

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED: STUDENT TEACHERS' VIEWS ON THE QUALITY OF MENTORING AND TEACHING PRACTICE IN TOWNSHIP SCHOOLS

J BADENHORST AND B BADENHORST

ABSTRACT

In South Africa a high premium should be placed on the value of effective education and training to achieve an array of economic and social objectives. The development of a strong and functional education system is closely linked with the quality of teaching and learning taking place at schools. In this regard, the nagging shortage of skilled educators underscores the importance of effective training of student teachers to address the shortages and ultimately contribute to the establishment of a competitive and sustainable education system. The present article examines the effectiveness of mentoring and teaching practice experiences of student teachers at a South African university who completed their practical training at township schools. These schools are typically under-resourced, overcrowded and situated in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Not only are many of these schools' teachers under-qualified, but the schools also experience acute shortages of teachers in scarce subjects. An empirical study was conducted that targeted all final-year education students who had completed their teaching practice at 34 township schools. The empirical findings provide food for thought as to the success of mentoring in these schools. While 16 aspects of mentoring rendered a positive result ranging from 'positive' to 'strongly positive', seven aspects of mentoring were regarded as 'mildly adequate' and five skills were evaluated as between 'below adequate' to 'inadequate'. Even though the findings of this study cannot be generalised to mentoring at all township schools, some noteworthy trends were identified.

Keywords: student teachers; teaching practice; mentoring; township schools

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the cornerstones of any society. It plays a pivotal role in the achievement of critical goals such as social transformation, technological innovation and individual empowerment. South Africa is no exception: as it is a developing country, a high premium is placed on the value of effective education and training to achieve an array of economic and social objectives. The development of a strong and functional education system is closely linked with the quality of teaching and learning taking place at schools. In this regard, the nagging shortage of skilled educators underscores the importance of effective training of student teachers to address the shortages and ultimately contribute to the establishment of a competitive and sustainable education system.

Education in South Africa faces numerous challenges and the building of teaching capacity should top the priorities of the South African government. To this end, the quality of teacher training is crucial. According to UNESCO (2002:8) teacher training should be designed to achieve four objectives, namely improving the general educational background of student teachers; increasing their knowledge of the subjects they aim to teach; understanding the pedagogy of learners; and learning and developing practical skills and competencies. The question arises whether teacher training departments at South African tertiary institutions achieve these objectives. Marais and Meier (2004:220) point out that inculcating sound practical teaching skills is integral to teacher training. Research consistently points to two facts, i.e. the instilling of sound teaching practices is key to the effective training of student teachers, and next, practical teacher training is in need of vigorous improvement because, *inter alia*, the quality of supervisor teachers is inadequate, as is the linkage between theory and practice (Robinson, 2000; Sullivan & Glantz, 2000; Jonson, 2002; Sivan & Chan, 2003).

The term 'teaching practice' refers to a variety of experiences to which student teachers are exposed when they work in classrooms and schools (Marais & Meier, 2004:221). These experiences present numerous challenges to teacher training in a developing country such as South Africa. The benefits of practical training can easily be eroded by factors such as geographical distance, isolation, variances in the levels of teacher expertise, ineffectiveness and socio-economic circumstances (Ismael, 2000; Halse & Buchanan, 2000:40). The experiences of student teachers doing practical teaching in schools are therefore affected by diverse factors and challenges, many of which can often not be anticipated.

2. RATIONALE AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This article is based on research that sought to examine the effectiveness of teaching practice experiences of student teachers at a South African university who completed their practical training at township schools. In the context of this study the term 'township schools' refers to schools situated in black settlements established during the pre-1994 political dispensation in South Africa. These schools are typically under-resourced, overcrowded and situated in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Many of the teachers at these schools are under-qualified. Moreover, the schools experience acute shortages of teachers in scarce subjects (DoE, 2007; Engelbrecht, 2009).

An analysis of the results of the Department of Education's rating system of schools, which depicts schools as either 'dysfunctional', 'underperforming' or 'functional', reveals that the majority of 'underperforming' and 'dysfunctional' schools are situated in township areas and informal settlements (Engelbrecht, 2009). In a study conducted in 2005, Taylor (2006:1) found that almost 80% of township schools were essentially dysfunctional.

The placing of student teachers for practical teaching experience and mentoring at schools labelled as 'essentially dysfunctional' is therefore cause for serious concern. Given the importance of worthwhile practical teaching experience and quality mentoring by competent teacher mentors, it is alarming that a considerable number of student teachers at South African universities complete their practical training at sub-standard schools.

