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Becoming professionally qualified: The school-based mentoring experiences of part-time PGCE students

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This paper reports on a study which explored the mentoring experiences of professionally unqualified practicing teachers enrolled in a part-time Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The study sought to understand the mentoring experiences these students received from their teacher mentors, who were also their colleagues. Data was collected through interviews towards the end of their programme. Drawing on the concept of teacher knowledge, findings indicate that some students experienced subject-specific mentoring, others received only feedback on generic pedagogic issues, and some received minimal mentoring. They reported content-specific and pedagogical mentoring as the most useful, indicating that this significantly assisted them in improving their teaching, even though they had been teaching for some time. It also emerged that some students received very limited mentoring, where mentors simply complied to fulfil university assessment requirements. The study suggests a need for more focused, comprehensive and on-going mentor training for mentor teachers. The success of this would require collaboration between all stakeholders involved in departments of education and universities. This paper further suggests that university-school partnerships required strengthening, along with appropriate strategies put in place, towards ensuring mentoring effectiveness.

Keywords: emerging economy; mentoring; PGCE; professionally unqualified practicing teachers; school-based learning; teacher knowledge

Introduction

Investment in human resource development (HRD) has been closely linked to education, and the role of human capital in economic development, productivity growth, and innovation has frequently been cited as a justification for government subsidies for education and job skills training (Becker, 1994; Republic of South Africa (RSA), 2009). This is more so the case in emerging economies, often characterised by skills shortages, unemployment, and high levels of inequality and poverty (Becker, 1994). HRD broadly refers to the formal and structured activities that are intended to enhance the ability of individuals to reach their full potential. By improving the skill levels, knowledge and capabilities of individuals, HRD serves to improve the productivity of people in their areas of work. Improving skills and increasing productivity in a country promotes economic and social development (RSA, 2009). In emerging economies such as South Africa, HRD becomes critical, given that the government's main concern would be to accelerate development, to ensure a match between supply and demand of the human resource, and thereby benefiting society as a whole.

The contribution of education and training to a country's economic and wider development has been demonstrated in varied national contexts (Ziderman, 1997). Promoting acquisition of knowledge, skills and competencies through education is necessary for the performance of chosen roles that contribute to national economic and social development. This requires an education system staffed with teachers who are well equipped to effectively discharge their roles. In South Africa, the supply of qualified and competent teachers remains a challenge, as evidence indicates large numbers of under- and unqualified teachers (Bernstein, 2011; Bertram, Mthiyane & Mukeredzi, 2013). This may be a consequence of the expansion of access to schooling, the restructuring of teacher education, and the closure of colleges of education after 1994, all of which created severe qualified teacher demand exceeding supply (Parker, 2003). Teacher attrition stands at 5% a year due to, amongst other factors: teachers emigrating; teachers leaving the profession for other jobs; poor working conditions; a lack of support by authorities; retirement; and death (Gordon, 2009; Mahlangu & Pitsoe, 2013). South African teacher education institutions only produce a third of the annual new teacher requirement of 25,000 (Bernstein, 2011).

The shortages cited above have resulted in the recruitment of 'professionally unqualified' teachers (PUPTs) into the profession. Sykes (1998) views the term 'professionally qualified' as referring to those individuals that are officially recognised as possessing knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and competences to engage in given tasks. Implied in this definition when applied to teachers is the possession of pedagogies within the wider domain of knowledge, skills, attitudes and competences. Thus, in this study we understand being professionally qualified as implying going through formal professional study and acquiring the requisite pedagogies, knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and competences to engage in the activities of classroom practice. The prevalence of practicing teachers who are 'professionally unqualified' on the other hand, means that teacher education institutions must grapple with ways to meet teacher demand while addressing the quality

of graduates in order to contribute to the country's emerging economic resource. In response, the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) offers the PGCE on a part-time basis to allow practising professionally unqualified teachers to study while working. While much has been written about training pre-service teachers in full-time programmes, not much has been documented with regards to initial teacher training of practicing teachers. Appropriately qualified teachers are likely to be more effective in classroom practice than unqualified teachers, which in turn ought to enhance learner achievement. However, there is an extensive number of young people who have failed to enter either higher education or the world of work due to poor learning outcomes, which has in turn contributed to higher levels of unemployment and poverty (Statistics South Africa, 2006). Teachers are, therefore, an essential resource that contributes to a nation's economy, given that they are expected to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and skills for progression into higher education or the world of work.

