Research Article

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Student-Teacher Mentorship: Do School Mentors Support and Guide Student Teachers?

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Abstract

This paper was undertaken to explore the support school mentors offer student teachers during teaching practice. Using a qualitative approach, this paper employed document analysis for fourteen (14) reports from university supervisors that were purposively sampled. Human learning theory was used to frame this study. This theory assumes that the mentor guides the learners in discovering hidden knowledge to achieve self-actualization. The findings reveal that some school mentors support student teachers by assigning classes and preparing them for evaluation, some need to improve mentoring expertise, some do not have time for student teachers, some dump work on student teachers without support, some do not pay attention to critical issues needed by student teachers. Others argue that they are employed to teach, not support student teachers. The paper concludes that some school mentors know their mentoring responsibilities, while others are unwilling to offer support. This paper recommends that school mentors be given incentives for supporting student teachers; they need to be workshopped about mentoring and made aware of the significance of mentoring. Higher education institutions should identify school mentors who are willing to support student teachers.

Keywords: *chronicles; school mentors; support; student teachers; teaching practice; university supervisors*

1. Introduction

Do you know that few school mentors support student teachers during teaching practice, whereas most offer little or no support? The teacher preparation programs do not provide adequate insight that student teachers need, and the program itself requires that student teachers undergo teaching practice where they put what they have been taught into practice in the school environment. When student teachers undergo teaching practice, they are put under the guidance and supervision of subject specialists who become mentors to the student teachers. This is done so that school mentors can fill the gap by providing mentoring support to student teachers (Polikoff et al., 2015) to make up for the discrepancies that may arise from the dearth of knowledge and skills acquired via teacher educators. School mentors are subject teachers or subject specialists who guide and support student teachers in schools during teaching practice. As student teachers get to schools for teaching practice season, they rely on school mentors for mentoring so that they may be supported and guided on effectively conducting teaching and learning activities. Mentoring involves experienced and

inexperienced teachers engaging in mutual learning (van Ginkel et al., 2016). For this mentoring to succeed, there should be a good mentorship whereby experienced and expert mentors support the less experienced mentees who are student teachers. The role of the school mentors includes helping, guiding, and counseling the student teachers with their theoretical and personal advancement. School mentors are, therefore, key role players in the mentoring process. For this reason, Savage, Cannon and Sutters (2015) argue that for mentoring to achieve its excellence, it depends upon the generosity of mentors who make the journey with student teachers as they complete their teaching practice experience. Student teachers rely on the support they hope to find from school mentors so that they can acquaint themselves with the necessary skills and knowledge for teaching. Therefore, it is incumbent to establish the level of support that student teachers acquire from school mentors during teaching practice.

Teaching practice is meant to expose student teachers to the real experiences (El et al., 2015) of teaching and learning activities and for student teachers to receive guidance and support (Fletcher, 2000) to ease them through difficult school situations and other work-related issues. If student teachers are properly guided and supported, they may acquire proper knowledge and skills relevant to teaching. However, as Tirivanhu (2014) argued, some school-based mentors do not assist student teachers in developing teaching or pedagogical skills. In other words, they do not support student teachers as expected. If school mentors do not offer the expected support to student teachers, the chances of student teachers not obtaining good marks during evaluations and not acquiring requisite skills are high. Therefore, the failure of school mentors to support and guide student teachers can have adverse consequences on the professional development of student teachers. Several studies have approached student-teacher mentorship from such perspectives as its professional and pedagogical benefits (van Ginkel et al., 2016; Lamb et al., (2016), discord between university and school mentoring expertise (Tirivanhu (2014), perceptions of novice teachers on mentoring support (Clark & Byrnes, 2012), partners' perspectives on tripartite dialogue during field experience (Mtika et al., 2014), mentoring in a cohort model of teaching praticum (Mukeredzi, 2017) and perceived possibilities and challenges of mentor teachers as mentors and teachers (Jaspers et al., 2014). However, there has been little agency, according to the observations of university supervisors, about the phenomenon when visiting schools where the phenomenon unfolds. School mentors have not been examined closely to determine if they support and guide student teachers. It is taken for granted that when student teachers attend teaching practice, they receive requisite support and guidance from school mentors. To this end, this paper explored the support school mentors offer student teachers during teaching practice. Exploring the support student teachers receive from school mentors, if any, would help to measure the success of a school mentoring process. It will also help to navigate alternatives that can help student teachers support and guide during the teaching practice period. Lastly, this paper will shed light on how the sampled university supervisors assess the phenomenon and reflect on their own agency as teacher educators.

