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Encounters with mentor teachers: first-year students' experiences on teaching practice

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ABSTRACT

Teaching practice is a compulsory, legislated component of initial teacher education programmes in South Africa. During this experience, preservice teachers engage with their mentor teachers. By exploring first-year students' experiences with their mentor teachers during their first teaching practice, we argue that mentorship is a vital component of teaching practice in order for first-year students to grow and develop their teaching skills and their professional development. The theoretical framework chosen underpins the mentorship processes based on Hagger and Macintyre's work, this enabled a multi-dimensional analysis and account of mentorship. Four hundred and twelve first-year students participated in this study and the data were analysed by means of an open coding method. The results were that 376 (91%) of participants reported that they felt unsupported and powerless during teaching practice, because of negative engagements and experiences with mentor teachers. These findings have implications for the preparation of preservice teachers in other contexts too.

KEYWORDS

Preservice teachers; teaching practice; mentor teachers; initial teacher education

Introduction

While preservice teachers are keen to be placed in a school context to teach, their first teaching practice experience can be either a fear-provoking or an exhilarating experience. The university's focus during teaching practice foregrounds the pedagogical aspects of working with learners, rather than the establishment of a mentorship relationship between the preservice teachers with their supervising teachers. The importance of establishing mentorship relationships is not considered central as argued by Hudson (2013). However, Hudson (2013) suggested that the moment a mentor accepts a mentee 'the mentoring relationship is formalized within school experiences' (p. 2). Within a school context, preservice teachers are reliant on their mentor teachers for guidance, support and constructive feedback on their progress, and the preservice teachers observe their mentor teachers in order to discover what is expected of them as future teachers. This means that mentor teachers can be

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regarded as powerful models for preservice teachers in a classroom context (Bandura, 1977), because the mentor teachers should have pedagogical content knowledge and be able to demonstrate acceptable practice to the preservice teachers. It is for these reasons that mentorship is of central importance for the professional development of preservice teachers.

The issues of mentorship and its complexities have been discussed extensively in international research. Augustiniene and Ciuciulkiene (2013) suggested that mentors are critical to preservice teachers' success; Brondyk, Searby, and Kochan (2013) discuss the complexities of teaching in different contexts and the implications this has on teaching; Hagger, McIntyre, and Wilkin (2013) argued that the mentor has a great influence on the mentee as they work closely together. Shanks and Shanks (2017) agreed that it is important to understand the professional learning that occurs within the mentorship relationship, although they suggest that mentorship should be examined critically regarding whose interests it serves so that it could address the challenges that occur in mentoring relationships.

In addition, mentorship reiterates the complexities of its definition as any underlying challenges that emerges during these relationships within specific contexts needs to be continually interrogated (Mukeredzi, 2017; Robinson, 2016). Within the South African context, mentorship in education has become a critical focal point in literature over the years with current studies (see Du Plessis, 2013; Mukeredzi, 2017; Robinson, 2016) addressing concerns about what preservice teachers learn from their mentors during teaching practice. These researchers highlighted that in-service teachers in South African schools are not always adequately equipped to mentor preservice teachers. In fact, in-service teachers either volunteer to accept preservice teachers in their classroom during teaching practice, or the school principals instruct their teachers to accept preservice teachers into their classrooms. These in-service teachers are reliant on their personal experiences of mentorship (or the lack thereof), and they focus on interpreting the initial teacher education institution's guidelines for teaching practice, which might lead to an inaccurate interpretation of what is acceptable or not during the mentorship process. A possible result is that an inconsistent relationship develops between the mentor and mentee, which is not conducive to either one's growth (Foncha, Abongdia, & Adu, 2015; Mukeredzi, 2017). Furthermore, Fairbanks, Freedman, and Kahn (2000) and Kwan and Lopez-Real (2005) indicated that there are varied definitions of mentoring with no definitive clarity on its meaning. Given these above challenges, we propose a working definition of mentoring as the one-to-one support provided to preservice teachers (mentee) by qualified and experienced teachers (mentor) at various schools during the teaching practice period.

In order to gain a better understanding of the challenges of the mentoring process, we focused on first-year preservice teachers' experiences of mentorship during teaching practice, as this is central to their development as future

teachers. In addition, we argued that preservice teachers and mentor teachers could find themselves in a difficult situation, as both may lack an understanding of how to mediate their way through the dynamics of working with each other. This leads to an imbalance in power relations between preservice teachers and mentor teachers, therefore we suggest that there is a need to investigate how best to prepare students to engage and work effectively with their mentor teachers.