This paper explores the experiences of school-based mentoring during Teaching Practice (TP) of some part-time PGCE students, who practice as teachers. This study is premised on the notion that TP is a fundamental component of any teacher education programme, as this is where professional practical knowledge is acquired and nurtured. The assumption is that while on TP, trainees will be supported and guided by both competent mentor teachers and university tutors. However, unlike their full-time counterparts, the practicing PGCE student teachers are in a complex space, where they find themselves entering formal mentoring relationships with colleagues in the school where they already teach, as a requirement of the TP component of the PGCE programme. This may be further complicated where the PGCE student has an undergraduate degree and the mentor does not. The key questions that we ask here are: how did a selected group of PUPTs experience school-based mentoring; and what did they learn through those experiences?

The PGCE Curriculum

The PGCE programme at UKZN offers a one-year full-time or two-year part-time professional teaching qualification to students who already have a Bachelor's degree. The programme assumes that students have the subject knowledge from their undergraduate studies, and is aimed at equipping them with the knowledge and competence needed for teaching this disciplinary knowledge in school.

The PGCE curriculum is made up of the core education modules, teaching specialisation modules and teaching practice. Core education modules introduce students to knowledge around curriculum and assessment, theories of learning, classroom ma-

nagement, barriers to learning, language across the curriculum and a range of teaching strategies. The specialisation modules focus on particular school subjects or learning areas that students are enrolled in, and on how to teach these.

For part-time students, the TP takes place for four weeks in the first year and six weeks in the second year, and is conducted in schools where students teach. Students are expected to identify mentor teachers to support them for the duration of TP, and are also assigned university tutors, who visit them during this period.

Teaching Practice for these second year PGCE part-time students was conducted over a six-week period, within which university tutors visited students to support and assess them in their teaching of those subject specialisations for which they were registered in the university. They were also expected to be mentored by a teacher in the school with the appropriate specialisation. The university expected TP to commence with these students observing the mentors' lessons, followed by mentors observing their lessons. The school was responsible for mentor selection. Letters to principals and mentors containing mentoring information, various forms for use during assessments, documents highlighting specific outcomes and criteria to guide lesson observations, as well as the university's expectations of mentors, were distributed to students during a contact session. The university assumed that principals and mentors would engage with the information and, that this would inform their mentoring practice. After the students identified appropriate teachers to provide the mentoring support, the final appointment rested with the principal. In some cases, students have no other teachers in their specialisation and, in such case, they are paired with teachers in related subject areas.

Literature Review on Mentoring Support

Mentoring has generally been conceived of as a one-to-one relationship between a competent, experienced teacher (mentor) and a novice or trainee (mentee). However, given the many limitations of this conception, for instance perpetuating conventional teaching practices and minimizing mentee's convictions about student-centred pedagogies (Awaya, McEwan, Heyler, Linsky, Lum & Wakukawa, 2003; Gershenfeld, 2014), more collegial, dynamic and reciprocal conceptions have emerged. Mentor support and a good relationship with the trainee are indispensable during TP (Marais & Meier, 2004). Stressing the value of mentoring, Du Plessis, Marais, Van Schalkwyk and Weeks (2010:328) note that "if, as research indicates, practice teaching is the most single powerful intervention in teachers' professional preparation, then mentoring is the single most powerful process of such intervention".

