



MENTORING STRATEGY IN THE SUPERVISION OF SECONDARY TEACHER EDUCATION STUDENTS IN THE POSTGRADUATE DIPLOMA IN EDUCATION OF THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

¹Dr Sharayi Chakanyuka

ABSTRACT

The study sought to investigate the effectiveness of the mentoring strategy in the supervision of secondary teacher education students in the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programme. The study was qualitative in nature using a case study approach. Mentoring was the phenomenon studied in depth. A convenience sample of three students and their three mentors was used for the study. This sample was done from a total population of eight student teachers and their eight mentors in the Masvingo region of Zimbabwe. Data was collected through observation of lessons taught by each of the three students. Students and their mentors then produced autobiographical accounts of their experiences with the mentoring process. Data was also collected through document analysis of the students' teaching practice files, which contained their schemes of work, detailed lesson plans, pupil records and mentors' supervision reports.

The study found that all six participants had a clear understanding of what mentoring entailed. The students and their mentors had collegial relationships that facilitated the guidance the students needed. The mentors used different strategies to guide the students, such as joint planning of lessons, conducting demonstration lessons in areas of student difficulty and observing students' teaching in order to facilitate the students' acquisition of skills and knowledge in lesson delivery and interactive classroom management. Students indicated that, through being mentored, they had developed positively in teaching skills, reflective teaching and classroom management.

Keywords: mentoring strategy, supervision, teacher education, improved teaching skills

1 Dr Sharayi Chakanyuka is associated with the Zimbabwe Open University.
E-mail: sharayichakanyuka@yahoo.com

INTRODUCTION

Distance education has played a significant role in education and has been viewed internationally as a viable option for improving access to and the equity and quality of basic education in various settings (McQuaide, 2009). It is a way to educate people who would not otherwise have access to education and is a tool to support and supplement conventional educational programmes (Perraton, 2000). One of the key characteristics of distance education according to Keegan (1996) is the physical and temporal distance between the learner and the tutor. Consequently, there are no lectures or classrooms and learners study at their own pace (Holmberg, 1995). Distance education institutions have to devise strategies to bridge the distance and offer tuition to learners. Instruction is offered by various means, such as print, audio, video, television and the internet.

In Zimbabwe, the higher education landscape was transformed with the establishment of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) in 1993 – initially as the Centre for Distance Education of the University of Zimbabwe and, in 1999, as a fully fledged university with its own charter. The ZOU uses a combination of media to offer instruction to its students, such as print, face-to-face communication and the internet. It offers varied programmes in four faculties: Arts and Education, Commerce and Law, Natural Sciences and Social Sciences. One of the programmes offered in the Department of Education is the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE), which is a teacher education programme. A component of this programme is supervised teaching practice.

The supervision of teacher education students engaged in teaching practice through distance education has provided logistical problems to many institutions. Ntuli (2008) states that one of the attractions of distance education is that students learn from their jobs and homes, but these attractions are often eroded by problems associated with classroom teaching, especially in situations where students are in schools located long distances from each other and from the distance education institution. Simpson (2008) argues that field experience is considered important as it “provides the testing and proving context for the theoretical and curriculum courses in the programme”. Such exposure could be provided through block releases, microteaching and observations. Simpson (2008) goes on to argue that field experience should provide opportunities for students to learn to enquire and reflect on their teaching, as well as on the power and influence of relationships that operate in schools.

One challenge faced in organising meaningful school experience arises from the need to find suitably qualified teachers to work with students and for lecturers from the distance education institution to visit the schools to give the necessary support to the teacher education students. The distances between the institution and the schools where the students are working make it financially and logistically difficult to visit students regularly enough to ensure that students are developing professionally, as is expected by the institution (Simpson, 2008).

