of the coach.

The coach, therefore, has a crucial role in ensuring that the pre-service teacher is supported in every way possible and that progress is monitored to ensure successful apprenticeship. The issue of setting ground rules is also very important as the pre-service teacher should be aware of what the coach expects from him or her at any given point of the relationship. Coaching is, however, dynamic as the coach has to respond to the needs and progress of the pre-service teacher by adapting and adjusting plans and strategies [23]. Coaching should also be co-productive, with both the pre-service teacher and the mentor teacher working together. [24] reveal that coaching encourages pre-service teachers' engagement in their own learning and performance improvement, and that it is different from simply receiving and absorbing knowledge through instruction.

4.5. Multiple practices

In the situated learning theory, mentoring and apprenticeships take place in communities of practice, meaning that trainees learn by doing [25]. This involves adopting various roles related to the major role they are being trained in. The pre-service teacher has to observe and imitate by working closely with the mentor teacher, hence the importance of practice [25]. The numerous roles of a teacher can influence the pre-service teacher's gear to work as they realise that there are many activities involved in the teaching process but are all doable [26]. The mentor teacher in the teaching practice process is a facilitator, a role model, an information provider, a resource developer, a planner and an assessor [27] [28] [29] [30] [31]. A pre-service teacher should practise most of the roles while still on teaching practice [32] to gain proficiency in each one of the roles.

4.6. Acquisition of new skills

In teaching practice mentoring, a situated learning environment promotes skills acquisition in lesson design and delivery [33]. From the situated learning theory, behaviour is learned from the environment through the process of observational learning [34]. External environmental reinforcement is not the only factor to influence learning and behaviour in an individual. Intrinsic reinforcement, a form of internal reward, such as pride, satisfaction, and a sense of accomplishment that influences the articulation of learning skills in an individual is another factor [35]. The mentor teacher has a role in the mentoring process to spell out the new skills a pre-service teacher is expected to acquire and what they acquire in the mentoring process so that the pre-service teacher attains a sense of accomplishment.

4.7. Authentic learning environments

A situated learning environment provides an authentic context that reflects the way the knowledge may be used in real-life [20]. This means that pre-service teachers on teaching practice are afforded the opportunity to try out their skills of teaching in real classroom settings, physical or e-learning environments. Learning theories acquired theoretically at university or college are tested out to ascertain their workability. Affording pre-services an opportunity to work in real workplace environments allows them to come to terms with the challenges of the workplace [36] [37] [38].

The situated learning theory values the social aspect of learning, as well as the application of what is learnt [39]. Pre-service teachers learn from senior colleagues, as well as from each other and they apply acquired knowledge and skills to real teaching and learning contexts [40]. [41] in the authentic learning environment the pre-service teacher starts at the periphery of the professional demands and then goes through processes of collaboration, interaction and engagement to negotiate his or her way to becoming a fully-fledged member of a community of practice. In considering these factors contributes to appropriate implementation of teaching practice mentoring in training pre-service teachers and producing a well cultivated professional.

4.8. Theoretical framework

This study was guided by the situated learning theory which borrows heavily from the social learning theory [42]. The situated learning theory according to [43] was developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in the early 1990s, and it follows the work of Dewey, Vygotsky, and others who claim that students are more inclined to learn by actively participating in the learning experience. Situated learning entails creating meaning from the real activities of daily living [44] where learning occurs relative to the teaching environment.

Situated learning essentially is a matter of creating meaning from the real activities of daily living proposed by [43] as field trips where students actively participate in an unfamiliar environment, music and sports [physical education] practice which replicate actual setting of these events like, orchestras, studios, training facilities, laboratories and child-care centers used as classrooms in which students are involved in activities which replicate actual work settings and cooperative education and internship experiences in which students are immersed and physically active in an actual work environment. In teaching practice mentoring such proposed activities may illustrate that pre-service teachers need to be actively involved in real classroom teaching where they would tackle real classroom problems as the practice implies that the pre-service teacher situated in the physical or e-learning environment gains experience and acquires knowledge [45].