In view of the above, it seemed mandatory firstly to inquire whether the practical teacher training that student teachers undergo in township schools meets the requirements of effective school-based training, and secondly to establish what students' perceptions are regarding the quality of the practical training and mentoring they receive at township schools.

3. BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The increased importance of mentoring in practical teacher training courses

The term 'mentoring' denotes 'the support given by one (usually more experienced) person for the growth and learning of another, and for their integration into and acceptance by a specific community' (Malderez, 2001:57). In the context of modern-day student teacher training, Tomlinson (1995:7) defines mentoring as 'assisting student-teachers to learn how to teach in school-based settings'. According to this definition mentoring is not only undertaken by teachers whose advice and support may be actively sought, but also by teachers whose teaching practices and interactions with pupils may be witnessed by student teachers. It might thus be deduced that *all teachers* in schools which accommodate teacher trainees should be sensitised to the importance of mentoring and be equipped with basic skills in order to perform their mentoring role properly.

Various research findings point to the benefits of student teachers working closely with experienced practitioners or teacher mentors (Hobson, 2002; Marais & Meier, 2004; Caires & Almeida, 2005). Effective mentoring might present itself in different ways. It fundamentally comprises skills acquisition which is facilitated by various forms of 'coaching'. Where mentoring involves the development of a partnership through which one person shares his own knowledge, skills, information and perspective to foster the personal and professional growth of someone else, Gallway (2011) points out that a coach supports a coachee to identify, focus on and achieve his/her own goals. Sloboda (1986:32-33) asserts that '[r]eal life skills ... are usually learnt with the aid of some form of coaching', and that appropriate feedback on practice, which he characterises as 'knowledge of what your actions achieved', is 'essential to skill acquisition'.

Edwards and Collison (1996:27-28) suggest various ways in which teacher mentors might coach, support and 'scaffold' student teachers, including listening to students; modelling teaching and general classroom management; analyzing and discussing [their] own practice; observing students; negotiating with students their own learning goals; supporting students while they teach; [and] ... providing constructive criticism ...' Student teachers might further explore mentor knowledge and beliefs by interviews, by discussing mentors' concept maps, by conducting stimulated recall interviews after the mentor's lessons, and also by discussing the content of mentorstudent conversations (Zanting, Verloop & Vermunt, 2003:200). Luneta (2006:19) and Mohomo-Mahlatsi and Van Tonder (2006:387-389) mention specific competencies that should be mentored. These include effective guidance with regard to general classroom practice (lesson planning, instructional methods, learning activities, the effective use of learning and teaching subject media (LTSM) and assessment); the ability to deal with diversity in terms of gender, language, race and socio-economic status; managing learner behaviour; and school administration and organisation.

Research shows that student teachers, being those who primarily benefit from pre-service teacher training courses, perceive school-based mentoring to be a key element of their teacher training course (Hobson, 2002:16-18; Furlong, 2000; Malderez, 2001; John, 2001). It furthermore indicates which elements of school-based mentoring students value most, i.e. having supportive, reassuring mentors who are able and prepared to invest time in them, who offer practical advice and ideas relating to their teaching, and who provide constructive feedback on their teaching attempts. In addition, *Hobson (2002:18) found that students* expect school-based mentoring to be a vital component of their teacher training. To illustrate this point, 92,4% of secondary Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students from four training courses who completed questionnaires at the start of their courses in 1998, regarded the joint planning of lessons with their school teacher/mentor as 'very valuable' or 'essential', while 95,3% of respondents stated that it would be 'very valuable' or 'essential' to have teachers/mentors observe their lessons and give them feedback. In his/her study, Hobson (2002) found that the students' expectations of the value of working with school-based mentors were significantly higher than their expectations of the value of any other aspects of their teacher training course.

Research moreover provides strong indications that the quality of mentoring varies significantly because it appears that some mentors, for example, do not provide a 'safe' and supportive environment in which their mentees can learn (Sullivan & Glantz, 2000; Robinson, 2001; Sivan & Chan, 2003;). Conversely, it appears as if student teachers commonly do not explore their mentor teacher's practical knowledge of their own accord (Malderez, 2001, Le Roux & Möller, 2002:184; Zanting *et al.*, 2003:201).

They are inclined to focus on their own teaching. They expect their lessons to be evaluated by experienced mentor teachers, and thereafter to get tips, advice, and suggestions to improve their techniques. They focus on the mentor's teaching skills to a lesser extent. The observation of mentors' lessons provides student teachers with the opportunity to accumulate useful information on teaching practice. However, few students fully comprehend their mentor's teaching style because they do not enquire about the knowledge and beliefs that underpin the mentor's actions in class (Zanting *et al.*, 2003). For example, in a study by Penny *et al.* (quoted in Zanting *et al.*, 2003), it appeared that student teachers rarely ask questions about lessons given by the mentors. In addition, mentors are often not inclined to explicate the teaching knowledge and beliefs that underlie their teaching style (Edwards & Collison, 1996).