In view of the challenges of supervising teacher education students, the ZOU adopted mentoring as a strategy for supervising student teachers in its teacher education programmes. Mentoring was seen as a viable means of ensuring that student teachers could practise the theory they learnt in their courses in the schools in which they were already teaching. The ZOU intended to empower mentors in those schools for their roles through training.

Mentoring was first practised in business where it was used to induct new employees, and for career development and management training (Alleman, 1986, Daloz, 1983, Hawkey, 1998). Mentoring has since been adapted to teacher education programmes, where it is utilised mostly when student teachers are in schools to gain field experience. In distance education, this is the part of the programme where university lecturers deliberately visit the schools to support mentors and to assess student teacher performance. In many universities, such as Sussex University (Dart & Drake, 1993), teacher education is mostly school based, as it has been found that teachers learn more from the real school environment rather than in the higher education institutional environment where there are no classrooms or pupils. In Zimbabwe, teacher education institutions combine stints in the institutions with periods at schools where students put the theory learnt in the institutions into practice (Chakanyuka, 2002).

In teacher education, mentoring can be viewed as a process through which a newer person in an organisation is helped into the system by a more experienced person. Anderson and Shannon (1995) view it as a process “involving an ongoing, caring relationship”. The American Heritage Dictionary (2006) defines a mentor as a wise and trusted counsellor or teacher. As a formal relationship, mentoring is assigned, deliberate and directed at employee development. As such, it has goals, schedules, the training of mentors and student teachers, and evaluation (Hawkey, 1998). Makoni (2006) views the process as facilitating the professional development of a student teacher in whom the mentor leaves footprints or a

legacy. Through mentoring, student teachers have the opportunity to link theory learnt in teacher education institutions with practice in real classrooms with real pupils. Pollick (2007) defines mentoring as a process in which the mentor guides a student teacher and offers spiritual, financial and emotional support. This ability to marry theory with practice is the reason why mentoring has become popular in school-based teacher training programmes.

The ZOU introduced the PGDE, a school-based teacher education programme, in 1999. The programme afforded students the chance to study for a professional qualification from the schools where they were teaching as untrained university graduates. As Simpson noted above, this was an advantage for them in that they did not have to find additional accommodation, meals, classrooms, scholarships or transport to a full-time conventional college (ZOU minutes, 17 June 1997). All they had to do was to attend two-week tutorials during school holidays and do assignments during term time. The programme was initially offered over four semesters until the period was reduced to three semesters in 2004. While students were teaching as they studied, they were monitored in teaching practice over two semesters, during which period they were assigned to a mentor, who was another teacher at the school. The mentor would regularly meet with the students, observe some lessons taught and give the student teacher a chance to observe the mentor teaching. The ZOU trained the mentors on how to carry out their mentoring responsibilities and, once in a while, visited the schools to supervise the students, offer support to the mentors and also to assess the students' performance.

In Masvingo, the mentor was selected by the school principal on the basis of his or her being a fully qualified teacher teaching the relevant subject to the student and having a minimum of five years' teaching experience (interview with ZOU lecturer in charge). The ZOU normally accepted the school's choices, but carried out initial training to orientate all the mentors to the ZOU's requirements and impart knowledge and skills in mentoring. The lecturer in charge of the programme organised the one-day training at the regional office. Through this training, all the mentors for the programme got acquainted with one another and shared their experiences. They would then go back to their schools and mentor students in those schools. This mode of training was considered to be more cost-effective than asking trainers to travel around the region to train mentors in their schools (interview with ZOU lecturer in charge).

In this case, the lecturer in charge was female and had been working with the ZOU for three years prior to the study. Before that, she had also worked as a lecturer in a teacher training college. This paper investigates the effectiveness of the mentoring strategy in the supervision of teacher education student teachers in open and distance learning.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The ZOU adopted the mentoring strategy for the supervision of PGDE students. From 1999 when the programme was launched, no research was carried out to find out how effective the strategy was in developing students' knowledge and skills. This study sought to investigate the extent to which the mentoring strategy contributed to the professional development of student teachers in the PGDE programme.

