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Exploring the role of mentoring and coaching in developing pre-service teachers: a qualitative case study of a South African ITE programme

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ABSTRACT

South Africa's low learner achievement puts into question the capacity of teacher competency, and more particularly the quality of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) training. The need for sufficient classroom practice in pre-service training programmes is well documented and mentoring and coaching are understood to be effective tools in this practice. What is less well understood is the underlying mechanisms that promote successful mentoring and coaching that contribute to the value of ITE programmes.

While there is consistent support for the effectiveness of mentoring and coaching in ITE, international research indicates a lack of uniformity in methods, context and approach. Investigation and analysis of ITE mentoring and coaching effectiveness ranges from technicist teaching strategies through to enculturation and a wider teaching context. Themes such as professional identity, trust and emotional support are all considered crucial elements that impact mentoring and coaching efficacy. South Africa's unique educational challenges including low levels of teacher pedagogical and content knowledge as well as resources, language and access inequalities further compound ITE quality issues. Understanding *how* mentoring and coaching impact the success of ITE professional development potentially provides lessons in unlocking powerful models to improve ITE training.

This qualitative case study of a South African ITE mentoring programme has used the voices and perceptions of key stakeholders to explore the mechanisms and triggers within "successful" mentoring and coaching that facilitates professional pre-service teacher development. The internship programme used as a case study is located as a parallel programme to the BEd academic programme. Interns study part time towards a BEd (Bachelor of Education) degree, either through Unisa (University of South Africa) or through NWU (North West University), while simultaneously being immersed in an independent four year intensive mentoring and coaching school environment. All current and past interns within the case study programme were offered the option to participate. A total of 18 interns took part in the study, and of these 6 were second year students, 4 were third year students, 5 were fourth year students, and 3 had completed their BEd degrees, and were practicing full time employed teachers. In addition, one staff member participated in the study. For a full breakdown of participants, see Appendix I.

A social learning theoretical framework goes some way to explain the assimilation of professional and practical classroom skill. However, the major finding of this research indicates that in situations where pre-service teachers are transitioning from one social class to another, the transmission of cultural and social capital in the mentoring and coaching relationships is fundamental to the professional development journey. Social class background is therefore at the heart of these contextual findings, where the transmission of social capital provides *access* into shared social capital networks, and mentors provide a bridge in the transition to the unfamiliar norms, expectations and patterns of social capital network interactions. Trust, a sense of belonging, emotional support and a professional environment are seen as essential ingredients in the mentoring relationships that provide this transmission of social and cultural capital.

Given the extent of the financial and time costs involved in this ITE programme, replication or roll out at scale is unlikely. In addition, the contextual specifics of this South African ITE programme are noted. However, this study aimed to contribute to the literature on the mechanisms that make for effective mentoring and coaching in ITE programmes.