Mentors should therefore develop strong relationships of trust and goodwill with mentees so as to enhance their professional growth. They should model commitment, efficiency, responsibility and enthusiasm, as they hold the most significant and powerful influence over the trainee's development of orientation, disposition, conceptions and classroom practices (Kettle & Sellars, 1996). Thus, they should take up multi-faceted roles as guide, coach, supervisor, counsellor, role model, nurturer, advisor, critic and supporter (Maphosa, Shumba & Shumba, 2007).

Namibian student teachers, studied by United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (2006), overwhelmingly identified internal supervisory support as the most needed form of support. In the same vein, Reddy's (2003) study found that South African student teachers indicated more gains and learning from their school-based mentors than from their university lecturers. Student teachers expect mentors to offer constructive criticism, to inspire them, and to show commitment to them (Maphosa et al., 2007), and to enhance their self-image, motivation and commitment to teaching. Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) also reported that the PGCE students they studied applauded school-based mentors for their positive attitudes, support, and willingness to help. Thus, mentors are expected to assist beginning teachers to understand the structure of subject matter, and to transform it into pedagogical content knowledge, use a variety of instructional methods and materials to teach the content, and to think reflectively and critically about their own practice (Gold, 1996). Moreover, Veenman (1984) suggests that mentors are expected to assist beginning teachers in acquiring professional knowledge and expertise around student discipline and motivation, handling classroom diversity, assessment and relating to parents of students. Thus, the mentor should empower and capacitate the mentee with knowledge and skills.

While the literature seems to describe the 'ideal' mentoring process, often this is not the case in practice. In a study of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE), students in Zimbabwe, Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2005) reported problems with mentoring emanating from mentor-mentee mismatches (e.g., differences in values, personalities, work styles and others). Similarly, from their South African study, Marais and Meier (2004) noted some ways in which mentors did not devote adequate time and attention to student teachers, for example: making student teachers cover for them while they were away; portraying unethical behaviour such as viewing student teachers as relief teachers; and lacking the competence to enhance student teachers' learning experiences. Eby and Lockwood (2005) also confirm the lack of mentor expertise and general dysfunctionality emanating

from personal problems or negative attitudes, that can impact on the student teacher's TP experiences. This type of behaviour contradicts expected mentor roles and responsibilities, where mentoring is viewed as a journey where the mentor guides, nurtures and supports mentee growth throughout, advising them on shortcomings, appraising on strengths and encouraging them, until they become capable of preparing and delivering effective lessons independently (Awaya et al., 2003).

The literature reviewed appears to focus mainly on how mentees learn through mentoring. It does not fully explore what kind of professional knowledge is learnt. This paper attempts to address this gap by exploring the kind of knowledge the part-time PGCE student teachers acquire through mentoring.

Method

The study is located within an interpretive paradigm and its purpose was to explore the learning experiences of students in school-based mentoring. A previous paper has already been published on the same students' experiences of university-based learning on the part-time PGCE (Bertram et al., 2013).

The population of the study was approximately 100 part-time PGCE students, who enrolled at the beginning of 2009. In May 2010 at the end of a lecture, after a brief explanation of the study, we distributed a short questionnaire, asking for volunteers to participate in the study. Of the 24 students who volunteered, 20 were interviewed and the remaining four could not be reached on the contact numbers provided. This was a self-selected sample, and there was neither randomisation nor matching to the demographics of the general PGCE student population. This approach may have inadvertently excluded other information-rich members of the student population. All respondents consented to participation in the study through a consent form. Ethical clearance was obtained from the UKZN Ethics committee.

The 20 students were interviewed following a semi-structured interview schedule. Students were interviewed by one of four members of staff, all of whom are experienced researchers, with doctorates (PhDs) in education. Interviews were audio-taped, took between 45–60 minutes, and were transcribed verbatim. The team met to reflect on how the interview process was unfolding in order to try and minimise differences. Most students responded in English, and four used both English and isiZulu. The isiZulu interviews were later translated to English by one of the research team members, who is a competent speaker of both isiZulu and English.