RESEARCH QUESTION

To what extent does the mentoring strategy of PGDE student teacher supervision contribute to students' professional development in open and distance learning?

SUBQUESTIONS

The study aimed to answer the following questions:

- What perceptions do mentors and student teachers hold of mentoring?
- What mentoring strategies do mentors use in supervising PGDE student teachers?
- What challenges does the ZOU meet in the supervision of student teachers?
- What benefits do mentors and student teachers derive from being involved in the mentoring process?

METHODOLOGY

For this study, qualitative research was used, which, according to Guba and Lincoln (1994), is "a situated activity that locates the observer in the world." The researcher investigates things in their natural environments. In addition, the researcher's aim is to try and make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people give to the phenomena under study. The mentoring of PGDE students in Masvingo



was studied from the point of view of the students and mentors who were involved on a daily basis (Yin, 1984, Kaplan & Duchon, 1988, Key, 1995). Qualitative research enabled me to obtain in-depth data from participants about their experiences and perceptions of mentoring and being mentored. Through qualitative research, I adopted an interpretive perspective that enabled me to understand the reality of mentoring from the perceptions of the mentors and student teachers who were involved in it on a daily basis (Kaplan & Duchon, 1988). I aimed to gain a deep understanding of mentoring as it was practised in the schools in Masvingo (Darke et al., 1998).

In line with qualitative research, I used a case study design, which, according to Yin (2003), is "an empirical inquiry which investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context". Kaplan (1985) defines case study research as research that studies a phenomenon in its natural setting, employing different methods of data collection. From these two definitions, we note that case study research focuses on one phenomenon in the setting in which it normally occurs. The case study was appropriate for this study because I was studying a contemporary phenomenon – mentoring – in its natural setting (Darke et al., 1998). Mentoring was a specific strategy deliberately selected for the supervision of student teachers. One advantage of the case study was that it enabled me to use different data collection methods (Kaplan, 1995, Tellis, 1997, Yin, 2003) so that I could establish how mentoring was used as a strategy of supervising secondary school teacher education students in an open and distance learning institution. Some of the data collection strategies used in case study research are direct observation, interviews and document analysis (Tellis, 1997, Yin, 2003). At the time of the study, I was working as a lecturer in the Department of Educational Management in Masvingo.

I used convenience sampling to select mentors and student teachers to participate in the study. Convenience sampling was suitable for this study because the students selected attended the supervision sessions that had been organised by the lecturer in charge of teacher education in Masvingo and were both accessible to me and were presumed to have adequate knowledge and experience of being mentored (Russell & Gregory, 2003, Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The students were also from three different districts of Masvingo (Chiredzi, Mwenezi and Bikita) and were willing to participate in the study. Their mentors automatically became participants.

DATA COLLECTION

There was a total of eight PGDE students in one intake in Masvingo. These students taught in different schools at least 100 km away from Masvingo in four different directions: Chiredzi to the southeast, Bikita to the east, Chivi to the southwest, and Zaka and Mwenezi to the south. With the limited financial resources available to the region at the time, it was impossible for ZOU lecturers to supervise the eight student teachers in the schools in which they were teaching. Students were invited to one central school in a district, where they taught pupils in that school in forms similar to those they regularly taught. ZOU lecturers supervised them in these schools. The student teachers had to bring to the venue the textbooks they needed for the lessons they had planned, as well as their teaching practice files, to ensure that they had adequate teaching and learning material for the arranged sessions. I took advantage of these arranged supervision sessions to collect data from the student teachers in my study. Consequently, I did not have the opportunity to visit student teachers in their normal classrooms, where they had established a rapport with pupils and were familiar with the school routines.