The relationship between student teachers and teacher mentors

Numerous investigations indicate that supervisor teachers or mentors have a considerable influence on the development of student teachers' orientation, disposition, conceptions and classroom practice (Marais & Meier, 2004:223; Sivan & Chan, 2003:187-191; Luneta, 2006). Students value a supportive, interactive classroom environment, especially with respect to the process of learning to teach (Marais & Meier, 2004:222). A good relationship between student and mentor is essential. Research has shown that conflict between a student and a mentor teacher is often the direct result of the mentor teacher's inability to match his/her mentorship style to the student's capacity to perform instructional tasks (Ralph 2000:11-12). The mentor teacher may also exploit an amicable relationship with the student by burdening the student with an excessive workload. Mentor teachers rarely question the correctness of the practical methods they employ in the classroom because the students do not query it. Students refrain from making enquiries about the teaching style and methods of mentor teachers, fearing they would incur a negative report. They would consequently rather suppress the teaching style they developed during their training and adapt to the style of the mentor. Mitchell (1996:47) says '[s]tudents become caught in the procedures and rituals of the classroom without considering, questioning or comprehending the overall purpose of what is being done'.

Research also reports that student teachers tend to be anxious about factors such as the maintenance of discipline and learner control, the quality of their professional relationships with their mentors, the level of their knowledge of the curriculum content, and the quality of their understanding of the learners (Christie, Conlon, Gemmel & Long, 2004:112). During teaching practice student teachers face the realities of this process and the complex roles that have to be mastered as part of the training. The complexity of these roles commonly causes considerable stress and anxiety.

Some mentors assume that students have already been equipped by the university with the requisite knowledge and skills to teach (McGee 1996:20) and they therefore deem it unnecessary to assist them with the development of much-needed basic skills. Under these circumstances students could, instead of being productive, view their practical teaching experience negatively, which could dent their self-confidence and lead to feelings of inadequacy (Rushton 2001:146; Marais & Meier, 2004:221). Many studies show that inadequacy in the mentor's guidance and training reduces the effectiveness of practical teaching and can lead to a negative experience of teaching practice overall (Sullivan & Glantz, 2000; Ismail *et al.*, 2000:44; Christie *et al.*, 2004).

In summary, the literature is unambiguous about the crucial role that teacher mentors play in the training of student teachers, and similarly, about the necessity for student teachers to make the most of the experience and expertise of their school mentors. However, the findings of the case studies mentioned above cannot merely be transposed to township schools because these studies were mainly undertaken in First World teacher training contexts that differ greatly from those in the townships. It was subsequently deemed necessary to establish the perceptions and experiences of student teachers on the quality of their practical teacher training at township schools, as well as the extent to which the guidance they receive meets the requirements of effective mentoring.

4. METHODOLOGY

Research design

For this study, a mixed method research design was followed, focussing on the *sequential exploratory strategy*. According to Creswell (2009:211), this strategy involves an initial phase(s) of qualitative data collection and analysis, followed by a subsequent phase(s) of quantitative data collection and analysis that builds on the results of the initial qualitative stage(s). The purpose of this strategy is to use quantitative data and results to assist in the interpretation of qualitative findings. This was the procedure of choice in the study under discussion in this article, since a quantitative data collection instrument needed to be developed based on the findings arrived at in the qualitative phase. Using a three-phased approach, the researchers first gathered qualitative data and analysed it (phase 1) and used the analysis to develop an instrument (phase 2) that was subsequently administered to a sample of a population (phase 3) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The study targeted a South African university's final-year education students who had completed their teaching practice at 34 township schools of which 14 were 'functional', eight 'underperforming' and twelve 'dysfunctional'.

Data collection and analysis

A review of the literature was undertaken at the outset to establish the importance of student mentoring during teaching practice. Each of the mentor teachers at the designated schools received an information brochure beforehand which explained their functions and assistance to the trainee teachers. This was followed by an analysis of student portfolios which had to be completed as part of the practical training assessment (first qualitative part of phase 1). The portfolios comprised, *inter alia*, a section that required students to reflect critically on their teaching practice experiences. These submissions were sorted according to the functionality status of the schools and subsequently textually analysed to determine students' views and uncover any trends and themes emerging from their practical teaching experiences.