We also pose the question of how to prepare preservice teachers for their teaching practice, so that they are supported and empowered as teachers. It is important for initial teacher education institutions to place more emphasis on understanding how first-year preservice teachers perceive their experiences on teaching practice, as it could provide a way to determine what skills and knowledge preservice teachers need to succeed during teaching practice. This raises awareness of the contextual realities that impact on the mentorship relationships between preservice teachers and their supervising teachers. We acknowledge the possibility that the first-time preservice teachers are placed in the schools; it might be a traumatic experience for them as they are not fully aware of what to expect. There are unrealistic expectations placed on preservice teachers by university staff as well as mentor teachers, which suggests that it is important to demystify these expectations for preservice teachers. A way of doing this is to understand and reflect on preservice teachers' experiences in order to establish ways to strengthen the mentee-mentor relationship. Hence, this article attempts to develop an understanding of the current South African educational context and its focus on teaching practicum.

We situated our study within the wider body of mentorship, teacher education and teaching practice research. Next, we described the research context and the process of the research, and then outlined the findings. An analysis of the data suggests preservice teachers felt unsupported by mentor teachers, and many of the preservice teachers felt insecure and did not know how to develop positive relationships with their supervising teachers. We highlight that further research on mentorship requires urgent attention, especially in the South African educational landscape, but by doing so, this may have implications for other contexts too.

Literature review

The role of teaching practice

Teaching practice is a compulsory component of any teacher education programme both nationally and internationally. The central aim of teaching practice is to expose preservice teachers to the realities of the classroom. It is during this time that preservice teachers are often faced with the dilemma of merging theory with practice. During teaching practice, preservice teachers should be

provided with the opportunity 'to develop their self-confidence in a safe environment and build up their skills and their understanding of the complexities of teaching and learning' (Moody, 2009, p. 169). Furthermore, teaching practice exposes preservice teachers to 'systemic and reliable instructional practice' (Gamble, 2010, p. 17). We locate the school as pivotal in supporting, developing and nurturing preservice teachers during their respective journeys to become teachers.

In order for preservice teachers to develop a sense of what teaching entails, they need to be exposed to good classroom instructional practices, so that they can learn both in and from their teaching experience. During teaching practice, the preservice teachers interact with their supervising teachers and 'no amount of knowledge can fully prescribe appropriate or wise practice' (Ball & Cohen, 1999, p. 10). Teaching practice should provide preservice teachers with insights as to how teachers develop their skills and use their pedagogical and subject knowledge to provide meaningful learning opportunities for the learners during lesson delivery. There are many positive outcomes of teaching practice, which researchers have documented (see Mena, Hennissen, & Loughran, 2017; Thornton, 2014). However, there are also numerous challenges that preservice teachers face during their time at schools, such as underestimating the conceptual complexity of teaching, and seeing the most visible routines as the essence of practice itself (Brondyk et al., 2013; Dominguez, Hager, & Kochan, 2013). During the preservice teachers' first teaching practice at a school, they gradually develop an understanding of teaching and acquire some knowledge of the profession. This understanding is linked to the preservice teachers' personal expectations and experiences, which invariably leads them to experience various challenges regarding teaching practice. There are some researchers who argue that challenges on teaching practice may impact preservice teachers' decisions to complete their studies (DeAngelis, Wall, & Che, 2013).

Challenges during teaching practice

For some preservice teachers, the teaching practice may simply be an exposure to one more teacher's style of work (Lortie, 1975), which is not necessarily a worthy experience. Teaching is a multi-layered and complex task that requires a carefully scaffolded process. Furthermore, many preservice teachers experience the school-based practical experience as a series of isolated, decontexualised lessons, which are prepared and implemented according to the supervising teacher's requirements.These experiences, can be a disempowering experience for the preservice teachers (Foncha et al., 2015). Besides, preservice teachers can also become heavily dependent on their mentor teachers to induct them into the practice (Hagger & McIntyre, 2006). In this way, the preservice teachers become reliant on the ways their mentor teachers model the practice of teaching (Barab & Hay, 2001). The value of preservice teachers' experiences of teaching practice is often dependent on the

wholehearted and consistent support of individual, supervising teachers (Robinson, 2004). According to Hagger and McIntyre (2006), it is also within the school context that student teachers must deal with 'school issues' (p. 60), for example, avoiding social confrontations with their supervising teachers. Additionally, there are different ways preservice mentor-mentee relationships are perceived globally and various contexts may bring about different challenges and benefits (Izadinia, 2017; Yuan, 2016). Investigating mentor-mentee relationships in a South African context will add to this discussion.

