Mentor teachers' feedback role in improving the training of Grades 1-3 student teachers in South Africa

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Abstract

Mentor teachers play a vital role in the pre-service training of teachers. The role of mentor teachers assumes even more significance when the training is done at a distance education institution. It is impossible for lecturers and university representatives to reach every teacher student during the weeks of teaching practice done at schools in a big country like South Africa. The feedback obtained from the mentor teachers is thus important to train student teachers when they present their lessons during weeks of teaching practice at schools. But the feedback from mentor teachers can also be used for the future training of student teachers. Mentor teachers should, however, also be informed about their role as mentors for student teachers. In this article the way feedback of mentor teachers could be used to improve the quality of the lessons of student teachers when offering language lessons in Grades $1 - 3$, is discussed.

Keywords: mentoring, mentor teachers, teaching practice, mentors' feedback, language teaching, reflection

Introduction

The main aim of teacher training is to develop well-rounded students who are professionally trained and informed about the many requirements and skills to be mastered to become a successful teacher. Students also need to have the necessary theoretical knowledge. The

undergraduate and Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) curricula for teacher training offered by various institutions in South Africa, seem to successfully address many issues involved when teaching learners at school. Provision is made for good subject content knowledge about, for instance, language teaching, mathematics, social sciences, art and music, multicultural issues and diversity, as required in the various school phases.

The experience that student teachers gain during their periods of teaching practice is, however, a very valuable component of their actual training as teachers. The days and weeks spent at school during teaching practice remain important for future teachers, as they are provided with the opportunity to plan and present their lessons according to their knowledge and interests. They also have the chance to reflect on their own teaching when they offer lessons. Thus, the teaching practice weeks become a continuous learning occasion for the inexperienced teacher students (Verkler & Hutchinson, 2011:17). Student teachers' learning is enhanced by the quality of feedback and support that they receive from mentor teachers.

During teaching practice, student teachers are dependent on learning the practice of teaching and the way in which a school is managed from the management and staff of a school and especially from the teachers in whose classes they do their teaching practice and who act as their mentors. The preparation that is done at university level to develop student teachers into professional teachers, the experience gained during school visits and the cooperation of the mentor teachers is crucial for the professional development of student teachers. "As gatekeepers to the work and norms of teaching, mentor teachers play a highly influential role in how pre-service teachers understand the work of teaching … [T]he position of a mentor teacher as arbiter of teacher knowledge in practice affords opportunities to significantly influence the values, opinions, and perspectives of prospective teachers" (Butler & Cuenca, 2012:297).

The selection of teachers who can act as mentors during students' teaching practice weeks can pose a problem as they are often not informed about the teacher education programmes offered by the institutions where the students do their teaching practice. They are usually selected based on the assumption that any person who has taught for some years, can effectively teach student teachers. Mentors are often left to fend for themselves because they are not provided with the aims and practices of the various higher education institutions at which the

students study.   This leads to uncertainty about the roles and responsibilities of mentor teachers (Butler & Cuenca, 2012:297).

A general request to the teachers who acted as mentors was included In the official letter from the university that student teachers whose lessons are discussed in this article took to the principals of the schools where they spent the weeks of teaching practice, These requests include the introduction of the student to the staff and the learners, that ideas about teaching should be shared and that the student teacher should be involved so that his or her stay at the school could be meaningful and informative.   The mentor teacher was also asked to help the student cultivate a positive attitude towards teaching at a school, to discreetly discuss mistakes that the student teacher could make, to act as a role model, and to provide the university with an honest, detailed and useful review of the student teacher (University of South Africa, 2014:11).

