

Mentorship challenges in the teaching practice of distance learning students^{1 2}

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ABSTRACT

Effective mentoring is pivotal to the development of student teachers. In this study, the researcher focused on the experiences of the University of South Africa (Unisa) distance education students who are enrolled for the Bachelor of Education qualification, who are in their fourth year of study, and who have already completed three cycles of teaching practice. This study evaluates mentoring practices using a five-factor mentoring model as a theoretical framework. Quantitative data were collected and supported by additional information provided by open-ended questions. The findings indicate inter alia that student teachers need to be placed at schools that will provide constructive learning environments and that more training should be provided to mentoring teachers. Mentors need to provide student teachers with emotional support and opportunities to develop their own identities as teachers, and to create challenging and complex environments in which to learn. Partnerships between schools and the university need to be improved. There should be greater clarity on the who, what and how of mentoring during teaching practice in order to increase the quality and quantity of mentoring for enhancing student teachers' practices. The findings of this study may have implications for other programmes that use work-integrated learning (WIL), beyond teacher education in a distance learning environment.

BACKGROUND AND AIMS OF TEACHING

Most teachers remember the first time they stood in front of a class – no longer a learner looking up to the teacher but now a student teacher trying to live up to a perfect ideal or passionately trying to 'perform' well. As such, a student teacher can be defined as 'a college student who is teaching under the supervision of a certified teacher in order to qualify for a degree in education' (Farlex, 2008). Thus teaching practice can be described as the time in student teachers' training when they are exposed to school life under the guidance of a supervisor/mentor.

Internationally, teaching practice is an issue that has been researched for some time (Robinson 2001). Recently, Landman (2008: 7), Naude (2007: 14), Rademeyer (2008a: 7) and Van Niekerk (2008: 12) observed that teaching practice in South Africa is in crisis. Although schools are willing to accommodate student teachers, poor management, non-existent timetables, lack of staff and non-mentoring all impact negatively on the practice, leaving some students demotivated and disillusioned (Cillié, 2008; Rademeyer, 2008b; Timm, 2008: 4). Thus, the restructuring of teaching practice at schools is essential.

Several studies on teacher training through Distance Education (DE) reveal that the organisation of practice teaching for student teachers presents both logistical and educational challenges (Du Plessis, 2011: 60-70; Aldridge, Fraser & Ntuli, 2009). Problems facing practical teaching via DE include: the placing of students at approved schools, mentoring and supervising them during school visits, building relationships with all stakeholders, assessment, and feedback. One of the biggest problems for DE, particularly in a developing country, is overcoming transactional (pedagogical) distance. In practical terms, such a pedagogical gap can exist between students and the institution, between students and lecturers/tutors, between students and courseware and between student and student.

Unisa, a DE institution, includes student teaching practice in the training of teachers. In support of this, Unisa staff design workbooks, visit schools during teaching practice and are available to students to discuss problems. Nevertheless, the lecturers at Unisa were urged in their audit by the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) to improve students' experience of teaching practice (HEQC, 2008). This made it necessary to investigate students' views on the most vital concerns in teaching practice.

According to the HEQC requirements in their audit report, all of the following areas needed to be improved: selection of schools, placement of student teachers, training of mentors and mentoring during the teaching practice period, and assessment of student teachers' competence and feedback to the university. Referring to a recent study by Du Plessis, Marais, Van Schalkwyk & Weeks (2010) - the mentoring component of the Teaching Practice module was identified by these authors as an area for further research. Given the HEQC's criticisms referred to above, the main research question was: What are the mentorship challenges in the teaching practice of distance learning students and how can Unisa improve this aspect of teaching practice?

THE CONCEPT 'TEACHING PRACTICE'

School-based teacher education or internships is a mode of delivering learning programmes in education in such a way that theoretical knowledge is combined with practical experience. Wilson & Demetriou (2007: 215) claim that it is essential to bring the academic programme into close alignment with its practical application in the actual classroom.