Useful data was obtained from the text analysis, and in order to verify the data, a focus group interview was conducted with nine students (second qualitative part of phase 1). The selection of the interviewees was determined by the functionality status of the school where they had completed their practical teaching, i.e. at a 'functional', 'underperforming' or 'dysfunctional' school. Three students were selected from each school category. The objective was to ascertain whether the quality of mentoring could be correlated with the functionality status of the schools. The data from the interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed. The trends and general themes derived from the text analysis and focus group interviews were subsequently used to inform the design of a structured, quantitative questionnaire (phase 2) which was later used for data collection on a larger scale (phase 3). It was believed that a questionnaire would differentiate more effectively between themes and would highlight ranking orders (Kamper, Badenhorst & Steyn, 2009). The following recurring themes were identified: personal factors, subject knowledge, lesson preparation and instructional methods, learning and teaching activities, feedback on activities, managing learner behaviour, school administration and organisation, and finally a few general factors. The data collection process was therefore triangulated (text analysis of the teaching portfolios, focus group interview and questionnaire), which contributed to the reliability and validity of the study.

The questionnaire comprised statements to which the student teachers responded by indicating their level of agreement on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (4). These statements aimed to bring to light the student teachers' perceptions of their mentor teachers' ability to supervise and assist them with various aspects of teaching. To verify the consistency of the inter-item reliability of the questionnaire, the Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficients were calculated by using the statistical package SPSS 13.0.

According to the guidelines for the interpretation of this coefficient, a result of 0,90 indicates high reliability, 0,80 indicates moderate reliability, while 0,70 indicates low reliability (Pietersen & Maree, 2007:216). The Cronbach Alpha coefficient of the 28 items was 0,919. The reliability of the questionnaire could therefore be regarded as very high.

Ninety six (96) questionnaires were issued to final-year students. The return rate was 100%. The following ethical measures were considered: the anonymity and privacy of respondents were respected at all times, the rationale of the research project was explained to respondents at the start of the focus group interview as well as in the cover letter to the questionnaire, and the researchers endeavoured to be objective when reviewing literature and obtaining data.

Findings

The data from the text analysis and the focus group interviews surprisingly revealed that the functionality status of the sample schools had no significant bearing on the students' ratings. The same conclusion was reached with regard to the questionnaires, which were sorted according to the functionality status of the schools before analysis. This finding refuted the researchers' expectation that notable correlations would be found in this regard.

When the data were analysed it immediately became evident that care would have to be taken to avoid over-generalisations in the interpretation of the data. Consideration was given to whether a result of 54% with regard to a particular mentoring skill, for example, could be interpreted as successful, or vice versa, a result of 46% as unsuccessful. In the first case 54% agreed or strongly agreed, which implies that almost as many (46%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. Interpreting 54% as successful would therefore be inaccurate and misleading. To avoid such misinterpretations and subsequently enhance the validity of the data interpretation, we decided to use the cut-off points applied by Caires and Almeida (2005). In keeping with their criteria, a significant positive result with regard to a particular item would have to constitute the agreement of at least two thirds (66%) of the respondents. A result of 66-79% was thus deemed positive. If 80% or more of the respondents were in agreement the result was seen as strongly positive, while a result of between 50% and 66% was interpreted as a mildly adequate level of mentoring. If less than 50% of the respondents disagreed with a particular statement, the success of mentoring was regarded as below adequate to inadequate.

For purposes of determining the perceived success of mentoring in township schools, the findings are subsequently reported per category in correspondence with the categories in the questionnaire (also refer to Table 1).

Category A: Personal factors

Table I illustrates that an overwhelming 90% of the respondents reported a positive and supportive relationship with their mentor, while 88% felt at liberty to ask their mentor for assistance when needed. Seventy seven per cent (77%) indicated that their mentor played a significant role in helping them to teach with self-confidence. Seventy per cent (70%) agreed or strongly agreed that their mentor had assisted them in establishing a positive teaching self-concept. It is clear, therefore, that the participants generally experienced positive or strong positive bonds with their mentors.

Category B: Subject knowledge

The participants generally perceived their mentors to have solid subject knowledge (72%) and 66% agreed or strongly agreed that their mentor had assisted them in improving their own subject knowledge. Seventy per cent (70%) of the participants also believed that their mentors had a thorough knowledge of curriculum developments (34% agreed; 36% strongly agreed). These findings are encouraging, since adequate subject knowledge and a sound knowledge base of curriculum developments of mentor teachers are viewed as pivotal aspects of successful mentoring (Robinson, 2000; Hobson, 2002; Zanting *et al.*, 2003; Christie *et al.*, 2004).