One of the data collection methods for case study research is observation (Yin, 2003). I used observation to obtain first-hand data on how the student teachers were operating in their classrooms. As a non-participant, I observed each of the three student teachers teaching a "new" class in a "new" environment to find out how they managed the lesson, the pupils and the subject content being taught. This strategy enabled me to observe the student teachers (Marshall, 1998) on three different days when the arranged supervision took place. It is possible that the results of my observation may not have been a true reflection of the teachers' performance, but it provided me with first-hand data, which demonstrated the skills and knowledge that the student teachers had mastered up to that point in their teaching practice. None of the other data collection strategies could provide this data.

I also collected data through autobiographical accounts written by both mentors and students (Thorne, 2000). Armstrong (1987) argues that autobiographical accounts are useful instruments for collecting data because they assign significance and value to a person's own story and the interpretations he or she places on his or her experiences. In addition, the accounts document the inner, subjective



reality as constructed by the individuals. The accounts in this study placed value on the students' and mentors' own perceptions of the process of mentoring and being mentored. I used this data collection method to minimise misconceptions that might arise from the fact that I could not observe students teaching in the schools in which they normally operated. I hoped that this method would generate data that gave a realistic representation of their experiences in schools.

Through personal accounts, the participants had the opportunity to express their views and perceptions of the mentoring process in their own language and expression. The responses received varied in length from one to three pages. Even though I had given the mentors and students the option of using phrases, they all chose to use full sentences. This was useful because it was easier to understand what they had written.

The participants were informed that their accounts could address any or all of the following mentoring issues:

- Understanding of the concept of mentoring
- Mentor-student relationships
- Mentor strategies
- Skills and knowledge that mentors focused on
- The benefits of mentoring
- Students' progress during the mentoring period

Ideally, the students and mentors should have been interviewed as well. However, this was not possible due to the long distances that the student teachers travelled and the very busy timetables they had to follow on these days. The detailed information in the autobiographical accounts and document analysis, taken together with observation data, helped to give as realistic a picture as possible of how mentoring could be used as a strategy to supervise teacher education students in open and distance learning institutions.

Finally, the lecturer in charge of the programme in Masvingo was interviewed to get the institution's perspective on the mentoring strategy.

ETHICAL ISSUES

The case study involves obtaining a great deal of personal and subjective data from participants. Scott (1996) recommends that participants must be consulted and must give their consent before taking part in the research. Simons (1984) identifies the rights of the research subjects as impartiality from the researcher, which enables representation of all viewpoints, and willing participation. The researcher also has to maintain the privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. In this study, I explained to the participants what my research entailed before observing them and asking them to write their accounts of the process of mentoring or being mentored. I explained that the data I was collecting was for the purposes of this study and would not be used officially by the ZOU. In addition, I did not use the names of my subjects or any information that might reveal the identity of the participants.

Each participant wrote his or her personal account privately and did not share it with either the mentor or fellow students. The participants were asked to keep their accounts anonymous. Because of this, I am confident that the perceptions I received on different aspects of the mentoring process were genuine representations of the participants' experiences.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis in qualitative research starts at the beginning of the study. I began to do tentative data analysis as I started to collect data and read about mentoring. From literature on mentoring, certain themes, such as a definition of mentoring, strategies for mentoring and relationships in mentoring, began to emerge and I used these in the guides on personal accounts (Watt, 2007). Genuine data analysis began after I had collected all the data. In analysing the data, I kept checking the accounts, document analysis and observation notes I had made to ensure that no useful information was overlooked. As qualitative data analysis is iterative (Holliday, 2007), I reflected on this data over and over again to ensure as thorough an understanding of the mentoring phenomenon as possible. As I did this, I made notes that I used to identify patterns, recurring themes and the general meanings mentors and students placed on their experience. I checked data from various

sources for convergence of information (Darke et al., 1998). These represented the themes that I then used to present the data.