Various authors have also argued for a stronger relationship between schools and institutions with a view to improving the quality of mentoring. For example, in view of the lack of training provided to mentor teachers at schools, Quick & Sieborger (2005: 3) indicated a need for better communication between student teachers, supervisors, liaison people and university lecturers. Marais & Meier (2004: 230) and Maphosa, Shumba & Shumba (2007: 305) emphasised that lecturers and teachers (mentor teachers) have to work together in order to ensure their efforts are coordinated, thus improving the quality of mentorship in schools.

The implication of 'partnership' models for key stakeholders in initial teacher education is important. The key stakeholders are: prospective teachers (student teachers), higher education institutions (the providers), the schools themselves (and mentor teachers within them) and the organisation sponsoring the students, like the Department of Basic Education (Husbands, 1995: 19). Standards for mentoring need to be based on the literature and empirical evidence of effective mentoring practices. According to Sempowicz (2012: 52) theoretical mentoring models have been proposed but few studies conduct investigations of practice with these models. This study aims to identify mentoring challenges during teaching practice using Hudson's (2010: 30-39) mentoring model as a theoretical framework, as well as other supportive literature. It further explores how the student teacher's feedback can act as a catalyst for improving the mentoring facet of teaching practice.

PARAMETERS OF TEACHING PRACTICE

Student teachers

Tomlinson (1995: 7) uses the concepts 'student-teacher', 'student interns' or 'mentees'. The concept 'student teacher' is the term most commonly used in the majority of academic institutions in South Africa.

Students' practical learning experience is supported in four ways:

- through their observation of, and work with, experienced teachers in the school
- through their observation of, and work with, their subject partner in the school
- through their analysis of, and reflection on, their own practice in support-teaching, small-group and whole-class work
- through a school-based research project, to be done after their first period of teaching practice.

Blake & Landsdell (2000: 64) argue that excellent performance by student teachers in the classroom depends on the conditions of learning established in specific teacher education programmes. These are likely to be influenced by a set of principles developed in collaboration by teams of teacher educators working with teachers.

Student teachers need to participate actively in the school contexts for their learning to take place. However, it is not always easy to operationalise 'participation' (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2003; 2008). These authors point out that 'practice' is merely an activity, whereas 'participation' is a meaningful activity. The importance of actively doing in the relevant context was pointed out by Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy (1999: 61). In this regard, a student teacher in a recent study (Du Plessis et al, 2010: 333) said: 'Practical experience by standing in front of a class gives you an understanding of the reality of teaching.' Thus, although some student teachers felt that they had been 'thrown in at the deep end', they recognised that this was a good and positive experience.

The education providers

There is general agreement among educators, politicians, and others concerned with education that schools alone are unable to respond successfully to the changing family structures and values, global economic climate, social pressures, and the societal demand for educational accountability (Robinson & Mastny, 1989). It is increasingly important that schools form sustainable partnerships with stakeholders if schools are to be successful in fulfilling their mission (Railsback & Brewster, 2003). The value of educational partnership is particularly evident in teaching practice of student teachers.

The higher education providers provide the academic support. The Higher Education Institutions (HEI) partnership requires openness, which encourages cross-institutional resourcing and collaborative working. In the case of the HEI-school partnerships, this extends to urging the full sharing of resources and awareness across and within institutions (Tomlinson, 1995: 206).

A good teacher education programme is likely to include the following (Blake & Landsdell, 2000: 68):

- A model of the skilled reflective practitioner as an essential support construct.
- Partnership of HEIs and schools in course design, management, delivery, assessment, evaluation and student teacher selection.
- A skills and knowledge audit of student teachers at the beginning of the programme and regularly during the course of the programme.
- A sequence of extended and serial workplace experiences.
- Challenging modules in the HEI that develop student teacher's intellect, confidence and professionalism.
- High quality staff development for HEI and school-based trainers.
- Self-evaluation of academic and professional development as a key component in student teacher learning.
- Engagement of the HEI tutor, school mentor and student teacher in the assessment, evaluation and feedback of professional competence.