Category C: Lesson preparation and instructional methods

With regard to lesson preparation and the use of instructional methods, the participants' views on the quality of mentoring were more discouraging in comparison with the foregoing categories. While 71% (33% agreed, 38% strongly agreed) reported that they got ample opportunity to observe their mentors' lessons, a considerable percentage (47%) indicated that their mentors did not assist them in preparing their lessons. Only 55% said that they discussed aspects of their mentors' lessons with them. This may be attributed to the fact that mentor teachers hardly ever question their own teaching methods (Marais & Meier, 2004:222). According to Marais and Meier (2004), student teachers seldom feel at liberty to reflect critically on their mentors' instructional methods in fear of a negative evaluation. Hobson (2002:7) points out that school-based mentors can benefit from insight into the perceptions and evaluations of student teachers, since it may constitute constructive feedback on their own (and other mentors') practices. It can thus serve to remove teaching obstacles and enhance effective learning of teaching in their own teaching practices, and additionally be helpful to future student teachers in perfecting their own teaching methodology (Zanting *et al.*, 2003:200).

Although 58% indicated that their mentors observed their lessons regularly, 61% reported that their mentors often left the class and expected them to take control of the teaching for extended periods.

Sixty per cent (60%) said that their mentors assisted them in using a variety of instructional methods. Research consistently indicates that the use of a variety of instructional methods enhances cognition and retention and furthermore promotes a classroom climate that is conducive to learning and teaching. The effective management of learner behaviour is an additional positive offshoot associated with the employment of several teaching methods (Christie *et al.*, 2004; Cairns & Almeida, 2005; Luneta, 2006).

Category D: Learner activities and media

In accordance with item 12 where the majority of respondents indicated that their mentors had assisted them in using a variety of instructional methods, 69% (46% agreed, 23 % strongly agreed) reported that they were advised on using a variety of learning activities. Mentoring with regard to the use of various methods of assessment was not ranked very highly (only 55% agreed with the statement on this skill). Likewise, the use of learning and teaching media was also not ranked very highly. Sixty one per cent (61%) of the respondents indicated that their mentors did not employ a variety of learning and teaching media when teaching, nor were they advised on the use of different and interesting media (47%). The reason for this finding may be rooted in the fact that many township schools are situated in impoverished areas; these schools are constrained by financial difficulties and as a result they are under-resourced, not only in terms of inadequate facilities such as buildings, but also in terms of teaching and learning resources (Kamper, 2008; Engelbrecht, 2009).

Category E: Feedback on activities

Numerous studies point to the value of student teachers being observed by their mentors and thereafter receiving feedback and constructive criticism (Robinson, 2000; Hobson, 2002; Edwards & Protheroe, 2003). It serves as an invaluable means of developing their teaching skills. It appeared as if the students had experienced the highlighting of positive aspects in their teaching as particularly motivating. Many of the participants also attested to the value of suggestions, friendly 'challenges', setting targets and practical advice for the sake of professional development. Advice related to the 'practicalities' of teaching were particularly valued because it provided alternative strategies that can be utilised in certain situations. A particularly useful form of feedback came from scheduled (e.g. weekly) meetings with mentor teachers where matters of mutual interest and concern were discussed. In their study, Christie *et al.* (2004:115) found that student teachers became extremely frustrated and demotivated when they lacked proper feedback from their mentors, especially when they were repeatedly assured that their teaching practice was up to scratch although they were fully aware that the opposite was true. Feedback given offhandedly or hastily in snatched moments at the beginning or end of each day or during break also leads to disappointment and disillusionment (Garvey & Alred, 2000:124).

The present study revealed that feedback activities were disappointingly inadequate. Only 51% of the participants agreed (29%) or strongly agreed (22%) that they had regular meetings with their mentors about their general progress. A mere 50% (35% agreed, 15% strongly agreed) felt that their mentors gave them adequate advice and constructive criticism on their teaching abilities and the art of teaching, while 53% disagreed (21% strongly disagreed, 32% disagreed) that their mentors set them targets for improvement.

Category F: Managing learner behaviour

Hobson (2002:8) points out that many student teachers regard learner discipline as a thorny issue. Since the abolishment of corporal punishment in 1998 there have been frequent research reports on the discipline crisis in South African schools (Badenhorst, Steyn & Beukes, 2007). Rossouw (2003:414) describes various cases of learner misbehaviour and its impact on the effective functioning of schools and he asserts that a lack of discipline in schools strongly jeopardises efforts to establish a culture of learning and teaching in South African schools. Wolhuter and Oosthuizen (2003:333) cite studies in which disrespectful behaviour towards teachers is singled out as one of the most devastating forms of learner misbehaviour and moreover, as one of the most prevalent reasons why teachers resign. Studies conducted by De Klerk and Rens (2003:354) as well as by Mentz, Wolhuter and Steyn (2003:392) confirm this trend of misbehaviour and disrespectful demeanour of learners.