Of the 20 students interviewed, 16 were female and four were male. The mean age of the sample was 35 years: with six students aged between 25 and 30 years; nine aged between 31 and

40 years, and five aged 41 years and above. In terms of years of teaching experience, the mean for the sample was four and half years, while four teachers had each been teaching for more than 11 years (Bertram et al., 2013).

Ten of the students were registered for the Further Education and Training (Grades 10-12) specialisations, four for both FET and Senior Phase GET (General Education and Training) (Grades 7-9) specialisations; three in the Senior Phase GET (Grades 7-9); and three were registered for the Foundation Phase (Grades R-3). Five were teaching in state township schools, four were in state suburban schools, three were in independent schools, five in state rural schools and three in schools for learners with special needs (LSEN).

Of the 20 transcripts, one interview transcript did not provide any data on the student's mentoring experiences, and as such, was not included. Hence the findings report on 19 students in total. The data was analysed using the NVIVO 8 qualitative software package, which enabled us to inductively categorise the data into themes, which were later linked into either major or minor categories. The different categories were then compared, contrasted, and reviewed to ascertain whether some categories could be merged, or if some needed to be sub-categorised. Grossman's (1990) categories of teacher knowledge are relevant in understanding the way in which teachers talked about their experiences of mentoring and what they learnt during this process. Finally, the researchers returned to the original transcripts to ensure that all the information had been included.

The analysis draws on Grossman's (1990) categories of teacher knowledge, which include, content knowledge, general pedagogic knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and context knowledge. Content knowledge is the teachers' understanding of the content structure of a subject, both substantive and syntactic, and their understanding of which topics are central to a subject and why. Pedagogical content knowledge refers to teachers' knowledge of the most useful ways of representing topics related to a subject, in a way that makes them understandable to others (Shulman, 1987). Wilson and Demetriou (2007) argue that it is important that new teachers have a good grasp of subject knowledge, and are able to present it in accessible ways to all learners in the classroom. General pedagogic knowledge refers to the teachers' knowledge of how to handle certain aspects related to teaching, such as questioning, group work and classroom management (Shulman, 1987); and is gained from teaching practice (Turner-Bisset, 2001).

Results

This study sought to explore school-based men-

toring experiences of part-time PGCE students. Data analysis shows three types of mentoring experiences received by these students. Firstly this involved subject-specific mentoring, where the mentor offered subject-specific feedback on teaching particular subjects; secondly general pedagogical mentoring, where mentoring feedback related to generic teaching strategies and classroom management; and thirdly compliance mentoring, where the mentor simply satisfied the technical requirements of the university without offering any meaningful feedback. The following section describes these findings in detail.

Subject-specific Mentoring

Five of the 19 participants reported receiving mentoring related specifically to their teaching subjects, which, according to Grossman's (1990) categories, falls under content knowledge and PCK. This type of mentoring enabled trainees to develop PCK, which concerns teaching strategies, explanations, analogies, models, activities and resources that are specific to teaching a particular discipline. For example, XN spoke of being mentored by Life Sciences colleagues. He explained:

I went to my seniors, teachers teaching Life Sciences and worked with them. Ok [sic], I had a course outline of what should be covered during the year, but worked with them in selecting content to be covered. Yeah [sic], we used the same notes, and if the teacher was teaching Grade 10 previously, he/she would have some notes, so I would borrow them, make copies and, invited them to my class to observe and make comments which I try to improve (XN, BSc., 3 years experience).¹

While XN does not specify working with one specific mentor, he describes a situation where he learnt from a pool of mentors, who observed his lessons and gave him valuable feedback, which he then implemented. This quote shows teacher agency and a collegial working relationship within the Life Science specialisation. They worked well as a subject group, sharing teaching resources and observing each other teaching. This example of a supportive subject group was a unique occurrence in this study.