To ensure that my results were credible, believable and trustworthy, I used data from different sources to capture the essence of mentoring from such different perspectives as documentary data from students' records, mentors' personal accounts, students' personal accounts and the observation notes that I had made. These sources taken together proved useful in generating the understanding of mentoring given below. I took this decision in line with Rossman and Rallis's (1998) assertion on the value of triangulation.

FINDINGS

Student supervision in Masvingo

The lecturers in Masvingo have to supervise widely dispersed teacher education students. Because of logistical and financial problems, ZOU lecturers were unable to supervise the students adequately in the schools in which they were teaching. As a way of dealing with the problem, the lecturer in charge of the PGDE in Masvingo decided to cluster the schools according to districts and their close proximity to each other. Student teachers in one cluster would be asked to report to a school central to the cluster and be supervised by a team of ZOU lecturers. Such visits were not conducted regularly. The clustering of schools for supervision purposes served their purpose during a period of financial hardship for the university.

Background information on participants

All student teachers and mentors were male. This was a reflection of the overall gender profile in this programme, where only two of the eight student teachers in the intake were female. Only one of the three mentors held a university degree or a graduate certificate in education. Two mentors held diplomas in education (secondary). The shortage of certificated graduates in rural secondary schools accounted for this situation. Ideally, a teacher mentoring a student teacher on the PGDE programme should have been a university graduate. Chakanyuka (2002) reports that some students found it difficult to take advice and guidance from someone they considered to be less qualified than they were.

The mentors' teaching experience ranged from eight to 17 years. Their ages were 30, 40 and 44 years. The three students were 30, 34 and 30 years of age.

Two mentors were older than the students they were mentoring. From this perspective, the mentors were old enough to be respected by the student teachers they were mentoring. In one study, Chakanyuka (2002) discovered that one mentor had a problem mentoring a student who would not respect her because they were of the same age.

Definition of mentoring

All six participants in the study had a reasonable understanding of the concept of mentoring. The definitions they gave covered key issues of mentoring such as "giving guidance to someone less qualified", "helping teacher training students with techniques that could make them good teachers" and "offering advice by a practitioner who is above you in terms of professional qualification". From these definitions, it is noted that mentors and students identified the key issue of mentoring, namely the pairing of a qualified person with a less qualified one to ensure that the qualified person guides the professional development of the student. In this case, a teacher with higher qualifications and more experience is paired with a student teacher who is undergoing pre-service training. These aspects of mentoring are similar to the definitions given by Maynard and Furlong (1995) and Anderson and Shannon (1995).

Maynard and Furlong (1995) view the role of the mentor as a complex one in which the mentor supports the trainee teacher to acquire concepts, schema and skills about practical teaching and learning in the process of professional development. Tomlinson (1995) refers to mentoring as active assistance given to student teachers who have to acquire the complex skills of teaching and learning, which he identifies as "acquisition of awareness and strategies relevant to teaching", "engagement in teaching activity", "monitoring teaching activities and their effects", "adapting teaching strategy in response to reflection" and "motivate student teachers to harness their personal strengths through relevant interpersonal strategies" (Tomlinson: 1995). In a Welsh programme (Estyn, 2001), mentors provide well-targeted support and guidance to trainee teachers in order to meet their needs and help them to solve the problems they come across in the classroom.

Relationship between the mentor and the student teacher

The three pairs viewed their relationships positively, describing them as "sound, learning from each other", "very good and sound", "good two-way communication",

"favourable – the mentor has a strong desire to assist the student teacher" and "good and working cooperatively".

From the above excerpts from personal accounts, we note that the relationship verged on being open, which allowed communication to flow freely from mentor to student teacher and vice versa. The relationships enabled the mentors to guide the student teachers' professional development. Chakanyuka (2002) found that relationships tended to determine the level of assistance and support mentors gave student teachers. Where relationships were positive, mentors gave maximum support and guidance to student teachers. Both the mentor and student teacher had a responsibility to ensure that the relationships between them enabled mentors to adequately guide the student teacher.