The educational provider in this instance is Unisa. After the 2008 HEQC audit report, changes were made to the teaching practice model. Distance learning student teachers now have to do their teaching practice at a school of their choice from a list of schools already selected by the university. International students have to come to South Africa to do their teaching practice at these selected schools. These student teachers are then visited during the duration of their practical work by either a Unisa lecturer or by a supervisor, trained and appointed by Unisa. These visits are class visits during which time the student teacher has to present a lesson.

Individual discussions are afterwards held with the student to point out the strengths and weaknesses of their specific lesson. A checklist is used to ascertain the competency of the student teacher. Lecturers visit student teachers to establish their classroom abilities and note their competence in their specific teaching subject. Interviews are held with the mentor teachers of these student teachers. Unisa also offers a formal mentor training programme that accounts for 120 SAQA (South African Qualification Authority) credits.

The schools

Schools participating in initial teacher education should ensure that their learners, as well as the student teachers, will benefit from it. Cunningham (2007: 83-84) suggests that the learners themselves and their teachers believed that they benefited from this engagement. Howe (1972: 1) describes a student teacher as a 'good right arm'; a helper who is capable of assisting with the mountain of educational tasks facing the instructor in the classroom. Learners trained in this way will become useful members of staff from the start, because they have effectively undergone the initiation and orientation period during their training period (Learnership Business Plan, 2003: 9).

Working at more than one school may well benefit the student teacher. Teacher development will take place more effectively in schools with a culture of collaboration, because such schools encourage pedagogic partnerships that not only counter professional isolation, but also contribute to the enhancement of practice (Williams, Tanner & Jessop, 2007: 73). Referring to a study by Du Plessis et al (2010: 328) – student teachers were asked what worked well at the school where they did their teaching practice. One participant at a rural, well-resourced school said that she had felt totally involved in the school – 'just like part of the school'. Another participant at a well-resourced, high school said: 'Practical experience ... standing in front of a class ... gives you an understanding of the reality of teaching.'

Participation is a way of learning which allows the learning curriculum to unfold in opportunities for practical engagement, in accordance with situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The social context at the schools encouraged collaborative learning by means of groups which included both students and staff members. Such social interaction addressed the students' differing needs by taking into account their social and cultural backgrounds (Woolfolk, 2007: 346). Due to the function of context, the positive aspects of the students' relationship with teachers during teaching practice were based on the teachers' professionalism and expertise in mentoring.

Mentor teachers

The very complex forms of skills possessed and practised by human beings (e.g. speaking, writing, social interaction, deployment of formal understanding) cannot be learned in isolation, but require input from others. Assistance is often informal, but is nonetheless active (Tomlinson, 1995: 20; Cunningham, 2007: 86). With a professional tutor on the school staff (to lead the school's professional teacher education work) and a mentor teacher in each subject where student teachers are being placed, one has the basis for 'school practice' to become an institution for 'school-based initial teacher education'. The great advantage of mentors as teacher educators is that they are full-time practising

teachers who, in effect, are standing right next to the student teacher (McIntyre, 1997: 10). Ideally, every student requires at least one mentor. Some schools have found it useful to identify a main mentor and several subjects or phase specific mentors.

There are many ways of viewing this very distinctive relationship, and mentoring is not the kind of skill that can be broken down into clear components and steps (Windsor, 1995: 117-118). In fact, mentoring depends on craft knowledge that is accumulated through experience and practice. Its central distinctive quality is that, like teaching, mentoring is a very subtle and sophisticated kind of knowledge which is enacted and performed, but which cannot be 'transmitted' as a concrete and clear guide for action (Windsor, 1995: 117-118).

Mentoring also needs to help student teachers to analyse and reflect systematically, not just after the teaching session or series of sessions, but also during the teaching itself (in other words, while they are close to the action). Student teachers need help not just to monitor, but also to explore, interpret and explain the how and why of what went on. This then flows naturally into the next phase of the teaching cycle, namely, the (re)planning of the next piece of teaching (Tomlinson, 1995: 44; Husbands, 1995: 31).