The role of mentor teachers during teaching practice

Mentor teachers play an important role in supporting preservice teachers during teaching practice. Ball and Cohen (1999) argued that teachers, which include preservice teachers, learn in and from practice. This means that preservice teachers need to be placed in schools for teaching practice where teachers are able to mentor them, because 'effective mentoring is pivotal to the development of student teachers' (Du Plessis, 2013, p. 29). To achieve this outcome, preservice teachers spend most of their time during teaching practice under a mentor teacher who provides guidance about what to do in practice. Bradbury and Koballa (2008) argued that it is crucial to understand 'the complex interactions that constrain and promote' (p. 2143) the relationship between mentors and mentees, because the quality of the mentor-mentee relationship is pivotal to counteract the possibility of the preservice teachers feeling disempowerment (Hudson, 2013). However, Izadinia (2017) indicated in her research that the 'presence of a mentor is not enough' (p. 66), and argued that the mentorship relationship assists preservice teachers' professional development only if there is 'collaboration and commitment' from the mentor (p. 67).

According to Hagger and McIntyre (2006), the mentor-mentee relationship is one which has several challenges. They indicated that preservice teachers find it difficult to suspend their own way of thinking so that they are more receptive to the mentor teachers' ideas. Furthermore, Hagger and McIntyre (2006) suggested that many preservice teachers tend to look for generalised solutions to the problems of teaching and they prefer a simple solution. Preservice teachers also take a considerable time to recognize the complexity of teaching. Hagger and McIntyre (2006) also indicated that most preservice teachers are focused on being in the classroom and invariably reject formal or artificial conversations with mentor teachers, although some preservice teachers ask questions that might make the mentor teachers feel defensive. However, the preservice teachers view knowledge as useful if they can apply it immediately, as a result of feedback from mentor teachers. This means that the motivation to learn from mentors stems from the way preservice teachers connect to the teaching style and the mentor teachers' attitude.

The current South African education landscape faces additional challenges, because of the democratisation of our education system post-1994. During the Apartheid era, the South African education system was unequal, and schools were segregated according to race. One of the results is that the majority of teachers currently in South African schools have not received adequate training due to 'a racially stratified teacher education system' (Sayed, 2002, p.381). These issues continue to impact on the quality of mentorship, as many mentor teachers in our schooling system were part of the Apartheid education context and are still making sense of what it means to teach in the current diverse South African context (Chisholm et al., 2005).

Furthermore, power relationships between preservice teachers and their mentor teachers cannot be ignored. Bradbury and Koballa (2008) noted the tension created when the mentor used power as a control mechanism over the mentee. Invariably, this leads to feelings of powerlessness and an inevitable unwillingness to question the mentor regarding the mentees progress or evaluation during the practicum. Issues of culture and ethnicity may also play a role in the power relations, but an exploration of these ideas goes beyond the focus of this article. There are expectations and differences of opinions and philosophies about teaching that might jeopardise the relationship between the mentee and the mentor. Furthermore, Hansman (2003) explained that the 'mentoring relationship is crucial to psychosocial development because mentoring relationships can be powerful and life-changing events in people's lives' (p. 14). Ambrosetti, Knight, and Dekkers (2014) argued that experienced teachers might not necessarily be the most effective mentors, and this has implications for where school management places preservice teachers. Given all these complexities, we argue that it is important to rethink how to prepare preservice teachers to deal with the mentor mentee relationship.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework used in this research is that of Hagger and McIntyre (2006), who proposed that during the teaching practice preservice teachers often experience three different processes: modelling, practice and feedback. These processes play out when preservice teachers are allocated to a mentor teacher at each school as happens in a South African context. In most cases, the students remain with the mentor teacher for the duration of their teaching practice.

Mentors are responsible for modelling appropriate practices to preservice teachers, who learn vicariously about teaching in this manner. The importance of a modelling process is expressed by Bandura's (1977) concept of social learning, which states that humans learn largely through interaction or observation of others. According to this theory, observing a model is an effective way of learning as well as a meaningful method of teaching (Davis, 1983). Hagger and

McIntyre (2006) stated that preservice teachers are 'heavily reliant on models to gauge how to function in the school space' (p. 51). These models help preservice teachers to develop concrete and mental pictures of what to do. Du Plessis (2013) argued that modelling within the mentor-mentee relationship is central to teaching in a South African context, as it provides a platform whereby the mentee can observe best practice in the form of good teaching approaches, thorough planning and classroom management. Learning from mentors can occur inactively or vicariously (Schunk, 2012), and first-year preservice teachers could experience all these forms of learning during teaching practice.

