MAKING SENSE OF THE EXPERIENCES OF MENTOR TEACHERS IN TRADITIONAL TEACHER EDUCATION: WHAT LESSONS CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS PRACTICE?

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INTRODUCTION

The trend towards school-based teacher preparation in initial teacher training during the 1980s has contributed to the popular use of the term "mentoring" to signify the appointment of experienced teachers to undertake the supervision of student teachers during their teaching practice in schools (McIntyre, Hagger & Wilkin, 1993; Wilkin, 1992).

Mentoring in education means that mentor teachers help student teachers reflect on their ideas and practices, they share their ideas and experience with student teachers, and give advice on student teachers' practices. In an extended version of mentoring, student teacher learning is extended beyond classroom teaching to issues of whole school and community concerns.

Maynard and Furlong (1993) identified three models of mentoring, which correspond to the changing needs of trainee teachers in practice situations. The apprenticeship model comes in the early stage of practical teaching, in which student teachers work alongside mentors who act as models and mentor teachers to help the student teachers "see" the complexity of the teaching process. The competency model comes in the second stage of practical teaching, in which the mentors take on the role of trainers or instructors to engage the students in a more systematic training programme that involves routines of observation and feedback on agreed competences. The reflective model comes in the final stage of practical teaching, in which mentors take on the role of co-enquirers to promote critical reflection on teaching and learning in the student teachers.

It is by now clear that mentoring is suppose to be an intentional, nurturing, supportive, protective process, but because mentors and students bring many individual sets of beliefs, orientations, concerns and pressures to their shared enterprise, the mentoring relationships can be extremely complex, but also very challenging – challenging because you as mentor also reflect and discuss new perspectives and ideas.

THE RESEARCH SETTING

The study was conducted in the context of a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGCE) programme for students at the University of Pretoria. The students held a university degree but had not undertaken any teacher training. The PGCE

programme provided these students the opportunity of a combination of practical teaching experience (60%) combined with classes on campus (40%).

The University has included a mentoring scheme in the PGCE programme so that schools can play a role in teacher preparation. This school-based model relies on a specific partnership. The partners are made up by the university as the training institution, and the mentor teacher as the other very important partner. The programme tries to integrate the professional knowledge of the mentor teacher with the theoretical knowledge that is part of the university's programme to allow all the students to form their own practice theory.

Constructive feedback, followed by critical discussion, is a typical example of how theorising forms a key component in the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of professional knowledge.

The task of the mentor is to guide the student teacher to become an independent teacher. Teaching involves constant decision-making; the student 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 student to reflect on his/her decisions. In guiding the student's professional development, a mentor has to decide which relating, coaching and assessing behaviours to use in different situations that he/she encounters. The overall goal of mentoring is to help mentees to become reflective practitioners, who have a good level of professional knowledge and expertise in teaching.

In the mentoring scheme, schools with PGCE students are invited to nominate experienced teachers as mentors to provide support and guidance to the students during their teaching practice. Teaching practice takes place during two periods of 7 weeks each in the first semester and in the second semester, but at different schools. The student and the mentor work very close together in this seven weeks. The mentor teacher not only acts as a model for the student, but should promote a socially secure but professionally challenging situation where the student can learn and grow professionally. A pre-requisite is that mentors should use a balanced whole of co-operative, learning- and teaching-focused approaches themselves (Schelfhout, Dochy, Janssens, Struyven, Gielen en Sierens, 2006:880).

In this specific programme mentors are expected to:
- Model or demonstrate his or her classroom teaching practice to the student;
- Allow mentees to observe their practices and learn from them;
- Discuss any situation that might occur during the time with the student, and reflect on the situation;
- Allows the student to find his own teaching style;

- Create enough opportunities for the student to experience in the classroom and find his or her own style of facilitating learning;
- Assess the student on weekly basis;
- Provide feedback to mentees on their teaching performance;
- Facilitate reflective practice in mentees.

University supervisors visit the students at least twice during each semester for summative teaching practice assessments. Mentors visit the university for a training session at the beginning of each period of seven weeks. Written guidelines are also provided.

Data collection

Data was collected by means of a qualitative study. All 61 mentor teachers who attended the training for mentor teachers in 2004 were part of the study by completing a questionnaire, and 6 mentor teachers and the students that were placed with them for the teaching practice period also took part in an in-depth study.