Other mentoring support activities in the category of subject-specific mentoring included securing teaching materials and resources. For example, TM mentioned:

Yes, when I had resource problems, I would go to experienced Foundation Phase teachers, because teaching smaller ones you need some building cards, that I've never experienced [making], so I would ask how to make cards and shapes. There was an activity where you had to build something from shapes so I did not have a clue [...] Yes, because I've been teaching at this school, they helped me a lot [be]cause for my teaching practice I [took] literacy, but [since] I don't teach literacy [...] for writing they helped me [sic] (TM, BA

Hons Psych, 3 years experience).ⁱⁱ Mentoring here refers not just to one subject, but to the Foundation Phase as a whole. TM highlights the expert knowledge and specific skills required for Foundation Phase, and how she drew from experienced Foundation Phase teachers in her school. What is also apparent from this is the assistance she gained from mentors related to teaching resources, which related to specific pedagogy for the Foundation Phase.

A respondent who taught music at a Waldorf school also refers to subject-specific mentoring working with an allocated mentor, but with an option of consulting other teachers in the school. HC's descriptions suggest a prolonged formally structured in-school mentoring programme. She explained that:

[...] in Steiner you always have a mentor for seven years. They believe it takes seven years before a teacher has [acquired the] full [set of] skills of a proper teacher. I am lucky because my mentor used to play in an orchestra and was brought up in Steiner system, and [...] knows the whole philosophy, so should I have problems, he mentors me. Any teacher there is willing to help with any problems, e.g. how to handle a [given] situation, if you are not getting a point across [for example], you can ask any colleague and they're helpful and nice (HC, BA, MA Music, 1 year experience).ⁱⁱⁱ

This description indicates that HC takes the initiative to consult colleagues when necessary, which is possible due to the existing supportive school structures and culture. Again, this type of prolonged mentoring often takes teachers through phases of professional life, where successful mentoring relationships exist, provided mentor and mentee have some commonalities in certain aspects of their personal and/or professional lives.

Pedagogical Mentoring

The second type of mentoring identified in the data was general pedagogic mentoring. Nine students mentioned learning from mentoring support and feedback related to generic pedagogic skills such as classroom management, lesson planning, teaching strategies and technical aspects like chalkboard work. The following excerpts illustrate this below:

Yes, there is someone who assisted me [a mentor]. She said that I must improve strategies of disciplining learners because they are too old. I must [develop] some strategies of how to calm down learners [sic] and I must try to use resources (DJ, BA, MA Fine Art, 2 years' experience).^{iv}

Yeah, there are some things [I learnt from my mentor]. [For instance], starting a lesson – you need learner prior knowledge to start them from the known to the unknown. [...] he also taught me [something about] handling learners, asking questions before the lesson starts – all those things (PK, BA, 5 years' experience).^v

The first thing that Mr Ngcobo,^{vi} who gave me Math books, mentioned, was to prepare for lessons before going to class and always being prepared.

Another thing that one may think is not important, Ngcobo said, was to subdivide the chalkboard into four, since there were big chalk boards. I used write from beginning to end (MM, B.Com, 3years' experience).

These comments indicate that these mentors focused their feedback on general pedagogical knowledge such as strategies of classroom management, using resources and sequencing in lesson delivery. Many teachers mentioned that they learnt a great deal about assessment strategies, which, according to Grossman (1990), is also general pedagogical knowledge. This is not surprising, when considering that assessment is currently a issue of broad current debate in South African schools. New curriculum policies foreground the integration of curriculum and assessment and, at the same time, require newly-qualified teachers to have knowledge of assessment as one of the key competences (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2011; Republic of South Africa, Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011). These are generic issues that are not specific to the discipline content being taught.