Frick, Carl & Beets (2010: 434) concluded in their research on PGCE students that one can deduce that reflection is indeed a process where student teachers learn about the self in context, and that mentoring can act as a catalyst that enhances this learning process. According to these authors, a mentor system is valuable because it not only focuses on developing appropriate competencies, but also because it has a strong humanist element in that it concentrates on the person of the student teacher.

Mentoring is where teachers and prospective teachers meet within school settings. Indeed classroom teachers in their roles as mentors have a significant role to play in developing pre-service teachers (Hudson, 2010: 31).

The themes and issues raised in the research questionnaire were prompted by Hudson's theoretical framework, as well as the literature review.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical frameworks serve as epistemological guides that help to interpret the knowledge presented in a study. According to Agherdien (2009), studies that were theoretically developed yielded data that could be interpreted in more depth while, on the other hand, a substantial majority of authors who employed their theoretical frameworks in a very limited way ended up presenting findings that were simply descriptive in nature.

Literature has grown significantly in the area of mentoring with journals dedicated to such works (e.g., *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*; *International Journal of Mentoring & Coaching*), and empirical evidence has been gathered to present effective mentoring practices for guiding student teacher's development. The theory that guided this study is Hudson's five-factor model of mentoring for effective teaching (Hudson, 2010: 31-33). These factors are summarised as follows:

Personal Attributes: This includes being supportive of the mentee (student teacher), comfortable in talking about teaching practices and attentive listening to the mentee (student teacher). The mentor's personal attributes are used to encourage the mentee's (student teacher's) reflection on practices, and instil confidence and positive attitudes in the mentee.

System Requirements: In its simplest form, the mentor needs to articulate the aims, policies, and curricula required by an education system. However, the complexities for implementing system requirements may be noted in the pedagogical knowledge mentors need to articulate for effective teaching.

Pedagogical Knowledge: Effective mentors articulate how to plan for teaching; they timetable or schedule lessons for the mentee (student teacher). Preparation for teaching needs to be discussed, particularly with the location and use of resources. Mentors can assist with problem solving, teaching strategies, structure of lessons and pedagogic knowledge about curriculum and assessment.

Modelling: The mentor's enthusiasm as a teacher can present desirable teaching traits. Importantly, the teacher-student relationship is central to teaching and demonstrating a positive rapport with students can show the mentee (student teacher) how these behaviours can facilitate learning. The mentor also needs to model appropriate classroom language suitable for teaching, effective teaching, classroom management, hands-on lessons and well-designed lessons.

Feedback: Effective mentors articulate expectations and provide advice to the mentee (student teacher), they review lesson plans, observe how the mentee (student teacher) teaches, provide oral and written feedback. These factors are particularly useful in surveying practical experiences in and with teaching practice.

Against the background of the literature review and theoretical framework, the following methodology was deemed suitable for investigating the way in which a group of Unisa students experienced the mentoring aspect of teaching practice.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

A descriptive quantitative approach that applied logically structured questions (identified from the theory) as the data collection method seemed to be appropriate to gather information on student's experiences of mentoring during teaching practice. It was assumed that such information is crucial in determining strengths and weaknesses in the teaching practice of particularly distance learning students.

The initial draft questionnaire was improved by asking for input from three academics of the same department in Unisa. This added to both its content validity and face validity. The questionnaire consisted of four sections. Section A focused on respondents' (student teachers) and mentors' demographical information, including gender, age, student teacher's position at a school and mentor's years of teaching experience. Section B covered student perspectives on the interaction between them and their mentors, including discussions, meetings, feedback from the mentor, evaluation or assessment and mentoring style. These issues are linked to System Requirements and Feedback from Hudson's mentoring model. Section C focused on the student teacher's experiences regarding attitude, relationships, understanding, and learning experiences. These items are tied to Personal Attributes, Pedagogical Knowledge and Modelling in Hudson's (2010) mentoring model. In this section, student teachers had to respond on a four-point Likert scale to indicate if the item was relevant and, if so; to what extent they agreed or disagreed. In Section D four open-ended questions were asked as a way of obtaining in-depth understanding of an interactive and dynamic phenomenon. Respondents were asked what works well in the school's mentoring programme, what does not work well in the school's mentoring programme, to make recommendations to improve the school's mentoring programme, and to describes the impact of the mentoring on them personally.