Teacher training in South Africa

In 1994 South Africa had its first democratic election when every South African citizen could vote. The establishment of the ANC (African National Congress) government brought about a growth and a restructuring of the education system. This demanded for qualified teachers capable of transforming knowledge production and transfer beyond apartheid era practice. However, Samuel and Stephens (2000:477) noted that the training of student teachers in the new South Africa was hampered, among other factors, by a lack of physical resources and funds. The influences from the cultural environments and the years at school that student teachers brought with them also posed additional challenge. Schools in South Africa face the challenge of a demographics of a student population growing and changing in diversity as the country has witnessed an influx of immigrants whose children it has to accommodate in its schools (Zozakiewicz, 2010:137). The many cultures and languages they represent has added to the official-language difficulties that South African schools already struggle with. Young people, like the student teachers in this study, have not had enough opportunity to learn about the various cultures represented by the eleven official languages in the country, not to mention those of the many new immigrants. Yet, a knowledge and understanding of the culture of the learners the teacher engages with are important aspects of teaching that must be overlooked. Thus, Zeichner (2003:493) notes that a cultural rift between teachers and learners at school is further

complicated if enough attention is not paid in teacher training to prepare future teachers to teach across race, culture, and languages.

Proper tutor mentoring of student teachers is one of the means available to help qualify prepare teachers capable of meeting some of these challenges. Marais and Meier (2004:221) observe that problems of resource availability and the geographical distances between the homes of learners and their schools are problems that hamper the success of students' teaching practice. They also observe that some of the teachers, especially those in rural areas, who acted as mentors for student teachers often had low expertise and training. To not affect the success of student teachers' lesson presentation and their ideas about what the teaching profession entails, these problems must be properly handled. (Quick & Sieborger, 2005).

Mentoring is not an easy task for all teachers. It requires interpersonal skills and the ability to teach about teaching. Mentor teachers sometimes find it more difficult to guide adults in their learning process than they know how to with young learners. The mentor teacher often grapples with the problematic of dual loyalty to learners' learning and student teachers' learning. Some do not know exactly what is expected from them and most have to struggle with the problem of time constraint. (Jaspers, Meijer, Prins & Wubbels 2014:106-107). Kiggundu and Nayimull's research at the Vaal University of Technology in South Africa (2009:354-357) includes reports of mentor teachers' impact on student teachers. Some students described their mentors as role models who set an example worth following. They offered good guidance on how to engage with both the classroom and the school system. But some student teachers lamented that their mentor teachers saw them as relief teachers who had to take over the full loads of the teaching of the mentor while the mentors would sit at the back of the class. Also, some mentor teachers not trusting the student teachers, refused to leave their classes in the care of the student teachers. The support that the students received from their mentors thus varied from school to school. Unfortunately, apart from the studies by Marais and Meier (2004) and Kiggundu and Nayimull (2009), not much research about mentorship in schools has been done in South Africa. This article is thus an attempt to shed light on the way in which a group of students at a distance education institution in South Africa received support and feedback on their lessons from mentor teachers.

Theoretical framework

This article takes off from a social constructivist viewpoint. Social constructionists emphasize the importance of recognising the implications in the schools of teachers' work in context, in social terms as well as in political terms. The idea is to create more democratic and inclusive conditions in the school and beyond the school (Zeichner, 1993:494). In line with the social constructivist research method, the data used in this article was collected using a qualitative research approach.

In a classroom, there is often an overlap between a constructivist and a social constructivist approach, though the latter lays a greater emphasis on learning through social interaction than on the importance of looking at the cultural background of learners. According to Vygotsky, culture is very important in the development of a child, as it gives a child the cognitive tools needed for development. Learners carry from their environment the tools of culture into the classroom; their language, cultural history, social background and also electronic forms of information access (Constructivism and social constructivism in the classroom, 2015:1).

For social constructivists, both the context in which learning occurs and the social contexts that learners bring to the school are crucial. How learners, and especially young learners, interact with members of their society is important. Interaction with other people, especially adults, is the means by which young learners master the social meaning of important symbol systems, like language, and how to use systems. Thinking skills are also developed through interaction with adults (Kim, 2014:1). This also applies to young student teachers whose thinking skills could be enhanced through quality interaction with the teachers who act as their mentors.