From the above comments, it is clear that these PUPTs did acquire general pedagogic knowledge from school-based mentoring while on the PGCE programme. Considering that these teachers had been teaching for an average of four years, one would have expected them to have developed knowledge of how to discipline learners, to develop a lesson plan and to use a chalkboard. However, what emerges from these comments is that these pedagogical aspects had not been learned informally at school and were learnt through formal mentoring as part of the PGCE programme. This highlights the importance of formal professional training in learning how to teach, where learning such pedagogic skills cannot simply be left to chance.

In some instances, the reason that mentors offered only generic pedagogical feedback, and not subject-specific feedback, is that they did not share the same subject specialisation with the mentee. While some mentors were reported to be from different subject specialisations and therefore unable to offer subject-specific mentoring support, they were able to observe lessons and give developmental generic comments. However, some student teachers did not see this as effective mentoring. To illustrate MN said:

I had a mentor, but he is a Commerce HOD who would just say 'all the learners enjoyed the lesson' and 'have also enjoyed the lesson.' That was all [...] no one does drama at the school, the other Arts and Culture teachers mostly taught History previously (MN, BA Languages, 3 years experience).

A situation in which the mentor and mentee are from different specialisations often does not lead to effective mentoring, as one of the mentor roles is to

offer the mentee subject-specific developmental assistance. Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2005) generated similar findings, where student teachers were mentored by teachers from outside their specialisation or their school. These authors concluded that mentors in a different subject area are unable to perform mentoring duties confidently, efficiently and effectively.

Some respondents in the study, such as NS, reported being supported by senior teachers in the school, who offered moral support to help them go through the challenges they faced in the classroom. For example, NS explains how the principal provided support:

I worked with [...] my principal, [who] was very motivating, he would take us into his office, tell us about teaching and ask us about any problems we would have in class and help us to go through challenges we were experiencing (NS, BA Psychology, 15 years experience).^{vii}

This account indicates the importance of the involvement of school management in the mentoring of student teachers, making them feel welcome and supported. These motivational experiences have been grouped under the broad term of pedagogical support, as they are outside subject-specific support. Such support from management, in addressing classroom or school challenges relates to what Mthiyane (2012) describes as psychological support.

Compliance Mentoring

A third group of five student teachers in the study reported what we have labelled as 'compliance' mentoring, where mentor duties were performed to fulfil the university student TP assessment requirements. This involved sometimes doing a stipulated number of classroom visits, completing the assessment forms, and checking the student's TP file, but not providing any developmental feedback, whether subject-specific or of a general pedagogic nature. Students did not value this kind of mentoring, as it did not offer them any way to develop their professional knowledge. The following two students explained that they received very minimal mentoring:

Not, [I received none] at all. They [...] check[ed] my files and that was it. They [...] c[a]me in and s[a]t for the lessons they [were required to observe]. [So, they] assess[ed] three or four lessons that the school had to assess and that was just it (FS, BSc Dietetics, 5 years experience).^{viii}

I used to go to my HOD, although she always said she was not sure [...] always complaining about that, she'd keep saying 'No, do it your way. You are fine, you are clever. Just do it your way'. [So, with] some of the things, I had to find my own way (SS, B.Com, 4 years' experience).^{ix}

The above evidence indicates the absence of meaningful guidance and support, where mentors observed lessons to fulfil the formal requirements,

but did not provide meaningful feedback. ST also complained that:

I did my practice in [name of school], [where] older teachers don't understand Life Orientation ... they don't want to [understand it]. My mentor didn't want to come and observe, even when I called her, she just walked away. I don't know whether they feel intimidated or something [sic] (ST, B.Paed, 13 years' experience).^x

It appears that some of these mentors accepted the mentoring responsibility, but were seemingly not prepared to effectively perform mentoring roles. The three scenarios above suggest patterns of ineffective mentoring. This finding supports observations by the South African Department of Education (DoE, 2006), where a lack of in-school supervisory and mentoring support in the South African education context were hindering the success of on-site initial teacher education.