Managing learner behaviour did not appear to be problematic at sample schools in this study. Eighty per cent (80%) of the respondents agreed (35%) or strongly agreed (45%) that their mentors displayed good learner behaviour management skills, 75% agreed (39% agreed, 36% strongly agreed) that their mentors had assisted them in understanding learners and their characteristics better and 67% reported that their mentors had given them assistance in acquiring effective disciplining skills.

Category G: School administration and organisation

Many mentor teachers seem to overlook the administrative aspects of mentoring. By and large research focuses on the didactical aspects of mentoring while classroom administrative duties such as general paperwork, recording of marks and completion of registers seem to be neglected. Proper administrative management is crucial to effective teaching. Researchers appear to agree that effective teaching and learning go hand in hand with effective organisation and administration (Hobson, 2002:6; Chambers & Roper, 2000:42). Cairns and Almeida (2005:118) point out that administrative functions and responsibilities assist student teachers in developing professional competencies in a structured manner, while preparing them holistically for the challenges of the teaching profession.

Sivan and Chan (2003:184) emphasise that to be academically successful a school needs to have a sound administrative structure: 'Effective management of administrative systems implies effective school management. Seldom would one find an academically successful school with a poor administrative structure.'

While the majority of participants in this study (80%) indicated that they had been given ample opportunity to perform classroom administration (29% agreed, 51% strongly agreed), only 47% reported that they had been exposed to general aspects of school organisation such as time-tabling and arranging cultural and sporting events.

Category H: General

Even though no clear response pattern emerged from the results of the foregoing items, the feedback on the general value of the teaching practice period was overwhelmingly positive. Ninety five per cent (95%) agreed (15% agreed and 80% strongly agreed) that they viewed the teaching practice period as an important component of their teachers' qualification, 90% felt that the experience had prepared them adequately for the demands of teaching, and 97% were of the opinion that the teaching practice experience had contributed to their personal growth.

5. SUMMARY

Our initial research question enquired whether the participating trainee teachers perceived the practical teacher training that they underwent in township schools to meet the requirements of effective and quality school-based training as explained to them during their preparatory sessions. The empirical findings provide food for thought. When the cut-off points used by Caires and Almeida (2005) were applied, 16 aspects of mentoring were regarded as positive to strongly positive (66 69% and 80 100% respectively), while seven aspects of mentoring were regarded as mildly adequate (50 65%). Five aspects of mentoring were evaluated between 'below adequate' to 'inadequate' (less than 50%). Interpretation in accordance with these categories gives rise to the debatable question: Does a rating of 'mildly adequate' (50 66%) provide satisfactory proof of successful mentoring? It is our opinion that, for practical teacher training to meet the requirements of *effective* school-based training, all mentoring skills should ideally be rated as positive to strongly positive, thus from 66 100%. With this classification in mind, the following conclusions were reached:

- Students had positive and supportive relationships with mentors, and they felt at liberty to ask for assistance.
- Mentors gave assistance to students, thus enabling them to teach with self-confidence.

- Mentors displayed sound subject knowledge as well as a thorough knowledge of curriculum developments.
- Students were afforded the opportunity to observe mentors' lessons.
- Students were advised on the use of a variety of teacher and learner activities.
- Students were assisted in acquiring good learner behaviour management skills.
- Students were given the opportunity to carry out general classroom administration.

It is clear that the aspects of mentoring listed below have the potential to contribute significantly to the value of practical teaching in township schools. The researchers are of the opinion that these aspects need to receive more attention when mentor teachers are trained:

- Assistance with lesson preparation and/or checking of lesson plans
- Opportunities to discuss aspects of mentors' lessons with students
- Regular observation of students' lessons
- Advice on the use of diverse methods of assessment
- Advice on the use of a variety of learning and teaching media
- Regular meetings with students to discuss their general progress and to provide them with constructive criticism

Even though the findings of this study may not be generalised to mentoring at all township schools, some noteworthy trends in the mentoring of student teachers were identified. The findings can be applied fruitfully in the development of any practical teacher training programme for mentor teachers.

6. CONCLUSION

Some limitations with regard to this investigation need to be noted. Although the student teachers were provided with criteria to guide their judgement, they had limited teaching experience and an incomplete professional background. Since they were only exposed to mentoring at township schools, their views on mentoring were confined to their experiences at those schools. Prior experience of mentoring at private or ex-model C schools would have enabled them to juxtapose their experiences and ultimately better judge the quality of mentoring at township schools. The investigation would have benefited and consequently yielded more comprehensive results had this been the case. However, in the opinion of the authors the afore-mentioned limitations do not invalidate the practical value of the findings of the investigation. The identified shortfalls should be regarded as serious problem areas and subsequently serve as criteria for teacher training institutions to assess their own practical teaching training programmes.