Preservice teachers need to be given numerous opportunities to 'practice' various teaching techniques themselves. Mentors need to provide mentees with the basics of teaching, that is, pedagogical content knowledge in the form of effective use of resources, as well as how to plan and scaffold their lessons (Du Plessis, 2013). Mentorship is viewed as a reciprocal relationship where the mentee (preservice teacher) ought to feel comfortable to voice concerns and discuss teaching practices without any inhibitions (Du Plessis, 2013). This element is crucial and cannot be overlooked, as this is the essence of professional learning as alluded to earlier by Ambrosetti et al. (2014).

Mentees need feedback, and mentors should clarify their expectations during the process of teaching practice (Du Plessis, 2013). Feedback is important, because it promotes pedagogical development after a lesson that has been taught and opens up spaces for reflection to improve practice. In addition, the mentor needs specific attributes, such as being positive and nurturing when giving feedback, in order to support preservice teachers (Feiman-Nemser & Carver, 2012). Hagger and McIntyre (2006) framework of modelling, practice and feedback was used to analyse the data from the preservice teachers in this research.

Methods

A qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological (Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012; Maxwell, 2012) research approach was selected for this study, because we aimed to understand, reflect on and interpret preservice teachers lived experienced experiences with mentor teachers whilst on teaching practice. We were interested in gathering a rich description of preservice teachers lived experiences with mentor teachers and qualitative research is a most suitable approach, as it does not privilege one method or discipline over another (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The qualitative research design method is useful, because it elicits an understanding of the underlying reasons, opinions and issues that describe the socially constructed nature of preservice teachers' experiences. It also generates useful data for analysis. Multiple qualitative methods allow for the 'capturing [of] as much reality as possible' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 8). This approach allowed us to develop deep insights into an

individual preservice teacher's perspective of experiences during teaching practice. Rich explanations were generated (Shank & Villella, 2004) by using a phenomenological approach (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009) to focus on preservice teachers lived experiences, when they were requested to provide a narrative account of their experiences on teaching practice. We then used hermeneutics as an approach to reflect on and interpret (Maxwell, 2012) the essential themes that were indicated in the narrative accounts. This approach allowed for an increased understanding of preservice teachers lived mentorship experiences whilst on teaching practice.

There is a weakness in only using a qualitative design to collect data, because this approach restricts the ability to generalise the findings. We have attempted to ameliorate this by using a diverse sample of preservice teachers who were placed in different school contexts. Preservice teachers were purposively selected (Palys, 2008), as well as for convenience (Merriam, 2009), because they were all registered as first-year Bachelor of Education students at a higher education institution. Participants formed a heterogeneous group, as they are from diverse racial, cultural, social, gender, age and religious backgrounds. The preservice teachers completed their teaching practices at public, private, religious as well as non-denominational schools in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Context of the study

Our institute is a public university in Johannesburg, South Africa, which is a sprawling urban area. Students at our university are from various cultural and socio-economic backgrounds as well as other African countries. This research was conducted at the School of Education which is part of the faculty of Humanities. All first-year preservice teachers at our institution complete two sessions of three-week long teaching practices. The first session is based on the campus, and it takes place during May each year. All first-year students, despite their course specialisations, are placed in a primary school for the second teaching practice session during September. Schools are either independent or public schools that have hosted student teachers for at least three consecutive years. A central administration office at the university assists the students with their school placements. Before placing the students at a school, the members of staff, who work at the central administration office, pay careful attention as to whether or not a school's management is willing to support and mentor first-year students.

The tension arises between school and university expectations of mentorship, because when students begin their practicum at schools, the university does not provide guidelines to schools on how to select mentor teachers to support preservice teachers. Nor is there any legislation in South Africa regarding induction and training of mentor teachers. It is left up to school to nominate mentor teachers during the practicum session. Often mentors volunteer to have

preservice teachers in their classroom, although in some cases it is the school's internal policy that all teachers are expected to act as mentors.

Research questions

The overall research question for our study was: To what extent have preservice teachers' lived experiences with mentor teachers been empowering, supportive, and helpful? This question is guided by the following sub-questions:

(1) What have preservice teachers learned from observing mentor teachers' engagement with learners?
(2) How have mentor teachers assisted preservice teachers to understand the complexities of teaching?
(3) How have preservice teachers perceived the feedback that they received from their mentor teachers?

The aim of our research was to explore these preservice teachers' experiences of mentorship, by giving them an opportunity to articulate their experiences of their first teaching practice at schools. We argue that it is important for developers of initial teacher education programmes and mentor teachers to understand these preservice teachers' experiences during their first teaching practice, because this might result in better support for them at the schools and their own improved professional development.