Discussion

Data analysis shows very few instances of a shift from the traditional to collaborative/collegial mentoring approaches, where the mentor and mentee learn with and from each other. The majority of students (14 out of the 19) did receive mentoring, but the nature of that mentoring tended to focus on general pedagogic knowledge rather than on subject-specific PCK.

The students we interviewed reported three types of mentoring experiences. Some students (five) received mentoring related to subject content, which focused on their specific teaching specialisation, and these students received clear guidance and feedback enabling them to develop their PCK in their subject specialisation. This subject-specific feedback is the most useful for student teachers, as it focuses on teaching as a practice specialised to a particular grade or subject, and not simply a generic practice (Ruszynak, 2010). This is the type of mentoring that needs to be encouraged if school-based learning is to be meaningful.

Interestingly, in two cases of subject-specific mentoring, these experiences were also linked to collegial collaboration in some specialisations, where, firstly, teachers supported each other with material and psychological resources and observed each other teaching. Villegas-Reimers (2003) and Wenger (1998) concur that learning is a social activity involving collaboration, interaction, working together and learning with and from one another, and by extension, taking responsibility for their students' learning.

Secondly, nine students received mentoring related only to general pedagogy around classroom management, lesson planning and delivery, teaching strategies and the technical aspects such as using the chalkboard effectively. These students thus gained knowledge in specific strategies of

classroom practice, management and organisation that appear to transcend subject matter (Banegas, 2012; Shulman, 1987). Banegas (2012) indicates that generic pedagogic skills enable teachers to develop a better understanding of the educational context, transcending the subject teaching classroom, to the dynamics of the educational system as a whole. However, generic pedagogic skills cannot substitute subject-specific support, which enables new teachers to develop the PCK needed for ensuring that learners develop deep conceptual understanding in specific discipline areas.

Three of these students noted that their mentors did not have expertise in the subject that they were teaching. Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2005) established that a lack of confidence, efficiency and effectiveness exhibited by mentors from different subject specialisations, could be attributed to a lack of relevant content knowledge. Teachers with strong content knowledge engage in mentoring in a more interesting and dynamic way, contrary to those with limited content knowledge, who may shy away from more difficult aspects of the subject, or approach issues in a didactic manner (McNamara, 1995). This resembles what these students experienced, where such mentors would pass general comments like “...all the learners enjoyed the lesson ... I have also enjoyed the lesson.” Such situations bring mentor-mentee pairing into question, as careful attention must be paid to ensure appropriate matching of subject specialisation, values, work styles, personalities etc. PGCE part-time students are mentored by their colleagues in the schools where they teach. Hence, the university does not have much control over the choice of the mentor.

Thirdly, some (five) students experienced mentoring, where mentor teachers simply complied with university-school requirements, but did not effectively mentor, support or guide student teachers. Such mentors often did not observe student teachers' lessons, but simply completed the mentor assessment forms for the university. Limited mentoring of student teachers in South African schools has been documented elsewhere (see for example DoE, 2006; Marais & Meier, 2004; Mukeredzi & Mandrona, 2013). This situation raises questions regarding mentor training, mentor awareness of mentoring roles, as well as partnerships between school, university and Department of Basic Education.

While the university has good relationships and partnerships with local schools that host full-time PGCE students, part-time PGCE students are mentored within the school where they are already employed to teach. Thus, it is a challenge to establish direct communication and face-to-face training with mentors, as the schools are often located a great distance from the university campus, given the extent of the province of KwaZulu-

Natal. Letters to principals and mentors were distributed to the students to deliver, on the assumption that engaging with the information would inform effective mentoring practice. Our findings suggest that in some cases, this did not happen.