In addition, follow-up studies need to be conducted which could contribute to the empowerment of teachers as mentors of trainee teachers.

It appears that if teachers were better equipped for their role as mentors they would be motivated to revitalise their own instructional and guidance skills. What is more, such an endeavour would also advance the professional development of student teachers.

APPENDIX

Table 1: Frequencies of mentoring skills as perceived by student teachers

	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
A. Personal factors				
1. I had a positive and supportive relationship with my mentor.	1	2	3	4
2. I felt at liberty to ask my mentor for assistance whenever I needed it.	4	5	26	64
3. My mentor played a significant role in helping me to teach with self-confidence.	3	9	40	48
4. My mentor assisted me in forming a positive teaching self-concept.	5	17	42	35
	6	23	40	30
B. Subject knowledge				
5. My mentor displayed sound and solid subject knowledge.	9	19	37	35
6. My mentor assisted me in improving my subject knowledge.	9	24	37	29
7. My mentor displayed a thorough knowledge of curriculum developments (such as Outcomes-based education).	12	18	34	36
C. Lesson preparation and instructional methods				
8. My mentor assisted me in preparing my lessons or by checking my lesson plans.	19	28	34	19
9. I got ample opportunity to observe my mentor's lessons.	16	13	33	38
10. I regularly had the opportunity to discuss aspects of my mentor's lessons with him/her.	18	27	40	15
11. My mentor observed my lessons on a regular basis.	13	29	31	27
12. My mentor discussed and/or assisted me in using a variety of instructional methods.	18	22	41	19
13. My mentor often left the classroom and expected of me to teach his/her classes.	19	42	26	13
D. Learning and teaching activities				
14. My mentor advised me on the use of a variety of teacher and learner activities.	14	17	46	23
15. My mentor recommended and/or assisted me in using diverse methods of assessment.	15	30	40	15
16. My mentor employed a variety of learning and teaching media when teaching.	28	33	26	14
17. My mentor encouraged and advised me on the use of different and interesting learning and teaching media.	23	29	23	24
E. Feedback on activities				
18. My mentor made time for me by having regular meetings about my general progress.	18	31	29	22
19. My mentor gave me adequate advice and constructive criticism on my teaching abilities and the art of teaching.	18	32	35	15
20. My mentor set me targets for improvement.	21	32	34	14
F. Managing learner behaviour				
21. My mentor displayed good learner behaviour management skills.	9	12	35	45
22. My mentor assisted me in understanding learners and their characteristics better.	10	15	39	36
23. My mentor gave me assistance in acquiring effective learner behaviour management skills.	11	22	43	24
G. School administration and organisation				
24. My mentor gave me opportunities to perform classroom administration activities (such as completing the class register, recording assessment marks, marking tests).	11	10	29	51
25. I was exposed to general aspects of school organisation such as time-tabling and arranging cultural and sporting events.	26	27	23	24
H. General				
26. I see this teaching practice period as an important part of my teacher's qualification.	3	2	15	80
27. My teacher practice experience has prepared me adequately for the demands of teaching.	4	5	34	56
28. The teaching practice has contributed to my personal growth.	1	2	16	81

7. REFERENCES

Badenhorst J W Steyn M G & Beukes L D 2007. Die dissiplinedilemma in post-apartheid Suid-Afrikaanse hoërskole: 'n Kwalitatiewe ontleding. *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 47: 301 319.

Caires S & Almeida L S 2005. Teaching practice in initial teacher education: its impact on student teachers' professional skills and development. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 31: 111-210.

Chambers G & Roper T 2000. Why students withdraw from initial teacher training. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 26(1): 25-43.

Christie F Conlon T Gemmel T & Long A 2004. Effective partnership? Perceptions of PGCE student teacher supervision. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 27: 109 123.

Creswell, JW 2009. *Research design: qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, JW & Plano Clark VL 2007. *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

De Klerk J & Rens J 2003. The role of value sin school discipline. *Koers*, 68: 353 371.

DoE (Department of Education) 2007: *Strategic Plan 2007 2011*. Pretoria: Government Printer.

Edwards A & Collison J 1996. *Mentoring and Developing Practice in Primary Schools*. Buckingham: Oxford University Press.

Edwards A & Protheroe L 2003. Learning to see in classrooms: What are student teachers' learning about teaching and learning while learning to teach in schools? *British Educational Research Journal*, 29:227 242.