Statement of the Problem

Mentor teachers' support and advice are important in developing student teachers into professionals capable of applying what they have learned in theory to the classroom context. Since lecturers and supervisors are not always present when student teachers offer their lessons, students are dependent on the feedback and support that they receive from their mentor teachers. Working through the teaching practice workbooks of a group of Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students as the lecturer responsible for coordinating the module, I realised

that not all their mentor teachers provided their student mentees during the weeks of teaching practice with appropriate and constructive feedback. Been prompted thus to reflect on feedback from mentor teachers who provided some, it became apparent to me that gaps exist in the way that mentor teachers were requested to give feedback in the students' workbooks. I concluded that the mentor teachers' feedback pages in the students' workbook needed to be better planned and designed. I also observed some excellent feedback from some mentor teachers that provide relevant guidance for observing student teachers in the future and on how student teacher should write the feedback they receive.

The Research Method

The data that is used in this article was drawn from the written language lessons and the mentor teachers' feedback on the lessons of students enrolled for PGCE. This is a professional teacher's qualification program in South Africa for into which people can enroll who have obtained a bachelor's degree in subjects that align with those offered in the school system.

The lessons that are captured in the workbooks were presented in the language classes of Grade 1 – 3 learners, since in South Africa, both a home language and a second language, referred to as a first additional language in official documents, are taught in Grades 1 – 3. The student teachers had to present six lessons in the home language and in the second language of the learners in the class. Some of the learners were taught in English, although it was their second language. As explained later in this article, this happens in South Africa because many non-English speaking parents opt to send their children to schools where English is the language of instruction from Grade 1 onwards. The fact that students whose information is used in this article are open distance education students made them even more dependent on quality support and feedback from the teachers in the various schools who mentored them during their teaching practicum.

Employing the qualitative research method, I used document analysis, working through the student teachers' workbooks and specifically looking at the comments that the mentor teachers wrote after each lesson that the student presented. As noted by McMillan and Schumacher (2010:457), document analysis is a non-interactive strategy used to obtain qualitative data when there is little or no exchange between the researcher and the participants

who provided the information. I analysed the various comments written by the mentor teachers after each lesson that a student teacher presented and placed them in categories that arose from the data.

Afterwards I reflected on the information that I obtained from my reviews of the mentor teachers' feedback. There has been a growing awareness of the positive role that reflection can play in education. Lew and Schmidt (2011:530) in their definitions of reflection in education emphasize focused critical analysis of knowledge and experience in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the situation.

Participants

In 2014 a total of 307 students enrolled for the PGCE at the University of South Africa. At the end of the year after the students' workbooks were submitted for assessment, I randomly selected thirty of the workbooks on teaching a first and a second language in the Foundation Phase. However, based on addresses of students, I tried to include workbooks from both rural areas and cities and I tried to spread the choices across all the provinces of the country. I numbered the workbooks 1 to 30; thus, in this study reference is made to a student by referring to student number 1 to 30. Permission to use some of the content of the workbooks for research purposes was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the College of Education at the University of South Africa, Pretoria.

Mentor Teachers' Reports

The classroom teachers where the students did their teaching practice were appointed as the supervising teachers for the students, thus, the students' mentors. The students did their teaching practice at functioning schools in all the provinces of South Africa. Being an open distance institution, lecturers and part-time staff representing the university visited some students. But not every student teacher could be visited, hence, the crucial role that mentor teachers play in the training of these students.

The mentor teacher's assessment of each lesson offered by the student teacher consisted of a page which, after the discussion of the completed lesson with the student, was entered in the student's teaching practice workbook. Questions were posed under the following headings:

Planning, Presentation and General Impression. Under the various headings, the supervising teachers had answer questions such as:

- How well did the student meet the needs of all the learners in the group according to their language levels?

- How well did the student show creativity by integrating educational media to accommodate the learner?

- How well did the student use repetition to establish vocabulary without boring the learners?

- To what extent did the student ensure that all the learners participated in the activities?

- Did the student give positive feedback to the learners?

- Was the language used simple enough for all the learners to follow?

- Did the student succeed in making the learners enthusiastic about reading?

Reflecting on the questions, I realized that they did provide for logical and complete information about the lesson presentation and the many issues that are required to present good lessons. The teachers had to give the student a mark out of four for each option about which a question was posed. In the rubric for the marks '1' represented 'excellent' and '4' meant 'needs attention'.