Participants

The 412 participants selected for this research were all full time first-year students registered for a bachelor's in education degree. These participants included 119 male and 293 female students, aged between 18 and 56, who were either specialising as primary or secondary school teachers. Participants were from a heterogeneous group which included diverse racial, cultural, social, gender, age and schooling backgrounds. Some came from urban and rural communities and diverse schooling contexts. The sample was representative of participants from different racial groups that comprise the South African population which included Black, White, Indian and Coloured. This assisted in enhancing the variability of the data. The 412 first-year students gave their respective consent to participate in the research for this study. Due attention was given to ethical considerations of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity.

Data instrument

Data were collected using one an open-ended narrative question in order to get authentic feedback regarding the lived experiences of the preservice teachers

and this was validated by their actual lived experiences. The question required participants to describe moments when they felt powerless/helpless/not useful during teaching practice. The question was developed based on our observations and interaction with students during teaching practice as well as reading about students' experiences with mentor teachers in their reflective journals. The question was validated in a small-scale pilot project. Preservice teachers were requested to describe moments when they felt powerless/helpless/or not useful during teaching practice. This form of data collection allowed students to express their reported views, which they extracted from their teaching practice journals, in a handwritten or typed format without any word count limitations to reflect their experiences.

Data collection

In September when students returned to university after their three weeks of teaching practice in schools, they were requested to reflect on their experiences by responding to the central question by recording in writing moments when they felt powerless or helpless during teaching practice. These responses were submitted electronically to the researchers.

Data analysis

The data were analysed deductively using Hagger and McIntyre (2006) concepts of modelling, practice and feedback. By using these concepts of modelling, preservice teachers' responses were analysed from multiple dimensions which included observational, practical and reflective components. Furthermore, the data were analysed by using a thematic analysis to identify and report patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All the responses from participants were read carefully to get an overall sense of the participants' experiences. We found that the preservice teachers' responses were focused mostly on examples that were linked directly to their interactions and observations while working with their respective mentor teachers. Thereafter, individual responses were re-read and coded into themes and sub-themes to get a better understanding of a participant's experience of working with a mentor teacher. Finally, common themes and sub-themes were grouped together to form a holistic picture of the participants' experiences.

Trustworthiness and credibility of our study

To ensure trustworthiness, the data were analysed independently by the two researchers. Then we discussed the categories and compared them in order to reach 'intercoder agreement' (Nunan & Bailey, 2009, p. 428), which enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. Furthermore, the validity of

the data was ensured, because it consisted of multiple views expressed by a heterogeneous group of participants who completed their teaching practice in various school contexts. However, we note that the data was collected from students who attended one tertiary institute, and this means that it might not be possible to generalise the findings to all students and institutions.

Findings and discussion

Of the 412 preservice teachers who gave their consent to participate in this research, 12 (3%) preservice teachers did not answer the questionnaire, 24 (6%) preservice teachers felt supported by mentor teachers and the remaining 376 (91%) preservice teachers indicted that they had not felt adequately supported by their mentor teachers. Instead, they felt helpless and inadequate during their first teaching practice.

The consensus from preservice teachers who did feel supported was that the 'supervising (mentor) teacher was very hands on', and 'my teacher empowered me quite a lot'. These views substantiate the argument that mentor teachers are key role-players in enabling preservice teachers to have a positive experience during teaching practice (Du Plessis, 2013).

However, the majority of preservice teachers 376 (91%) did not feel supported during teaching practice, because their mentor teachers modelled unsupportive interactions with learners, which were in some instances authoritarian and technocratic. One of the participants articulated many of the preservice teachers' experience when she stated: 'I felt unsupported throughout my whole teaching practice, this is because my teacher was not allowing me to do anything or did not have anything for me to do'. Furthermore, 158 (42%) of participants felt unwelcome at the schools they were sent to for teaching practice. Thirteen percent of the participants raised concerns about the type of feedback that they received verbally and non-verbally from mentor teachers. One of the participants stated: 'I felt helpless when my supervising teacher criticised me but did not tell me how I could improve on my weakness'. In general, preservice teachers felt that they 'were looked upon as a burden to teachers as if we were taking up space and not wanted'. To enable a better understanding of preservice teachers' lived experiences whilst engaging with mentor teachers the data will be discussed by focusing on the sub research questions. Firstly, we will elaborate on what preservice teachers have learned from observing mentor teachers, followed by how they were assisted by mentor teachers and lastly how they perceived the feedback they received from mentor teachers.

Observing mentor teachers

The overall pattern indicated that preservice teachers focused on two aspects that they observed whilst watching mentor teachers in practice. The first being

mentor teachers' classroom management skills and the second how mentor teachers engaged with learners.