All the respondents were enrolled for the same BEd (Early Childhood Development) programme. These respondents were doing their teaching practice in the primary school context representing all the provinces in South Africa. Fourth-year students were used as respondents because they had already successfully completed three periods of teaching practice. Therefore their perceptions contribute to greater validity and reliability of the data. Both genders and a wide range of student teacher ages (23 to 61 years of age) were involved. Moreover, these student teachers completed their practice in a wide variety of sites – from those that were rich in human and other resources to those that lacked even the most basic of resources. Different cultural groups were also involved. Posted questionnaires were used, because of the context of distance learning, to reach a sample of 250 respondents of which 140 questionnaires were received back constituting a response rate of 56%. This was regarded as satisfactory for the purposes of the research. Ethical measures were adhered to because participant anonymity, as well as confidentiality, was maintained at all times and participation was not compulsory. A covering letter was included to give an indication of how the respondents came to be involved in the investigation. Clear instructions were given to respondents on how to complete the questionnaires. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM SPSS Statistics version 21) was used to analyse data from the first three sections and provided descriptive statistics with frequencies and percentages for each item. The data in the final section were analysed by identifying themes and categories. The following findings are based on an analysis and interpretation of the data collected.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Student teachers provided valuable insights into their experiences of mentorship during their teaching practice at primary schools. Their responses were registered in accordance with items associated with factors for mentoring, namely: Interaction between student teacher and mentor (linked to System Requirements and Feedback) and the relationship/partnership between the student teacher and mentor (tied to Personal Attributes, Pedagogical Knowledge and Modelling). Table 1 sets out the biographical data as gathered in Section A of the questionnaire. Table 1 shows that respondents consisted mainly of female student teachers (78.6%) and female mentors (72.9%). Most student teachers were under the age of 30 years (67%), while most mentors were between 40 and 49 years (40.7%). Student teachers' positions at the schools were almost equally distributed. Most mentors (79.3%) had more than 11 years of experience. This reflects the fact that student teachers were, on the whole, placed with experienced teachers at schools.

Table 1:
Geographical data (section A of questionnaire)

Variable*	*f	%
Student teacher gender		
Male	30	21.4
Female	110	78.6
Mentor gender		
Male	35	25.0
Female	102	72.9
Student teacher age (years)		
30 and younger	95	67.9
31 - 39	34	24.3
40 - 49	9	6.4
50 and older	1	0.7
Mentor age (years)		
30 and younger	95	67.9
31 - 39	34	24.3
40 - 49	9	6.4
50 and older	1	0.7
Student teachers' position at school		
Learnership	31	22.0
Permanent	39	27.9
Part-time student	36	25.7
Other	34	24.3
Mentor teaching experience (years)		
1 - 5	5	3.6
6 - 10	24	27.1
11 - 20	61	43.6
more than 20	50	35.7

*f is the official APA abbreviation for frequency.

The percentages associated with each demographic variable do not add up to 100% due to missing responses.

The next section of the questionnaire (section B) focused on the interaction that existed between student teachers and mentors. According to the data represented in Table 2, most of the respondents (80.0%) indicated that the focus of the mentoring they received was mainly on all aspects of teaching. Forty four per cent (44.3%) of the respondents specified that they had discussions or meetings with their mentors on a daily basis. According to 52.1% of the respondents, the feedback student teachers received from their mentor was mainly oral, while 42.9% indicated that the feedback they received from their mentor was an almost equal mixture of both written and oral feedback. Most of the respondents (73.6%) described their mentor's mentoring style as both task and people oriented. This shows that the interaction between mentors and mentees was important for keeping the relationship alive and that mentors were actively involved (in most cases). This is also highlighted by Blake & Landsdell (2000: 64) arguing that excellent performance by student teachers in the classroom depends on the conditions of learning. According to Hudson's (2010) mentoring model, feedback is essential for student teacher growth and it was good to see that regular feedback took place.