Engelbrecht E 2009. *The identification of shortcomings in the managerial skills of secondary school principals in the Lejweleputswa Education District: A critical analysis*. MEd dissertation. Welkom: Central University of Technology.

Furlong J 2000. School mentors and university tutors: lessons from the English experiment. *Theory into Practice*, 39:12 19.

Gallway, T. The Inner Game. Available from: <http://www.leadershipconnections.co.uk/> (Accessed 20 July 2011).

- Garvey B & Alred G 2000. Educating Mentors. *Mentoring and Tutoring*, 8: 114 125.
- Hobson A J 2002. Student Teachers' Perceptions of School-based Mentoring in Initial Teacher Training (ITT). *Mentoring and Tutoring*, 10: 5 20.
- Ismael N Halse C & Buchanan J 2000. Teaching practice in the Republic of the Maldives: Issues and challenges. *Pacific Asian Education*, 12: 40 56.
- John P D 2001. Winning and losing: a case study of university tutor-student teacher interaction during a school-based practicum. *Mentoring and Tutoring*, 9: 153 168.
- Jonson K F 2002. *Being An Effective Mentor: How to Help Beginning Teachers succeed*. California: Corwin Press.
- Kamper G D 2008. A profile of effective leadership in some South African high poverty schools. *South African Journal of Education*, 28: 1 18.
- Kamper G D Badenhorst J W & Steyn M G 2009. Future expectations of black South African adolescents: Trends and Implications. *Journal for New Generation Sciences*, 7: 71 88.
- Le Roux J & Möller T 2002. No problem! Avoidance do cultural diversity in teacher training. *South African Journal of Education*, 22: 184 187.
- Luneta K 2006. Mentoring as professional development in Mathematics education: a teaching practicum perspective. *Education as change*, 10: 17 25.
- Malderez A 2001. New ELT professionals. *English Teaching Professional*, 19: 57 58.
- Marais P & Meier C 2004. Hear our voices: Student Teachers' experiences during practical teaching. *Africa Education Review*, 1: 220 233.
- McGee C 1996. Learning to live with conformity: student teachers' reaction to multiple conformity factors during their teaching practice. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 21: 12-22.
- Mentz P J Wolhuter C C & Steyn S C 2003. 'n Perspektief op die voorkoms van dissipline probleme in Suid-Afrikaanse skole. *Koers*, 68: 391 412.
- Mitchell J M 1996. Developing reflective teaching: Negotiation in the practicum. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 24: 47-61.

Mohomo-Mohlatsi L & Van Tonder F 2006. The effectiveness of mentoring in the Distance Teacher Education Programme at the Lesotho College of Education: student teachers' and tutors' perceptions. *South African Journal of Education*, 26: 383 396.

Pietersen, J & Maree, K 2007. Standardisation of a questionnaire. In Maree, K (Ed), *First steps in research*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.

Ralph E G 2000. Aligning mentorship style with the beginning teacher's development: contextual supervision. *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, Vol 4: 211 236.

Robinson M 2000. *Mentoring and Teacher Developments: A Case Study*. DEd dissertation. Cape Town: University of the Western Cape.

Robinson M 2001. Teachers as Mentors: A critical view of Teacher Development in South African schools. *Perspectives in Education*, 19: 99 115.

Rossouw J P 2003. Learner discipline in South African public schools a qualitative study. *Koers*, 68: 413 435.

Rushton S 2001. Cultural assimilation: A narrative case study of student-teaching in an inner-city school. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17: 147 160.

Sivan A & Chan D W K 2003. Supervised Teaching Practice as a Partnership Process: novice and experienced student-teachers' perceptions. *Mentoring and Tutoring*, 11: 152 193.

Sloboda J 1986. Acquiring skill. In A. Gellotly (Ed.) *The skilful Mind: and introduction to cognitive psychology*. Milton Keynes: Oxford University Press.

Sullivan S & Glantz J 2000. *Supervision that Improves Teaching strategies and techniques*. Thousand Oaks CA: Corwin Press.

Taylor N 2006. *Fixing schools will take huge effort*. Business Day, August 2006.

Tomlinson P 1995. *Understanding Mentoring: reflective strategies per school-based teacher preparation*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

UNESCO (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) 2002. *Teacher education guidelines: Using open and distance learning. Technology, curricula, cost, evaluation*. Paris: Higher Education Division, UNESCO.

Wolhuter C C & Oosthuizen I J 2003. 'n Leerder perspektief op dissipline : 'n kwalitatiewe ontleding. *Koers*, 68: 437-456.

Zanting A, Verloop N & Vermunt J D 2003. How do student teachers elicit their mentor teachers' practical knowledge? *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice*, 9: 197-211.