Mentor teachers' inability to demonstrate effective classroom management skills

A total of 203 (54%) of participants stated that mentor teachers were not effective role models when it came to classroom management manage and support of learners in the classroom. One of the participants stated that when 'the teachers was struggling with the students' behaviour, it put me in an uncomfortable situation'. Managing learners' behaviour is an aspect that creates the most anxiety among preservice teachers. It is not uncommon for first-year students to feel fearful about managing learners, but it is crucial that mentor teachers support and guide preservice teachers when faced with these difficulties.

As this was the first-time preservice teachers were confronted with managing learners, they hoped that observing their mentor teachers would help them to acquire practical skills and knowledge of how to discipline learners in a positive manner. On the contrary, 203 (54%) of preservice teachers reported that their mentor teachers were unable to manage the learners, as one of the students stated that learners 'were very rude to their teacher and failed to follow instructions. This made [him] feel powerless because even their teacher was failing to keep order in the class, [so] obviously they wouldn't listen to [him]'. Another student felt confused by the learners' behaviour when he observed that 'the learners disrespected my supervising teacher, it felt so awkward'. This experience left the student questioning the ability of an experienced teacher to maintain a disciplined environment, which resonated with Feiman-Nemser and Carver (2012) notion that experienced teachers might not necessarily make the most effective mentors. Next we will focus on how mentor teachers engaged with learners.

Mentor teachers working with learners

Sixty six (18%) of the participants stated that it was important to understand how to engage effectively with learners in the classroom, but these participants found that mentor teachers were ineffective in demonstrating these skills. The way some of the mentor teachers interacted with learners led to the preservice teachers feeling helpless. They identified the lack of a mentor teacher's willingness or ability to assist the learners with their academic needs. One of the preservice teachers stated that he felt 'helpless and sorry' for learners 'when the teachers always shut down the learners' questions' and the teachers told him 'not to answer them'. Another participant stated that 'I felt like my supervising teacher did not help children like she could have by giving them encouragement and extra attention … but I didn't feel like I was in a place to give her advice'. These kinds of experiences left preservice teachers feeling a conflict

between their own roles and their responsibilities towards meeting the learners' needs. In addition, these participants were confused by the information they received during their campus-based teaching practice, which encouraged them to work with learners, and the situation that they had observed in practice, where the teachers did not help the learners.

A further 49 (13%) of participants felt that mentor teachers were poor role models for them as they had observed unethical behaviour, which showed evidence of mentor teachers' unprofessional conduct towards learners. One of the preservice teachers observed a 'teacher [who] slaps students'. This made the student feel helpless and angry, because what the teacher was 'doing is against the law but [I] could not do anything'. These practices were confirmed by other participants who stated that the supervising teacher 'would hit the children on their hands with a broomstick. There was nothing I could do about these situations as she was old and not open to suggestion'. In South Africa, it is illegal to administer corporal punishment to learners at school, but it continues to happen in practice. The critical role mentors play about enabling preservice teacher's success (Augustiniene & Ciuciulkiene, 2013) could be negatively affected based on mentors' actions as stated above. This raises concerns about what preservice teachers might learn from their mentors (Mukeredzi, 2017; Robinson, 2016).

Other preservice teachers observed teachers who 'ate food from the feeding scheme and that deprives a learner from a meal'. In South Africa, learners who need daily meals at school can access food from a government feeding scheme. Preservice teachers reported in the above incidents that the mentor teachers had acted unethically but given the imbalance of power in the mentor-mentee relationship, the preservice teachers could not do anything about these matters or felt afraid to disclose these incidents. This demonstrated that this cohort of preservice teachers wanted to avoid social confrontations with mentor teachers (Hagger & McIntyre, 2006) and that they felt disempowered regarding their mentor teachers' illegal and unethical actions. Next, we will discuss how preservice teachers were assisted by mentor teachers.

Understanding the complexities of teaching with the assistance of mentor teacher

During the first teaching practice, preservice teachers are confronted directly with the realities of being in the classroom. This is the time when the mentor teachers' support and guidance is the most vital for preservice teachers' growth and self-efficacy.

Ninety-four (25%) of the preservice teachers reported that they had not been adequately supported and guided by mentor teachers regarding lesson preparation and the use of various teaching strategies. Preservice teachers also indicated that they 'got bored of observing' because of the 'repetition' of 'strategies and lessons' used by teachers.

These experiences led to many preservice teachers feeling despondent, they were eager to start teaching, but they did not observe best practice from these experienced teachers. This meant that some of the mentor teachers provided insufficient learning experiences for the preservice teachers.