As a result of the positive relationships between the mentors and the students, all pairs indicated that they learned from each other. The discussions were productive. One student wrote that "at the end of lesson observations we all come to an agreement". The mentors are seen as being prepared and ready to assist the students in their professional development. One mentor indicated that he and his student worked cooperatively for the benefit of the student. In such situations, the mentor's guidance was accepted without question by the student teacher. The issue of mentors without university degrees was not raised in this study. Students viewed them as qualified enough to assist them to become qualified and professional teachers.

Mentor strategies

Mentors in the study used a variety of strategies to assist student teacher development. One mentor indicated that he planned lessons with the student teacher and proceeded to observe such lessons. All mentors observed some of the lessons taught by the student teachers and gave feedback in post-lesson discussions. One mentor offered demonstration lessons to guide the student in difficult areas. One student viewed the supervision by his mentor as "supervision and not fault-finding to guide and help me where I went wrong". These activities are similar to mentor activities reported by Kiely and McClelland (undated). In their study, mentors guided, coached, challenged student teachers and offered advice on planning, classroom management and reflection. These strategies are similar to those identified by Tomlinson (1995), the purposes of which were to help students acquire the skills of teaching and learning.

In carrying out these strategies, mentors focused on teaching methods, lesson delivery, interactive classroom management skills and teaching methods. Mentors, therefore, focused on knowledge and teaching skills. Teaching methods focused on the acquisition of knowledge, while lesson delivery and teaching skills focused on the skills necessary for successful and effective teaching, both of which are similar to the knowledge and skills that Tomlinson (1995) suggested trainee teachers should acquire. Some skills cited by both groups were lesson introduction, classroom management, the maintenance of discipline, teacher-pupil interaction, pupil-pupil interaction, marking skills, lesson evaluation and planning skills. In the skills domain, the mentors focused on all aspects of lesson delivery from planning to lesson introduction and lesson evaluation.

A study of the supervision reports the mentors had produced on the students' teaching also confirmed this. In general, the mentors gave constructive comments that helped the students to develop in their teaching practice. From the reports written in the early stages of the teaching practice to the later reports, there was evidence of growth in the student teachers' teaching performance. In the early stages of teaching practice, one mentor wrote: "The student has to plan his lessons more effectively." Another mentor wrote: "The student teacher's lesson evaluation is shallow." In the supervision reports just before the observation lessons, the two mentors wrote: "His lesson plans are now more meaningful for his lessons" and "Lesson evaluation points out genuine areas of pupils' strengths and weaknesses, and necessary remediation is being undertaken". These reports point to the fact that mentors had definite areas of professional development on which they focused. In one case, the student teacher was weak in lesson planning and in another the student teacher was weak in lesson evaluation. The two mentors gave advice on these areas and recorded progress on them in the supervision reports. It would appear that student teachers heeded the mentors' advice and feedback to improve their classroom performance.

Student learning

From the nature of the relationships between mentors and student teachers, it was clear that there would be positive learning on the part of the student teachers. The students indicated that they had gained a lot through being mentored, as the following excerpts show: "teaching skills as well as reflective teaching", "the value of the teacher as a facilitator of learning, child-centred learning and reflective teaching", "how to deliver lessons through different methods and different learning aids" and "group dynamics are more effective than lecture method".



The student teachers identified the area of their professional development as teaching skills, reflective teaching, the teacher as a facilitator of learning and the use of group work rather than lecturing. From these gains, we note that the student teachers' gains were on the critical aspects of teaching and learning. As teachers without certificates, these were areas posing problems to them.

The mentors helped the students to critically evaluate their lessons and teaching approaches. This strategy helped the students to develop into reflexive teachers who would experiment with different teaching approaches and not be replicas of their mentors. One weakness of mentoring is that some mentors discourage students from experimenting with new ideas, thereby limiting the professional development of the students. Through being mentored, the student teachers had the opportunity to enquire and reflect on their teaching, as Simpson (2008) argues.