Objectives

The objectives of this study were to:

- Establish the factors that determine appropriate teaching practice mentoring.
- Determine the expectations of the teacher education institute under study on teaching practice mentoring.

4.9. Problem statement

It is an expectation that when student teachers go for teaching practice they get attached to mentor teachers who are experienced to create proper mentoring relationships with them in schools physical or in e-learning environments [46]. In most instances the mentor teacher will take the student teacher through to the everyday practice in class without really considering what is expected to fully professionally develop the pre-service teacher [47]. This study will point out the factors that determine an appropriate teaching practice mentoring as well as what is expected during teaching practice mentoring.

5. Methodology

The methodology of a study is a coherent collection of methods that complement each other in an attempt to answer the objectives of the study [48]. A qualitative research approach was used in this study to give descriptions of views from the study participants as reflected by [49] that in a qualitative study participants are allowed to narrate their views to express their experiences on a phenomenon under study. Face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions were used to solicit information from the participants. Data was collected from the participants' natural settings in schools for pre-service teachers and mentor teachers and in the college under study for lecturers and teaching practice coordinators.

The sample used in this study was illustrative of the population from which it was drawn from as it had the characteristics of the population [50]. A research population is essentially a large collection of individuals that are of interest in the study [51]. Since it is impossible for researchers to collect data from every individual in the population, a sample becomes manageable to collect information from. Purposeful sampling was used to select the study participants as it is a method related to qualitative research [52]. The participants in this study were 17 pre-service teachers and 11 lecturers. Data analysis is the process used to answer research questions and in a qualitative research approach data is organised and put in categories or themes or findings [53]. The findings of the study are presented next.

6. Results and discussion

Mentor teachers are perceived to be classroom practitioners with experience, appropriate knowledge, desired wisdom and suitable skills meant to develop a pre-service teacher professionally. University or College lecturers prepare pre-service teachers for teaching practice in various ways with their own expectations on how pre-service teachers should be mentored by mentor teachers in physical or e-learning school environments. I enquired from the college practitioners their expectations of mentor teachers. Different stakeholders responded in various ways.

The teaching practice coordinators have a task to ensure that every pre-service teacher has been deployed to a school and the head teacher ensures that every pre-service teacher is attached to a mentor teacher. Placing the pre-service teacher in schools and attaching them to mentor teachers in line with situated learning as this will ensure that the pre-service teachers actively participate in the learning experience as suggested by [43]. Teaching practice coordinators have a keen interest on how pre-service teachers are guided in the schools.

Teaching practice coordinator number 1 states that, *"...we have advised the heads to ensure that the pre-service teacher has a mentor, even if the mentor is on leave, the headmaster must allocate the pre-service teacher to another qualified teacher."* Similarly, teaching practice coordinator number 2 is of the opinion that, *"The college expects pre-service teachers to be attached to experienced mentor teachers who will always be available in the classroom to assist the pre-service teacher."* The view presented by the teaching practice coordinator number 2 reflects that it lies in the interests of the teacher education institute, university or college, that pre-service teachers be deployed and attached to mentor teachers who willingly guide them in their teaching practice. The mentor teacher and the pre-service teacher working together and assisting each other supports collaboration as suggested by [12].

Different university or college lecturers have particular interests on how pre-service teachers are guided in teaching the different subjects offered in the school curriculum. I asked lecturers to explain how they expect the pre-service teachers to be mentored. Lecturer number 3 expressed that, *"I am expecting that they get mentored or rather I would say they should be assisted in planning lessons and scheming and also on how to handle the class when they are teaching."* Lecturer number 4 echoed similar views that pre-service teachers should be guided when they are on teaching practice, and get help in doing their schemes and plans as well as classroom management as explained by [54] that pre-service teachers and mentor teachers collaborate in producing schemes of work and lesson plans.