Out of the 30 randomly selected workbooks that formed part of this research, 11 supervising teachers provided no remarks after the lessons. Two teachers provided only some feedback on one of the lessons offered by the student teachers. Another teacher only wrote 'Excellent' or 'Very good' in some instances, which in the end did not mean much to the student teacher and the lecturers at the student's institution. It could be accepted that some teachers gave verbal feedback to their mentees, but from the viewpoint of the distance education institution, this was unfortunate as written comments were important for lecturers to assess how well their students performed in the classroom. Going by the feedback and, in some instances, the lack of feedback, I concluded that teachers who acted as mentors for students need to be better informed about their tasks as mentors.

Data collected from mentor teachers' written reports on students' lessons

Most of the PGCE students whose workbooks I used in this research were teaching for the first time. They might thus be nervous and unsure of themselves when they eventually had to offer a formal lesson during which important language skills, such as reading and writing were taught. In the selected workbooks, some teachers provided positive written post-lesson comments to the student teachers. There was, however, only one reported incident in which a teacher provided a student with positive encouragement and motivation before the lesson started. Student 3 stated that she "was a bit nervous and felt rushed", but after discussing it with the supervising teacher, she was reassured. This is the type of emotional support that student teachers often need because it is difficult to function optimally when one is emotionally disturbed.

How to plan a good lesson forms part of any teacher training. There was good feedback from a couple of the supervising teachers about their mentees' lesson planning. A well-structured lesson plan carries a good lesson, but unfortunately, not all the teachers provided feedback on the student teachers' lessons plans. One supervising teacher complimented her mentee (student number 12) by writing that the lesson started by testing the learners' pre-knowledge to establish which levels of knowledge and understanding the learners were. Student number 11 was also complimented by her mentor teacher because the introduction of her lesson was a recap of the lesson of the previous day. What these two student teachers did at the beginning of their lessons signifies good instructional practice.

In the workbooks, provision is made for the teacher students to provide feedback on and examples of the teaching media that they used when presenting their lessons. Most of the workbooks include examples of beautiful teaching media often made by the students themselves about which many teacher mentors wrote remarks that these were excellent. In some instances, there were remarks (e.g. in student number 2's workbook) that the cards that were used should be bigger or that the pictures in the storybook were too busy (student number 9). Student number 21 was advised to use more media, and the font of the newspapers that student number 10 used was too small. Such comments are valuable when one is an inexperienced teacher. The mentor of student 30 commented in two of her reports: "Excellent strategies for much repetition"; and "Consistently repeated new words". This mentor helped the student by praising her and at the same time reminding her in her feedback on the lesson that repetition is always important. The

mentor to student number 25 referred to the teaching principle of moving from the known to the unknown. This mentor commented that the student started to teach new sight words in the reading lesson by beginning with the sight words that the learners already knew. The mentor of student number 20 wrote that when teaching new words, the student teacher did it well because the "[f]ocus was placed on difficult words." Student 29's mentor noted that the reading lesson that she offered was a "well-integrated" lesson. Integrating information from the various subject contents offered in Grade 1 – 3 is not an easy task for a student teacher, but it seemed as if student 29 managed to do it well.

The difficulty of imparting into student teachers the appropriate classroom management skills to ensure young learners' disciplined good behaviour is always a major concern to both the students and the teachers. In some classes the mentor teachers mentioned that the classes were occasionally too noisy, but due mainly to over-excitement on the side of the young learners. Most teachers reassured the student teachers that discipline was not easy in Grade 1 – 3 classes and that the student teachers would master the 'art' of good discipline over time. Some of the students whose workbooks are used in this study realised that a good classroom behaviour could be maintained by their giving positive feedback and motivation to pupils. One student teacher acted proactively by building on the good behaviour. The supervising teacher commended student number 3 on how she handled her young learners' behaviour well when she "[c]omplimented them on good behaviour." Student number 22's mentor wrote that the student strived to focus on positive reinforcement as feedback and discipline. Another mentor commented that student number 30 gave encouraging and motivating comments on the learners' answers making the young learners to realize that they had the attention of the student teacher and this helped with the general attention levels in class. The content that is offered in a lesson and the methods used could impact learners' participation and experienced teachers know how to get and hold young learners' attention. Regarding an oral lesson about fire, it was interesting that a mentor teacher wrote: "[E]ven some learners who are normally shy, were involved" (student number 17). This student teacher learned the importance of getting and holding young learners' attention during a lesson.