2. Theoretical Underpinning for this Paper

The theoretical underpinning for this paper was the human learning theory, which assumes that the mentor guides the learners in discovering hidden knowledge to achieve self-actualization (Maslow, 1968). For this theory, experience is the key phenomenon when studying human learning. Human learning theory emphasizes self-actualization, which requires student teachers to be actively involved to realize or fulfill their talents and potential. Student teachers may acquire experience through self-actualization. The self-actualization anticipated by student teachers depends on the support and guidance from school mentors. This theory, therefore, encompasses these two key issues that shape the life of student teachers during teaching practice, i.e., mentorship and self-actualization. Student teachers attend teaching practice in order to, amongst other things, acquire teaching experience through the help, guidance, support, and exposure of school mentors. In line with this, human learning theory advocates for self-actualization, which can enable the acquisition of experience.

School mentors are expected to guide student teachers in discovering new knowledge through teaching experience during the teaching practice. Therefore, this article aimed to explore the chronicles of university supervisors on school mentors' support to student teachers during teaching practice. This paper highlights some views through the eyes of university supervisors on school mentors' support and guidance to student teachers. Two questions guided this paper. Firstly, what are the chronicles of university supervisors on school mentors' support to student teachers during teaching practice? Secondly, how do university supervisors view the mentors' support to student teachers during teaching practice?

3. Research Design and Methodology

This paper entailed a qualitative research method that applied a directed document analysis of the content in the evaluation reports of university supervisors. The document analysis is a form of qualitative research whereby documents are interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning to the topic studied. Document analysis incorporates coding of the content into themes in a similar way as a focus group or interview transcripts are analysed. This technique is mostly used to gather required information and is very useful when stakeholders are not available to give the required information.

The paper was conducted in South Africa, King Cetshwayo District. This area is dominated by rural schools where learners travel long distances to schools on foot; roads are graveled, water is a challenge in most areas, most parents cannot read and write, and schools are supported by pensioners. In such an impoverished environment, student teachers cannot naturally imbibe a professional disposition without purposeful interaction with experienced mentors. In this setting, even most learners are demotivated to learn since they hardly look up to community members who are professionals and literate. Dealing with such learners may be a challenge for student teachers who are still inexperienced but expected to deal with them, hence school mentors' support is a dire need.

The population for this paper were university supervisors who evaluated student teachers during the teaching practice period; 14 evaluation reports were purposively sampled. The reports used were those that had elaborated relevantly and clearly on how school mentors supported or did not support student teachers. After securing 14 evaluation reports from university supervisors, the data were coded using available trends. The codes were identified and used to construct themes that are analysed in the next section. The following five ethical principles were upheld during data collection: respect for privacy and autonomy, reciprocity, freedom of scientific inquiry, attribution, and respect for intellectual property. Consequently, university protocols were observed, from requesting the records to analyzing the data without divulging supervisors' personal details.

4. Findings

The data analysis revealed a bricolage of accounts presented by university supervisors about school mentors' support to student teachers during teaching practice. The findings suggest that there were positive and negative views about school mentors' support to student teachers.

4.1 Positive Support From School Mentors

On a positive note, most school mentors supported student teachers very well. This suggests that these school mentors understood their responsibility to support student teachers well to be good teachers. This was supported by the view of one of the university supervisors who said, *"Most of the school mentors were clear with mentoring expectations, thus being helpful, adequately supported and controlled students all the time".* School mentors were willing to see upcoming teachers prospering and becoming good teachers. The help and support school mentors gave to student teachers were an attempt to give student teachers ammunition they may need for their future teaching endeavours.

To show more support to student teachers, another university supervisor argued: *"Student teachers were trusted and given classes to teach, accordingly."* This was contrary to an outcry by some student teachers who struggled to get classes during practice teaching. Assigning student teachers classes to teach was a clear sign of willingness to support them in their journey to becoming teachers. Other school mentors were even eager to know how student teachers they had been supporting, performed during evaluation and what they needed to improve. To this effect, one of the university supervisors submitted that *"some school mentors assisted student teachers when preparing for evaluation and they were interested in debriefing sessions after evaluation"*. This was a good endeavour from school mentors to prepare student teachers for evaluation. Having assisted them before the evaluation, they also wanted to know the shortfalls in student teachers' performance so that they could continue supporting them. Therefore, most school mentors were committed to helping student teachers become good teachers.