Lecturer number 1 from focus group 1 anticipates that pre-service teachers be given feedback, after they have taught a lesson, pointing out the shortcomings and the strengths of a lesson presentation. These sentiments were also shared by lecturer number 1 from group 2 who expressed the view that:

We expect mentor teachers to use the positive way of criticism, where the pre-service teacher is doing well it should be pointed out and where the pre-service teacher is not doing well it should also be pointed out so that the pre-service teacher does not feel discouraged.

Views from Lecturer number 1 from focus group 1 and Lecturer number 1 from group 2 purport that part of the situated learning done in schools during teaching practice entail reflection as suggested by [54] that reflection is where pre-service teachers have an opportunity to do an analysis of their experiences as reconsidering some of them.

Lecturer number 1 pointed out that he expects pre-service teachers to be under the supervision of, “...mentors who are knowledgeable and skilled to demonstrate the scheming, planning and lesson delivery skills appropriately to the pre-service teachers.” Implying that pre-service teachers need to be attached to mentor teachers who will guide and assist the pre-service teachers in scheming, planning and delivering lessons. Similarly, lecturer number 2 from focus group 1 also shared the same view that, “Giving demonstration lessons, guiding them on lesson delivery and use of teaching and learning aids is one other way we expect mentor teachers to assist the pre-service teachers with. Lecturer number 2 shared similar sentiments as those expressed by lecturer number 1 and 2 in expressing that:

We expect the mentors to assist them in the actual delivery of the lesson because here at college we mainly equip pre-service teachers with the theoretical aspect of how to deliver lessons. At times it happens that time may not permit for lecturers to do demonstration lessons so the pre-service teacher would go out without an idea of how to deliver a lesson.

Lecturer number 2 however explained that at college pre-service teachers are equipped with theoretical knowledge on lesson delivery and at times lecturers fail to do demonstration lessons to pre-service teachers, hence the need for mentor teachers to further compliment or fill in the gaps.

Lecturer number 2 states that, “The other thing is that we normally want mentors to assist the pre-service teachers by giving them time to teach” Various stakeholders involved in TP mentoring have various expectations from a TP mentor. The TP mentor is expected to guide, coach and counsel a pre-service teacher on teaching practice in all activities expected of a classroom practitioner.

7. Conclusion

The college under study in Zimbabwe values situated learning environments as the head teacher guarantees that every pre-service teacher is assigned to a mentor teacher, and the teaching practice coordinators ensure that every pre-service teacher is assigned to a school. These coordinators are particularly interested in how pre-service teachers are supported in the classroom. This research supports [43] hypothesis that pairing preservice teachers with mentor instructors will encourage them to participate actively in the learning process and be a knowledge provider, facilitator, and mediator of knowledge. In the college under study there is great emphasis on that pre-service teachers get attached to mentor teachers in their practicing schools.

Situating the pre-service teachers in a school environment, physical or e-learning environment allows the mentor teacher to guide the preservice teacher, coach them and assist them with scheming planning and lesson presentations. The study's findings also show that pre-service teachers should be mentored throughout their teaching practice and receive assistance with their schemes and plans as well as classroom management. This outcome is consistent with [54] belief that pre-service teachers should be mentored in a collaborative atmosphere that allows for multiple practice and reflection on their performance. The mentor teacher also contributes to the preservice teacher's final teaching practice mark in college understudy.

Recommendations

This research suggests that college lecturers' pre-teaching practice lesson demos should be taken seriously, and that no student teacher should go for teaching practice without a clear understanding of what they will be expected to do in the classroom. A physical or virtual classroom could be used. This study also suggests that the mentor teacher be provided a checklist of the factors that lead to excellent pre-service students' situated learning on teaching practice, so that they are aware of what they are expected to perform.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Statement of informed consent

Permission to conduct a study was sought from the Ministry of Higher Education in Zimbabwe, the College under study as well as the Ministry of Education and the schools where student teachers are placed for teaching practice. Consent was obtained from all individuals that participated in this study.

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