In the theoretical modules on teaching a first and a second language, which form part of the PGCE training, student teachers are trained to use various techniques and methodologies.

This accords with the requirement in language teaching, that student teachers be trained to be versatile in using diverse teaching techniques, such as songs, poems, and dialogues. The different approaches to the teaching of reading are also included in the curriculum of the students. It was thus encouraging to note that some students were flexible in their use of techniques and methodologies in the language lessons that they offered. The learners in the class of student number 15 thoroughly enjoyed riddles and a poem as part of their oral activities. The mentor of student number 22 also commented, "The student recited the poem with lots of actions, humor and expression." Student number 19 used puppets for role-play in her language lesson and the learners were very interested, interactively engaging in the activities. Student number 7 made use of dramatisation and dialogue to prevent repetition when teaching new vocabulary. This also prevented the lesson from becoming boring. Student number 1 used role-play effectively to teach the second language.

There was also good feedback from some of the mentors about the way in which the student teachers in their classes taught reading. In student number 17's lesson on reading, she used the whole-word approach to teach new words to the learners. She outlined the 'shapes' of the words and it worked well "because of the different shapes/forms of the words." Students number 6 and number 11 used the charts of the THRASS (Teaching Handwriting, Reading And Spelling Skills) approach when teaching new vocabulary, which, according to their mentors, worked very well. This is a positive development because students are encouraged to attend training in the THRASS methodology during the theoretical part of their training. THRASS training can only be done by registered THRASS trainers and cannot be offered to students as part of their study materials.

The teaching of a second language, which in most instances in South African schools is English, also forms part of this teaching practice module on language teaching. The Total Physical Response (TPR) approach is one of the many that student teachers are introduced to in the theoretical module on second language teaching. Commendably, student number 30 made use of the TPR approach using "facial expression and body language" to teach new words.

By law, all learners in Grade 1 – 3 in South Africa should be taught in their home language, if it is one of the eleven South African official languages. But many non-English speaking parents opt to send their children to schools where English is the language of

instruction when the children enter formal schooling for the first time. Many of these children are English second language (ESL) speakers who cannot speak English and have not been exposed to English when they enter school. This causes a big discrepancy in the language abilities of young learners in English schools and teachers have to plan their lessons well to be able to use multilevel teaching according to the language needs of their learners. Reading the comments of some of the mentors shows that several student teachers made provision for the different language levels of the learners in the lessons that they offered. For instance, student number 20 stated that "it was a challenge to fully include learners whose home language was not English." The mentor of student number 22 wrote that the student teacher's vocabulary was well chosen and simple enough for the weaker ESL learners to understand and to follow instructions.

It is necessary to develop young learners' visual and auditory perceptual skills. This should be done regularly rather than incidentally during class activities as it has become common to do. Student number 30 was commended for reinforcing the learners' auditory memory skills when they had to retell the story used for oral activities. Student number 6 introduced the tactile element that required the young learners to physically move coloured tokens according to their colour and according to the required number of tokens in specific blocks of their worksheets.

The way teachers speak and project their voices could influence learners' learning during a lesson, especially regarding the intensity and duration of the young learners' concentration. Only one mentor teacher (of student 23) gave advice to a student teacher about her voice. The teacher advised her, "Try to speak up and use different 'tones' in your voice to keep the learners' attention."

The necessity of training in the use of higher-order intellectual abilities is often forgotten in the junior classes. The comment in the workbook of student number 30 noted that the oral activities s/he included in her lesson provided the young learners with an opportunity to reason. This is a sign of an excellent Grade 1 − 3 teacher in the making. Similarly, in the workbook of student number 6, it is stated that the learners had the opportunity to reflect and to raise insightful opinions about a story during the lesson.

Using Reflection to enhance Mentor Teachers' Feedback

The analysis of the feedback that the mentor teachers gave on their mentees' presentations was very useful. It was clear that the various aspects that arose in the discussion of the data from the workbooks containing the lesson plans should be attended to in a planned and logical way. During reflection, I realised how important the mentors' feedback was and I used it to redesign the workbooks, especially the pages for the mentor teachers' feedback.