On the other hand, mentors viewed the student teachers' gains in more or less the same fashion, as the following excerpts from the mentors' personal accounts show: "students started to practise strategies suggested by the mentor", "improved remarkably in presentation of lessons – from lesson preparation to lesson evaluation", "improved in the control of classes", "counselling pupils and offering individual help or remedial work", "remarkable progress in teaching, formulating objectives and lesson evaluation" and "student developed from chalk-and-talk and lecturing strategies to pupil-centred strategies".

It can be seen that the gains were genuine, as mentors and students identified similar gains in teaching skills, reflection (from lesson preparation to lesson evaluation) and class control. The student teachers also took the advice of their mentors seriously, which led to the progress they made in their teaching. This development was also evident in the mentors' supervision reports, as indicated above. The mentor helped to instil new ideas and values in the student teachers, such as pupil-centred methodologies and the teacher as a facilitator and not a dispenser of learning. The working relationships between the mentors and the student teachers in this study encouraged enquiry and experimentation, which led to greater development on the part of the student teachers.

While the mentors in this study did not identify the benefits they derived from the mentoring experience, Chakanyuka (2002) and Estyn (2001) point out that mentors have an opportunity to reflect on their own practice and thereby improve their teaching skills. Mentors also improve their management skills. It can be argued that mentors in this study also benefited from the process in similar ways.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study indicate that the participants understood what mentoring was and what it entailed. The definitions they gave and the activities they carried out were clear indications of their understanding.

It would appear that for the PGDE programme in Masvingo, mentoring was an effective strategy for managing the field experience of secondary teacher education students. While ZOU lecturers could not supervise student teachers in their regular schools, the mentors provided the guidance necessary for the student teachers' professional development. A telephone interview with the lecturer in charge of the programme in Masvingo suggested that very little or no training of mentors took place. The mentors relied on their extensive teaching experience to guide the student teachers.

The mentors used a variety of strategies to ensure that the students in their care developed professionally. While they focused mostly on classroom teaching, they also helped the students understand the changing role of the teacher, in terms of which the teacher is not a dispenser of knowledge but a facilitator. Mentors encouraged students to use effective group work, which enabled pupils to learn both from each other and from the teacher.

All the students and mentors confirmed that there were definite gains for the student teachers in the mentoring process. Students were guided meaningfully and acquired the necessary teaching skills, knowledge and aptitudes in classroom teaching and the profession. Students also found the relationships with their mentors to be conducive to their positive professional development. It can be concluded that student teachers were able to practise the theory they learnt from the ZOU under the safe guidance of the mentors.

From the findings above, it can be concluded that mentoring was a strategy that contributed effectively to the professional development of the student teachers in Masvingo. With extensive training, using mentors is a strategy that can be used to manage students' field experience in open and distance teacher education programmes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While mentoring is an effective strategy for the supervision of student teachers, it needs to be supported by intensive training of the mentors to ensure that they



are imparting the knowledge and skills required by the relevant open and distance learning university. This would ensure that when, because of logistical and financial problems, ZOU lecturers cannot supervise the student teachers adequately, mentors have the necessary skills and knowledge to guide students effectively.

The clustering of schools for supervision purposes may be useful for a while, but a more sustained and effective method of supervising student teachers is required. The best method would be to supervise the student teachers in their regular classrooms where they have established routines with their classes, are familiar with the classes and are taken seriously. Students referred to the inconvenience of carrying piles of textbooks to these venues and the possible problems this posed if, for some reason, they lost some textbooks. In addition, pupils in the "new" schools took time to get accustomed to the student teacher and sometimes did not take them seriously.

There is a need for more research in the other regions of Zimbabwe to find out how the mentoring of student teachers is being practised. The ZOU needs to have a fuller understanding of the mentoring strategy of supervising teacher education student teachers in open and distance learning institutions.

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