Conclusion and Implications

The findings indicate that the nineteen respondents experienced different levels of mentoring. Some students received content-specific mentoring and pedagogical mentoring, while others received very limited mentoring from mentors in different specialisations, with seemingly limited content knowledge. Other mentors simply acted to fulfil university assessment requirements. While some students were mentored and gained valuable knowledge, what emerges in this study is that effective mentoring of PUPTs did not occur in all schools.

These findings suggest that mentor teachers play an important role in teacher development, particularly when trainees have not yet acquired a professional teaching qualification. These findings echo findings by Du Plessis et al. (2010) and Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009), where student teachers confirmed having benefitted from their mentors in lesson preparation and delivery, learner discipline, and being generally well-organised and prepared to carry out their daily teaching activities.

In this study, while the university expected students to work under the tutelage of school-based mentors during the period of TP and to benefit from the mentoring support, this was not the case with a number of participants. Regrettably however, the university does not have any jurisdiction over the quality of schools, their structures and cultures – including both mentor choice and the quality of mentoring support – as these students are already in a post when they enrol in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. Besides, in this study, the university did not mount face-to-face mentor training, given the geographical locations of the schools where these students were practicing. In addition, there were neither strong monitoring mechanisms, nor strong school-university partnerships in all the schools by means of which to ensure effective mentoring. This is because the part-time students were teaching in schools located all over the province, and not in those schools typically used for fulltime student practica. The need for comprehensive mentor training for school-based teacher educators cannot be over-emphasised. Meetings held directly with mentors would establish and or strengthen school-university partnerships, expose the university to the realities in schools while uncovering university expectations of mentoring. This would enhance mentoring effectiveness. Such training would engage with notions of teaching as a specialised practice, and mentoring as requiring both specialised and generic

pedagogic feedback. This would be important not only for mentoring students and novice teachers, but also for the mentors' professional growth. A university mentor training project funded by KwaZulu-Natal DoE in 2010 may need to be revived and taken up as an on-going collaborative process. Until all stakeholders (teacher educators, education departments and schools) engage in serious and committed discussions around pre-service teacher supports, the possibility of significant improvement in school-based mentoring is unlikely, as schools and mentor teachers may continue to pay lip-service to mentoring. The success of these school-based teacher education components resides in their being a co-production by all involved. Thus, to achieve desirable outcomes for all stakeholders, there is need for a re-appraisal of institutional policies around school-based mentoring of such students to provide institutional and site-based teacher educators opportunities to undertake these kinds of dialogues around school-based supports. This implies that institutions ought to take a lead in developing and/or maintaining strong partnerships between schools and universities, and in ensuring that appropriate strategies are put in place to enhance mentoring effectiveness.

Mentoring has been touted as a pinnacle for effective school-based professional learning, and practice where mentees benefit from supervisory guidance, critique, and feedback, as well as from their own reflection (Kerry & Mayes, 1995). In this study, while not all the students benefitted significantly, it appears as if the levels of mentoring reported by most of the participants contributed to some extent to their becoming professionally qualified.

Furthermore, in-school teacher support during training is critical to promote development of their teaching knowledge and skills. This is important for their effective enhancement of learner achievement in the classroom, thereby enabling school graduates to access further education opportunities or employment and eventually contributing to national economic development. Despite being a small contribution to research that investigated 19 PUPTs, given the centrality of mentoring in school-based initial teacher education, it is argued that these insights require additional, comprehensive exploration.

Notes

- i. This information refers to the student's anonymised initials, their academic degree, and the number of years of teaching experience they had when they were enrolled on the part-time PGCE programme.
- ii. Verbatim quotation was edited for the publication.
- iii. Verbatim quotation was edited for the publication.
- iv. Verbatim quotation was edited for the publication.
- v. Verbatim quotation was edited for the publication.
- vi. Ngcobo is a pseudonym.
- vii. Verbatim quotation was edited for the publication.

- viii. Verbatim quotation was edited for the publication.
- ix. Verbatim quotation was edited for the publication.
- x. Verbatim quotation was edited for the publication.

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