4.2 Lack or Inadequate Support from School Mentors

The observation of university supervisors did not only find positive endeavours from school mentors to help student teachers but also showed that some school mentors were not willing to support student teachers. It came out vividly from university supervisors that some school mentors do not give students enough attention by sparing their time with them. One supervisor asserted, *"Some school mentors do not have time for student teachers."* Since school mentors can manage their time, not having time for student teachers meant that they were unwilling to support them; otherwise, they would have made time for student teachers. In addition to not having time for student teachers, *"some school mentors did not pay close attention to important issues that would assist students"*. Presumably, school mentors are aware of critical issues that define a good teacher and are aware of issues that affect good teachers. One would have expected school mentors to bring those critical issues to the attention of student teachers; instead, they showed unwillingness to support student teachers.

Where mentors were willing to support student teachers, there was a need to improve their mentoring skills. So their inability to mentor student teachers due to the dearth of necessary skills prevented student teachers from receiving necessary support. Some "*school mentors dump work on student teachers but do not support them"*. It has been argued in this paper that student teachers attend teaching practice to get guidance and support. This suggests that student teachers need a school mentor to hold their hands throughout the teaching practice journey. This need emanates from the fact that student teachers are deemed to have not acquired relevant and appropriate skills to teach learners. It is, therefore, an untenable situation for school mentors to dump work on student teachers without any guidance on how to teach. In other words, school mentors regarded the presence of student teachers as a relief from teaching, instead of supporting student teachers. Lastly, school mentors did not support student teachers because *"they were employed to teach, not [to] mentor student teachers"*. This clearly indicated that school mentors did not want to support student teachers since it was not part of their job description. This suggests that a monetary incentive for school mentors should accompany the exercise.

5. Discussion Of Findings

5.1 Positive Support from School Mentors

This section discusses the findings that unfolded from the analysis of data. The support from school mentors to student teachers aligned with Stanulis et al. (2012), who argue that school mentors are expected to offer student teachers professional and pedagogical support. This may suggest that these school mentors were clear about their attributes as mentors. These school mentors supported and guided student teachers for self-actualization and mentoring. In other words, they knew how to help

others learn to teach (Hobson et al., 2009) and 'others' being student teachers who need to learn to facilitate teaching and learning activities. It means that these school mentors understood the meaning of 'teach about teaching' (Leatham & Peterson, 2010). This suggests that school mentors supported student teachers in practicing and acquiring knowledge, beliefs, and skills that could enable them to teach well (Jaspers et al., 2014). Therefore, some school mentors fulfilled one of their roles and responsibilities of supporting student teachers.

When school mentors offered classes to student teachers to practice the art of teaching, they showed good signs of working in tandem with student teachers as more experienced colleagues (Lamb et al., 2016); working together with student teachers is one of the attributes of a good mentor. In line with self-actualization and mentoring, as informed by the human learning theory, school mentors were prepared to observe and give feedback to student teachers about their teaching. In other words, school mentors were prepared to work in tandem with student teachers during teaching practice. This suggests that most school mentors were willing to help student teachers sharpen their teaching skills and abilities through practice, thus acquiring the experience needed. This may have been of great help to student teachers who were looking for a chance to prepare themselves for evaluation while developing professional teaching skills. As student teachers got a chance to practice teaching, they might have been able to develop their sense of efficacy (Moulding et al., 2014), which could make them actualize themselves. Furthermore, student teachers may have received expert advice, guidance, and a set of worthwhile alternatives to teaching (Maphosa & Ndamba, 2012) that they needed from school mentors, thus developing professionally (Mukeredzi, 2017) and acquiring requisite experience.