Table 2:
Interaction between student teacher and mentor

Statement	*f	%
The focus of the mentoring I receive is mainly on:		
Completing my workbooks	5	3.6
Teaching my class	18	12.9
All aspects of teaching	112	80.0
Other	5	3.6
My mentor and I have discussions/meetings:		
Every day	62	44.3
Once a week	49	35.0
Once a fortnight	6	4.3
Other	23	16.4
The feedback I receive from my mentor is:		
Mainly in written format	3	2.1
Mainly orally	73	52.1
About equally in written and oral format	60	42.9
Other	4	2.8
I would describe my mentor's mentoring style as mainly:		
	*f	%

Task-oriented	19	13.6
People-oriented	13	9.3
Equally task- and people-oriented	103	73.0
Other	5	3.6

*f is the official APA abbreviation for frequency.

Section C of the questionnaire deals with the student teachers' mentoring experiences during teaching practice with reference to the relationship/partnership between the student teacher and mentor. Table 3 indicates that the respondents rated their experiences generally as 'good'. Almost two thirds (64.3%) of the respondents indicated that their mentor had enough time available to be a dedicated mentor, while most of the respondents (99.3%) agreed that their mentor had a positive attitude towards being a mentor. This complements the factor of personal attributes (according to Hudson's mentoring model, 2010: 32) where mentors are supportive and contribute toward positive attitudes. What was also positive is the fact that 90.0% of the respondents indicated that their mentor motivated them as far as teaching itself is concerned, and 95.7% pointed out that their mentor had a professional attitude towards teaching. Only 50.7% of the respondents said that Unisa and their mentor worked as a team to develop their skills. This shows that there is a lack of communication between the educational provider (Unisa) and the schools. It is thus important to consider aspects of a good teacher education programme according to Blake & Landsell (2000: 68) where engagement of the HEI tutor, school mentor and student teacher in the assessment, evaluation and feedback of professional competence are pointed out.

Although most of the respondents (95.7%) agreed that their mentor was properly qualified, 40.0% indicated that a mentoring programme is needed. Most of the respondents (92.4%) pointed out that their mentor was a good role model who gave them valuable advice (93.6%), while 92.1% of the respondents specifically claimed that their mentor was willing to help them. This was influenced by how well the mentors and student teachers were matched - 75% of respondents believed they were well matched. Hudson's (2010: 32) mentoring model also highlights the importance of mentors who perceive themselves as modelling practices. Only 13.6% of the respondents considered their relationship to have been influenced by cultural differences. The need to set clear goals for student mentoring was pointed out by 76.4% of respondents, and 77.1% made the point that it is important to stipulate clear time frames to reach goals. Seventy six per cent (76.4%) of respondents agreed that the school's infrastructure supported mentoring. Table 3 shows that more than 80% of the mentors made sure that students had positive learning experiences and helped student teachers to prepare for daily activities. More than 80% of mentors deliberately gave student teachers constructive criticism and encouragement and positive affirmation before recommending changes. These findings are in line with Hudson's (2010: 32) mentoring model, where most mentoring practices take place around the mentor's pedagogical knowledge. Mentors facilitate preparation, timetabling, classroom management, teaching strategies, and planning. According to Table 3, about two thirds of the mentors (63.6%) consciously addressed student teachers' negative emotions whenever these became apparent.

Indeed, Table 3 paints a positive picture of the mentors' influence on their student teachers. It also highlights a few aspects that need to be improved, like the partnership between the school/mentor and Unisa.