There were other examples when the preservice teachers experienced feelings of helplessness, because they could not support the learners academically. This was articulated by a student teacher who stated that he felt helpless 'when the kids asked me about something I don't know'. This sentiment was developed further by another preservice teacher who stated that 'there are a handful of the learners who are still incapable of reading and writing, my need to help them was so great but I felt so powerless because as a student teacher I was clueless as to how to help them'. Despite many preservice teachers' eagerness to teach during their first placement at a school, they often felt demeaned and unsure of themselves. This was sometimes because of the first-year students' own inexperience and lack of knowledge, but at other times their mentor teachers did not provide adequate support and guidance. The situation resonated with Bradbury and Koballa's (2008) research on the relationship between mentors and mentees, which highlights how crucial it is to understand 'the complex interactions that constrain and promote' (p. 2143) this relationship. Lastly, we will discuss how preservice teachers perceived the feedback they received from mentor teachers.

Feedback from mentor teachers

Feedback from mentor teachers is an important aspect for growth, as it implies that the preservice teachers learn from their errors. However, 49 (13%) of the first-year students experienced negative feedback from their mentor teachers, which left them feeling anxious and unwelcome in the mentor teachers' classrooms. The preservice teachers often felt more confused after receiving feedback on various tasks, because the mentor teachers gave unclear guidelines. One participant stated that, 'I felt undermined when my supervising teacher … took over my lesson as I was teaching. I had consulted with her before I presented the lesson. She cut me off [during the lesson]. In her general comments about my teaching, she wrote that I don't know my content knowledge, and I need to learn good classroom techniques. I felt these comments were unfair'. Lastly, preservice teachers stated that the feedback they received was often meant to undermine instead of to empower them.

Inadequate mentor support causes preservice teachers to feel excluded

The preservice teachers, namely 102 (27%) of the sample, stated they felt unwelcome by mentor teachers, for the following reasons: either the teachers are 'too busy' or because the preservice teachers 'will waste precious time'. Some felt disempowered and described teachers as 'guard dogs that didn't trust

anything [they] said to learners'. Furthermore, teachers did not allow preservice teachers to 'teach much because the teacher wasn't willing and [preservice teachers] had to understand and respect that'. The result was that preservice teachers were demotivated by these experiences. This negative situation led to feelings of inadequacy. The school principal had consented to have preservice teachers at the school, however, there is a disconnect between the school management's willingness to accommodate preservice teachers and individual teachers' reluctance to accept preservice teachers in their classrooms. Thus, the mentor teachers' unwillingness to support preservice teachers might indicate a lack of necessary skills and knowledge of building a mentorship relationship between mentor and mentee rather than a personal reluctance.

Unrealistic mentor expectations that leads to preservice teachers feeling undermined

Several of the preservice teachers, namely 18% of the sample, indicated that they felt undermined by the mentor teachers when they interrupted the lessons: 'She [a mentor teacher] didn't like my way of explaining and there was nothing I could say or do'. Preservice teachers felt that their role was to teach and observe lessons and many found themselves in the situation as did this participant who stated that 'the teacher sort of 'used' me to help her finish marking because she was behind'. Another preservice teacher stated that his mentor teacher 'was intimidating me in front of learners by telling me to keep quiet. I felt like I couldn't do anything, because she's older than me'. These preservice teachers' experiences showed that the role of mentor teachers was not clearly defined, and they were not always aware of what they were expected to do when a preservice teacher was placed in their classrooms. Thus, the role that experienced teachers play as mentors might not always be effective (Ambrosetti, Knight & Dekker, 2014). In addition, these examples showed that some of the mentor teachers did not regard preservice teachers as colleagues in the profession, as they undermined them in front of the learners.

One hundred and thirteen (30%) of preservice teachers in this category felt that they 'had no work' to do, because mentor teachers 'would insist on doing all the marking'. This made them feel disregarded and 'irritated sitting and doing nothing'. It seems that many of the mentor teachers found it difficult to trust preservice teachers with tasks such as assessing the learners' work. This meant that the mentor teachers did not provide important support and guidance to the preservice teachers regarding how to assess the learners' work. This indicated a lack of acknowledgement by the mentor teachers that preservice teachers need opportunities to learn to do tasks associated with teaching.

One hundred and five (28%) preservice teachers in this category felt undermined by mentor teachers who were 'always interrupting' and 'explaining in [their] own way and continuing to do so repeatedly' during the preservice teachers' lessons. This caused preservice teachers to feel inadequate and it

appears that the mentor teachers did not view the preservice teachers as professionals in training.