As school mentors prepared student teachers for evaluation, they were aware that they should be involved and concerned with the evaluation of student teachers and learning (Feiman-Nemser, 2012); hence they wanted to know how student teachers performed during evaluation. This shows full support from school mentors, which concurs with self-actualization some effort and time in student teachers (Jaeger et al., 2015; Hochberg et al., 2015). This shows how much school mentors cared about student teachers in terms of how they had developed their pedagogic literacy (Lamb et al., 2016). The interest also on debriefing sessions shows how school mentors took teamwork and student teachers' motivation (Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017) seriously. It means that some school mentors were committed to knowing about the professional development of student teachers they were mentoring and guiding so that they could identify difficulties (Crasborn, 2010) they experienced during lesson presentations. In other words, these school mentors were willing to offer what Weisling, 2016) refers to as an "outside the action" type of educative mentoring, which encapsulates debriefing sessions. This was a symbol of commitment to a joint venture between the school mentor and the university supervisor in assisting the student teachers to develop a teaching profession and Mtika, Robson and Fitzpatrick (2014) refer to this as essential social interaction between the school mentor and the university supervisor for the benefit of student teachers.

5.1.1 Implications of the positive support from school mentors

It can be deduced from the above arguments that the views of university supervisors revealed that some school mentors offer the required support to student teachers. The type of support they referred to was the allocation of classes, preparing student teachers for evaluation, and interest in debriefing sessions after evaluation. However, university supervisors did not give more details on what school mentors did or were expected to do after allocating classes to student teachers. This suggests that university supervisors were not as vivid in that aspect. On the contrary, scholars argued that student teachers need professional and pedagogical support, which university supervisors did not emphasize as an aspect that requires the involvement of school mentors during class visits. University supervisors did not also talk about knowledge and skills acquisition as part of the support needed by student teachers from school mentors. It is possible that university supervisors did not guide school mentors about steps to take after allocating classes to student teachers. This was not

peculiar from the views of scholars because they only argued that school mentors knew how to teach and they taught about teaching but did not explain essential aspects to be taught when teaching.

Furthermore, university supervisors noted that school mentors prepared student teachers for evaluation but did not get into details of the issues that school mentors dealt with while preparing student teachers. School mentors did not allude to the significance of preparing student teachers for evaluation. According to scholars, preparing student teachers for evaluation shows the working together between the school mentors and student teachers. University supervisors did not touch base with the pedagogical literacy that student teachers need during teaching practice. Also, university supervisors did not allude to why school mentors were amenable to debriefing sessions. In other words, it is unclear why school mentors were interested in the feedback from university supervisors after student teachers' evaluations.

5.2 Lack or Inadequate Support from School Mentors

The views from university supervisors indicated that most school mentors did not support student teachers. This lack of support from school mentors deprived student teachers a make-up for discrepancies that might have arisen from the dearth of knowledge and skills acquired via teacher educators (Polikoff et al., 2015). This suggests that student teachers need this support from school mentors since the knowledge and skills acquired at the higher education institution are not adequate until they have been exposed to the real situation under the guidance of school mentors. The inability of school mentors to support student teachers defeats the purpose of sending student teachers for teaching practice so that they could receive mentoring and self-actualization from experienced subject teachers. Without the mentoring exercise, school mentors as experienced teachers did not allow student teachers who were inexperienced to engage in mutual learning (Van Ginkel et al., 2016). One of the reasons for not supporting student teachers, according to university supervisors, was that school mentors do not have time for student teachers. In line with this, (Tirivanhu, 2014) argues that the curriculum for school mentors is congested; hence, they have little time to supervise student teachers. If school mentors were willing to support student teachers, they would have made time to do that. Therefore, the chances of student teachers developing professionally, acquiring experience and self-actualization were very slim .

School mentors might have been aware of critical issues expected from student teachers during evaluation and for their professional development. It is unclear why they did not promote and support student teachers' awareness about these issues, which inform the teaching profession and help them learn about the profession (Agudo & de Dios, 2016). The failure to support student teachers was not peculiar since (Tirivanhu, 2014) argues that some school-based mentors do not assist student teachers in developing teaching or pedagogical skills. The reason could be that they are not trained to support student teachers (Sethusha, 2014). The inability to support student teachers may seriously affect their performance and development as professional teachers. School mentors should provide the necessary support to student teachers so that they may become good and incompetent teachers.