Table 3:**Student teachers' mentoring experiences during teaching practice with reference to the relationship/partnership between the student teacher and mentor**

Statement	*f	Not applicable	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
My mentor has enough time available to be a dedicated mentor	139	0.7%	5.7%	28.6%	64.3%
My mentor has a positive attitude towards being a mentor	139	0%	2.1%	5.7%	99.3%
My mentor motivates for teaching	126	0.7%	2.1%	7.1%	90%
My mentor has a professional attitude towards teaching	134	0%	0.7%	3.6%	95.7%
My mentor and Unisa work as a team to develop my skills	137	7.9%	5.7%	33.6%	50.7%
My mentor is actively engaged in my mentoring	140	0.7%	2.1%	20.7%	76.4%
My mentor is well qualified	134	0.7%	0.7%	2.9%	95.7%
A training programme for mentors is desirable	140	10.7%	12.9%	36.4%	40%
My mentor is a good role model	140	0%	2.9%	5.7%	91.4%
My mentor gives me valuable advice	140	0%	0.7%	5.7%	93.6%
My mentor is willing to help	140	0%	1.4%	6.4%	92.1%
My mentor and I are well matched	140	0%	1.4%	23.6%	75%
The relationship between me and my mentor is influenced by culture	136	22.1%	47.1%	14.3%	13.6%
Setting clear goals for the mentoring of student teachers is necessary	140	1.4%	2.1%	20.0%	76.4%
Stipulating clear time frames to reach goals is necessary	140	1.4%	3.6%	17.9%	77.1%
In general, the school's infrastructure supports mentoring	140	0.7%	3.6%	19.3%	76.4%
My mentor ensures that I have positive learning experiences	140	0%	2.1%	11.4%	86.4%

From my mentor I learn how to be well prepared for daily activities	140	0.7%	4.3%	12.1%	82.9%
My mentor gives positive affirmation before recommending changes	140	0%	1.4%	15.7%	82.9%
My mentor addresses my negative emotions (e.g. anxiety) when these arise	140	2.9%	6.4%	27.1%	63.6%

*f is the official APA abbreviation for frequency.

Responses to the open-ended questions of section D were as follows:

Categories were identified, highlighted and used to support the quantitative findings. Respondents were asked what works well in the school's mentoring programme. According to a 31 year-old female respondent, her mentor supervision was very good. She believed that 'in service training takes place and it prepares me to be a good teacher'. These responses reflect on two aspects of Hudson's (2010) theory namely personal attributes (where mentors are supportive) and modelling (where mentors demonstrate effective teaching). Another respondent specified that 'to prepare classroom activities with my mentor works well in our school'. A 40 year-old female participant said her mentor gave her time to observe first and gave her pointers on how to improve her lesson plans. Another participant believed that 'motivation was positive from my mentor'.

Most of the respondents experienced the schools as being very supportive, felt part of the school and felt great about being involved in practical teaching. Students participate legitimately in teaching when they are treated as actual colleagues (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 53-54; 122). In other words learning is a social process where identity, membership (a need to belong in order to learn) and inter-personal relationships are significant. This happens when they are allowed to participate 'fully in a task, job or profession' (Brown & Duguid, in Handley, Sturdy, Fincham & Clark, 2006: 644). This sort of participation depends on the mentor, who is the dominant partner in the teacher-student relationship. The social process at schools is significant in terms of identity, membership and interpersonal relations. These findings are in line with the quantitative data, indicating that the interactions that existed between student teachers and mentors were in most cases good and that the relationship/partnership between student teachers and mentors were positive.

Respondents were also asked what is not working well in the school's mentoring programme. Some respondents reported destructive or depressing experiences. A 25 year-old male reported that different mentor teachers gave different guidelines for the presentation of lessons - this caused confusion. If we compare this response with Hudson's (2010) theory, this is not a good example of modelling by a mentor. Another respondent pointed out that her mentor was also a class teacher and therefore did not have enough time to mentor her. One participant implied that student teachers are misused when teachers are absent. Personal attributes is also one of the factors mentioned by Hudson (2010: 32) where mentors are supposed to support student teachers and contribute towards a positive attitude.