Reflection on the workbooks and the mentor's feedback demonstrates that the bridging between the theoretical modules and the practical application in the classroom during teaching practice should be done through mentoring and especially the professional mentoring of classroom teachers. Professional mentoring is what could guide student teachers on how to attend to the practical teaching issues in the teaching of language that may arise in their classrooms. This can be done not by providing the student teachers with quality theoretical knowledge only. It should be enhanced by placing the students with knowledgeable and experienced mentors.

Reflection on the mentor teachers' feedback in the student teachers' workbooks indicates the need for mentors to be well informed and trained enough to understand and fulfil their roles of advising and supporting their mentees. They should also be well motivated to complete their mentees' workbooks carefully after each lesson offered. Teachers willing to act as mentors for young students should also receive proper recognition for the important roles they play in the training of student teachers. Recognition of each mentor teacher could be done officially with its documentation sent to the various departments of education and the various teacher unions in the country so that it can form part of the teachers' professional profiles.

Not all the teachers provided feedback about the student teachers' lessons plans because there were no direct questions posed to the mentors about lesson planning. However, the 16 teachers who provided good professional feedback and who, based on their written responses, were real mentors to the student teachers, afforded me a valuable understanding of the nature of the existing gaps in way that the workbooks structure the feedback that is expected from them. The need for teacher mentors to comment on students' lesson plans calls for a creative and logical planning of the feedback pages in the workbook for the teaching practice. The planning manifest in the feedback pages of the student workbook does not demonstrate the necessity for

the mentor teachers' comment to reflect what the student teachers were taught in the theoretical modules. Thorough lesson planning is key to successful lesson presentation. Therefore, specific questions about each step in the lesson planning should be included in the feedback and comments that are expected from the mentor teachers. For mentor teachers to be able to assess how their mentees link the theories they were taught at school to lesson presentations during the teaching practicum, I recommend that they be provided with access to the contents of the theoretical modules that student teachers have to study.

The lesson presentations required students' preparation and use of different teaching media. Therefore, specific questions about the quality and the appropriateness of teaching media should be included in the feedback from the mentors. The richness and diversity of South Africa's cultures and languages also needs to be reflected in the choice of the learning content and teaching media. The visual media used should relate to the world of the young learners, their home environment, and their socio-economic status. The opportunity should thus be made available to the mentors to discuss the ways that their mentees addressed cultural and language issues in their choice of teaching media and learning content. The request to the teacher mentors that is included in the letter to the university that the student teachers take to the principal of the schools where they fulfil their teaching practicum should highlight the importance of reflecting cultural and language diversity in the classrooms. This aligns with the viewpoints of socio-constructivists who stress the importance of the context in which learning occurs, as well as the social contexts that the learners bring to school (Kim, 2014:2).

The important issue of the development of young learners' perceptual skills is not included in the existing questions that mentor teachers are required to answer. It is recommended that this be included in all the teaching practice workbooks that students have to complete. The workbooks could also include a section on general impressions that the mentors should complete. This should guide them to attend to issues such as the way the student teachers speak and project their voices, whether they pronounced words in the second language correctly, whether they developed the young learners' higher-order intellectual abilities or whether the student teachers encouraged the participation in the lesson activities of the shy and silent learners. To help the mentor teachers be knowledgeable about reflective supervision so that they

could reflect on the quality of the they provide their mentees to improve their teaching, a section about reflective supervision should be included in the request made of them.

Conclusion

Mentor teachers serve as the "gatekeepers of the work and norms of teaching" (Butler & Cuenca, 2012:297). They play an important role in the training of student teachers. This important role could be enhanced by providing clear instructions about their roles as mentors. This should be included in the official letters from the university to them and also in the forms and the student's workbook pages designed for their feedback. This will help to improve the quality of the teaching practice experience for student teachers. It will also help to ensure that the theoretical knowledge that students gained in the various teaching modules, is applied successfully in classrooms. This is necessary and will be especially helpful to distance education teacher students.

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