Conclusion and recommendations

Although higher education institutions prepare first-year preservice teachers for teaching practice, we argue that a crucial aspect is missing from this preparation, namely, the importance of considering the preservice teachers' experiences while working with mentor teachers. It is important for first-year students to have their voices heard about their concerns with mentorship in order to better prepare and support them during teaching practice. The reason is that mentoring relationships can have a powerful and life-changing impact on preservice teachers lives (Hansman, 2003). These experiences reveal that many of the mentor teachers are unable to guide and support preservice teachers effectively during their first teaching practice at schools. About half of the participants one hundred and eighty (48%) indicated a concern with mentor teachers modelling unethical behaviour such as hitting learners, which is against the constitution of South Africa. In addition, almost half of the participants one hundred and sixty-nine (45%) were also concerned about their mentor teachers' inability to discipline learners in their own classrooms and as a result the preservice teachers were unable to learn much from their mentors regarding classroom management. This created a tension for preservice teachers in terms of what is happening in practice in school classrooms and how to deal with these experiences. Finally, one hundred and fifty-eight (42%) of the participants felt unwelcome at the schools that they were placed at for teaching practice. The findings of this study reveal many of the ways the relationship between mentor teachers and first-year preservice teachers undermine the latter's professional development. Despite a limitation to this study, namely, the lack of follow-up interviews with the participants, the data collected from the questionnaires provided a lens which showed the difficulties of teaching practice from the preservice teachers' perspectives. While we acknowledge that there are a number of complexities in the mentor-mentee relationship, it is important to take preservice teachers' views about their experiences of relationships with mentor teachers into account, because these insights could benefit and strengthen the mentor-mentee relationships in future teaching practices.

The results of our research substantiate Hagger and McIntyre (2006) argument that mentor teachers need guidance and support from their schools and universities to mentor preservice teachers effectively. In addition, we also corroborate Du Plessis (2013) views that effective mentorship is crucial for preservice teachers' professional development. Through our study we validate the view that it is not enough for mentors to just be present in classrooms (Izadinia, 2017) during teaching practice but mentors need to extend their commitment and willingness to support and empower preservice teachers

during this time. The finding from our research disputes Gamble's (2010) view that teaching practice exposes preservice teachers to systemic and reliable instructional practices. In contrast, this cohort of preservice teachers were often exposed to arbitrary and irregular instructional practices that made them feel unsupported and helpless. Hence, what this study further highlights is that in the absence of an effective, guided and systematic mentorship approach preservice teachers would be exposed to unacceptable practices like ineffective classroom management, inappropriate ways of working with learners, inadequate guidance as well as lack of supportive and developmental feedback. These mentorship experiences can lead to a decline, rather than an increase in building effective professional relationships with the preservice teachers. Hence, preservice teachers' experiences of being inadequately guided and supported can have a negative impact on how they perceive teaching as a profession.

Consequently, we recommend a need to build stronger partnerships between schools and universities (Du Plessis, 2013). Providing mentor teachers with clear guidelines stating the roles and responsibilities of a mentor is imperative, but this research has shown that guidelines alone are insufficient. Mentor teachers need to be inducted into a community of best practice regarding their roles as mentors of first-year preservice teachers during teaching practice. A need to advocate for conscious alignment and awareness of the university's expectations mentor teachers' roles from both academic and emotional perspectives is required. A call for initial teacher education programmes to find ways to foster partnerships between mentor teachers, schools and universities is needed.

In conclusion, there is a need to conduct, research on the importance of mentorship relationships between first-year students and mentor teachers within South Africa and globally. In addition, further research is needed to understand how mentor teachers view the mentoring experience, what criteria schools use to select mentor teachers, and what constitutes the role of a mentor teacher. We advocate that ongoing research is needed to critically evaluate the process of teaching practice, specifically inside teacher education programmes. This requires clearly defined coordination goals regarding the establishment of robust relationships with schools. More importantly, there is a need to define a mentor's role in discussion with the schools, because at present there are only university guidelines for preservice teachers to follow on teaching practice, yet schools define their own parameters for mentor teachers. However, the results of our research indicate clearly the importance of the reciprocal relationship between a mentor and a mentee, especially during the preservice teachers' first teaching practice. We urge teacher educators who are working in initial teacher education in higher education contexts to critically examine their preservice teachers' experiences with mentor teachers in schools. It is crucial to foster a positive mentorship relationship to empower preservice teachers who enter

the teaching profession after graduating. Even though our study relates directly to the South African context, these findings raise important questions about the mentor-mentee relationship during preservice teaching practice, which could be relevant globally, as we argue that we could learn from global models of teaching practice, by building collaborative research partnerships around the complex issues of teaching practice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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