Students are sometimes disappointed when they realise that teacher mentors are not always quite the experts the students expected them to be. It is also mentioned by Hudson (2010: 32) that mentors need to provide pedagogical knowledge and viewpoints about effective teaching practices. Respondents were asked to make recommendations to improve the school's mentoring programme. Many student teachers pleaded for a more structured and standardised

system that made plain what was expected of both mentors and student teachers. It was suggested that the mentor be prepared for the arrival of a student. A formal mentor training programme was also recommended. Respondents asked for less repetition and observation – one lesson observation per learning area would be enough. A 23 year-old female participant asked Unisa to ‘tell the school principals that all educators in the school are there for a student teacher and not only the mentor teacher’.

Respondents were asked what the impact of mentoring was on them personally. In general, mentoring experiences were positive. One participant made the following remark: ‘Very positive, it prepares me to be a fully trained teacher.’ A 25 year-old male participant believed: ‘It helped me to prepare and organise myself more constructively. I know now how to use my time effectively and use the relevant resources.’ Another participant revealed that ‘it has shown me how enjoyable and rewarding teaching is’. From another participant, the following comment: ‘It reassured me that if I did something which didn’t work, the mentor would be there to guide me and advise me.’ Another male participant said: ‘Having a mentor is like having a role model; you can pick up qualities from that mentor.’

Finally, a student should develop an identity as a teacher during teaching practice. According to Hodges (1998: 273), practice and identity are continually informed and reconstructed. This occurs when mentors behave in an encouraging way towards their student teachers. It seems that teaching practice has a significant and wide impact on students’ personal and professional development. In short, the findings emphasise the importance of collaboration between all the role players in teaching practice: Unisa, the school, the mentor and the individual student teacher.

CONCLUSION

A challenge facing distance learning is that all role players in the school practice system should make a concerted effort to support the learning process of the student teacher during teaching practice. To overcome pedagogical distance, one of the principles in teacher training programmes, namely mentoring should contribute towards constructive teaching and learning during the teaching practice period at schools. In line with Hudson’s five-factor model of mentoring for effective teaching, mentor teachers at schools play an important role in helping and assessing student teachers while they (i.e. student teachers) do teaching practice. This research focused on the mentoring challenges as these can be deduced from experiences of student teachers while doing teaching practice at schools. The findings are also relevant for other modes of work-based learning of distance learning students. This quantitative study revealed data on mentoring practices to identify possible weak points in the current system. The study showed that, student teachers claimed that their mentorship experience was a positive experience in general, but it also highlighted the following mentoring challenges:

Lecturers and mentors have to work as a team and coordinate their efforts to enhance mentorship in schools. (The fact that only 50.7% of the respondents claimed that their mentor and Unisa worked as a team to develop their skills is something that requires further investigation. This implies that some of the factors of Hudson’s theory for implementing system requirements were not consistent in this study).

Mentor teachers should concentrate on the significant impact that the personal attributes of mentors had on the mentoring relationship that impinged on the effectiveness of the mentor-student teacher interaction. (This refers to Hudson’s theory where mentors have to encourage mentees and instil positive attitudes).

Results further show that mentor teachers should realise the importance of supportive and modelling aspects of mentoring. (This refers to Hudson's theory, focusing on the behaviour of mentors).

Lecturers should visit schools on a more regular basis to overcome the transactional distance. (This links with Hudson's theory, indicating that pedagogical knowledge, including lesson plans, teaching strategies, and so on, should be discussed).

From the quantitative and qualitative data it was clear that better mentor training should take place. This must include training on the influence of mentoring styles, how to negotiate rules and give feedback, how to deal with gender and cultural differences, and how to deal with student teachers' negative emotions.

It was also clear from the research that mentoring during teaching practice needs to be carefully thought through and discussed by the various role players so that there is greater clarity about what is expected of mentors and schools where student teachers are placed. A sound relationship and strong collaboration between the education institution and the work placement (in this case the university and the schools) and the need for training of the workplace mentors (in this case teachers) has bearing for all programmes which include WIL as part of the curriculum.

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