It is inexplicable that school mentors dumped their work on student teachers without supporting them, which may interfere with the self-actualization process, as explained by the human learning theory. It indicated that school mentors were unwilling to mentor and support student teachers. This means that while the student teachers who received support acquired good experience and strengthened their pedagogical content knowledge, those who lacked support were robbed of acquiring positive experience and developing pedagogical content knowledge. This may hurt their development as teachers. This lack of support violated one of the aims of the student-teacher/mentor relationship: to transmit knowledge, skills, attitudes, and culture regarding the student-teacher's career choice (Jones et al., 2014). In other words, school mentors regarded the presence of student teachers as their chance not do their job. This is in contrast to the practices for effective student-teacher mentoring, which is not simply leaving student teachers alone, turning on the commentary

track, working jointly to find creative outlets, modeling lessons and new learning content, joint planning (Clark & Byrnes, 2012) for both student teachers and school mentors and making time to talk, connecting the student teachers to the larger school political world and treating teaching practice as a learning opportunity (Larkin, 2013). Dumping the work on student teachers could have prevented some students from acquiring the benefits of a good relationship emanating from working with school mentors. This suggests that student teachers "were not provided opportunities to observe their school-based mentors teaching" (Tirivanhu, 2014, p.1480).

It was also very disheartening that some school mentors did not offer their support because they were not paid to support student teachers. In other words, they did not support student teachers just because they would not be paid for that since it was not part of their job description to mentor them. However, it has been a concern from school mentors that the government, tertiary institutions, and schools do not pay them to assist student teachers during teaching practice (Tirivanhu, 2014). This also interfered with the theory adopted in this article, which accentuates that the mentor guides the learners in discovering hidden knowledge (Maslow, 1968).

5.2.1 Implications of the negative support from school mentors

What can be gleaned from the foregoing section is that the unwillingness of school mentors to support student teachers may have deprived student teachers of a chance to acquire some experiences, as per humanistic theory. In line with the human learning theory, it robbed student teachers of a chance for self-actualization and mentoring. Again, student teachers may have lost the opportunity to fill up the gaps emanating from the knowledge they acquired from their teacher educators. Also, school mentors, as experienced teachers, may have denied student teachers engagement in mutual learning, which is also incumbent on teaching practice. The claim of university supervisors that school mentors do not have time for student teachers may have been an indication that school mentors were not eager to support student teachers. This unwillingness to support student teachers is contrary to one of the scholars who argued that due to the curriculum and the workload, school mentors have little time to support student teachers. In other words, student teachers did not want to play their role in the professional learning process of student teachers. Otherwise, they would have made time.

As school mentors dumped their work on student teachers without any support, they did not assist the student teachers in developing their pedagogical skills, which is one of the aims of teaching practice. This action also did not enable school mentors to transmit knowledge, skills, attitudes, and culture regarding the student teacher's career choice and thus mentoring. Some school mentors did not treat teaching practice as a learning opportunity for student teachers where they should acquire both mentoring and experience. Otherwise, they would have given them a duty load and thereafter guided them accordingly. The failure of school mentors to pay close attention to critical issues of evaluation may be deemed as a failure to guide student teachers well in discovering hidden knowledge. School mentors refused to support student teachers because they were not paid to do that; unfortunately, that had nothing to do with student teachers. School mentors were supposed to support student teachers by referring their concerns to the relevant bodies not to stand on the way of student teachers in self-actualization and mentoring.

6. Conclusion

This paper concludes that some school mentors are willing to assist student teachers through guidance and support, and they understand their responsibilities and the significance of mentoring; hence, they do the best they can to support and guide student teachers. However, in the same breath, this paper concludes that some school mentors do not offer support and, in some cases, offer very little support since they will not be paid for the support they offer. Furthermore, school mentors need to improve their mentoring skills; hence, they do not understand the critical areas of student

evaluation and mentoring at large. This paper also concludes that some school mentors dump their work on student teachers without guidance and expect them to do all the work as if they are already pedagogical practitioners. Worthy of note among the voices of university supervisors is the absence of any reference to the self, that is, the agency of teacher educators. Distancing oneself from the phenomenon of interest appears to be the adopted defense mechanism, which dissipates the institutional responsibility of a coordinated mentorship into a peripheral scope.

7. Recommendations

This paper recommends that school mentors be given incentives so that they can undertake the task of supporting student teachers freely. Alternatives: only those willing school mentors should be allowed to mentor student teachers. Those willing to mentor student teachers should be trained so that they know exactly what is expected of them. School mentors need to be workshopped about their roles and responsibilities. HEIs should identify school mentors willing to mentor and support student teachers. School mentors should be made aware of the significance and importance of mentoring so that they put their weight on it. However, the findings for this paper may be limited to the sample size of 14 reports/participants. Also, document analysis may have limited the findings compared to other data collection methods. To this effect, future or further studies can be undertaken on the same or related topic with a bigger sample size using other data generation methods.

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