All the mentors except one were experienced teachers, with over ten years of teaching experience and holding various senior positions – as subject heads or heads of departments. They worked in the same schools as the student teachers.

Data were collected by semi-structured interviews conducted individually with the participants. Interview questions were designed to explore the participants' views on various aspects of mentoring for students, including roles and responsibilities, mentor selection and training, mentor-mentee relationships, the mentoring programme, and school-university relationships. Some of the questions raised general issues about the nature of mentoring, while others related specifically to the participants' roles in the PGCE mentoring scheme.

THE REALITY
The mentor teachers' experiences:
Mentor teacher 1: She was an experienced high school teacher; tried her best but the student struggled with the language of teaching and also couldn't handle discipline. The class was 90% of the time in total chaos. The mentor sat in the class because teaching and learning did not take place when she was not in the classroom. She became very frustrated at the end because her learners suffered.

Mentor teacher 2: She was an experienced primary school teacher with previous experience as mentor teacher. She was the only one willing to act as mentor teacher. She and the student worked well together. It was as very successful relationship. The student tried her best, was very co-operative and willing to learn.

Mentor teacher 3: She was a very passionate primary school teacher. With her previous experience as mentor teacher, she set the boundaries for the student from the start. She spent hours in the beginning to help the student teacher. The student struggled with discipline, but asked for help and the relationship was very successful.

Mentor teacher 4: The male teacher was inexperienced. He had no teaching qualification; He relied on his textbook and was happy if the student did the same. They became very close friends and the mentor found it difficult to find a balance between friendship and authority. He was never in the class, except to assess the student. He admitted that he did not know what was expected from him as mentor.

Mentor teacher 5: She is an experienced high school teacher. During the interviews she gave the impression that she is the model mentor teacher, but in reality she didn't do a single mentor activity. The student did much more than was expected from her as student.

Mentor teacher 6: She was an experienced primary school teacher, although inexperienced as mentor, but willing to learn. The student was also willing to learn. At the end this was one of the two very successful relationships.

LESSONS TO LEARN FOR A DISTANT TRAINING INSTITUTION

Distance is the most unique feature of distance education — the lecturer and student are physically separated from each other by time and place. The student is sometimes isolated from resources, support and peers. The lack of contact with lecturers and other students can have a significant effect on the learner's motivation.

Adult learners also face numerous challenges that include changing definitions, overcoming circumstances, relearning and motivation. Addressing these challenges in a timely and personal way is especially important in distance learning environments. Some distance students are in remote areas and have little or no access to communication devices and technology. Distance learners, irrespective of location, also have different needs. Effective mentoring is one such need.

What can the university do?

1. Communication between university and school:
All the participants were unsatisfied with the communication between the university and the schools. There was no evidence of any real tripartite relationship. Universities should put in some effort to contact the mentor teachers directly, by calling them or by using e-mail. Spell out expectations clearly especially regarding lesson planning and assessment.

2. Selection of mentor teachers:

There are no clear guidelines for the selection of mentor teachers. Mentor teachers are identified by principals or school management teams. They look at the needs of the university and decided which teacher best fits the needs of the university. It is especially very difficult for a distant training institution with students from all over the country and sometimes from outside the country to select suitable mentor teachers. Universities cannot expect students to go to specific schools for teaching practice. This leaves the university in a dilemma because it can happen that there is no qualified or experienced mentor teacher in a school. Sometimes teachers are willing to learn. The data learns that character, intrinsic motivation, experience as teacher, commitment, dedication, a positive attitude and expertise the most important criteria for the selection of mentor teachers are. Teachers need to be passionate about teaching. A huge difference in age did not play a role and is preferable above nearly the same age. Rather select a willing teacher as mentor and give the necessary support. If there is no willing teacher, the school must rather say no for the opportunity.

3. Training of mentor teachers:
The best solution is to select willing teachers and train them to become successful mentor teachers. Unisa, also a distance training institution, put in place a training programme for mentor teachers. They try to train at least one teacher at each school. To realise this, they offer a Certificate Programme in Mentorship free of charge and any teacher can apply to do this course.

Other kinds of programmes are also available. The North-West University offers a Learnership programme in Mentorship. Teachers then attend about 4 classes, and acts as mentor for a student in this specific period. A portfolio must be handed in at the end of the course.

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