Mentorship in Teacher Education: The Impact of Covid-19 in Third World Contexts

Nancy Nhachena & Mthokozisi Moyo

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a major upheaval in the teaching and learning process worldwide. It brought about unprecedented challenges to education that has undoubtedly and forever changed the architecture of education. It has altered the traditional roles and relationships of mentors and their protégés as much as it changes the roles of teachers as they shift to e-mentoring after adopting blended education. A precondition for e-mentoring is the availability of and access to Information and Communication Technology gadgets and infrastructure, coupled with digital literacy. Effective mentorship has been hampered by a dearth of ICT infrastructure, the cost of internet services as well as the skills shortage among advanced career teachers who are mostly digital immigrants. This article focuses on the shift to virtual learning and the need of school authorities to actively support e-mentoring programmes within their schools if they are to derive any meaningful benefits from mentoring.

Keywords: mentorship, digital literacy, virtual learning, teaching practice

Introduction

The outbreak of the Corona Virus disease in the year 2019 brought about major changes in the lives of many across the globe. In education, traditional face-to-face teaching methods have ceased to be sufficient on their own in this Covid-19 pandemic era due to prolonged lockdowns and the adoption of blended education. The twenty-first century demands a blend in the teaching methods due to the presence of technology in
all other facets of life. Blended learning is an innovative concept that embraces the advantages of both traditional teaching in the classroom and ICT supported learning including both offline learning and online learning (Lalima, 2017). Singh & Reed (2001) define blended learning as a learning programme where more than one mode of delivery is being used to optimize the learning outcome and cost of programme delivery. Blended learning focuses on optimizing achievement of learning objectives by applying the “right” personal learning technologies to match the right personal learning style to transfer the “right” skills to the “right” person at the “right” time (Akkoyunlu & Soylu, 2008). It is, however, not easy to blend the teaching methods without adequate planning and resources, which has been the case in this Covid-19 era. How Covid-19 restrictions have been enforced in the different societies in third world contexts has had a massive impact on student-teacher mentorship as there is a need to shift from the traditional mentorship programmes to e-mentorship programmes that rely on information communication technologies and online teaching platforms.

Blended learning needs rigorous efforts, the right attitude, a handsome budget and highly motivated teachers and students for its successful implementation (Lalima, 2017). Digital literacy plays a critical role in blended education because student teachers and their mentors need to continue interaction away from the school premises. It is an important feature of blended learning that teachers are very dynamic, tech-savvy and fully trained to work efficiently in both the formats—traditional classroom format and ICT supported format (Lalima, 2017). The challenge in third world contexts is that most teachers are not tech-savvy, and those who are, may lack the requisite resources. This affects the teachers’ delivery of lessons and ultimately mentoring of student teachers on teaching practice assignments. In as much as it is important to have tech-savvy teachers, an enabling environment is necessary for both the mentor and the mentee.

The Role of a Mentor

A mentor is a lifeline for the student teacher’s success as the mentor becomes, to the student-teacher, a go-to for all things professional, building a relationship and bond that transcends the student teaching practice period. The mentor is expected to advise, educate, and help without expressly asking for concrete behavioural adjustments or
recommending specific conduct from the mentee (Tarihoran et al., 2021). It is the mentor’s job to show and tell the student-teacher everything relevant to the teaching profession as a way of nurturing them to become the best they can be, during their teaching practice assignment and beyond. This is because mentors act as sounding boards for mentees or role models who provide inspiration (Pillon & Osmun, 2013). Mentoring, understood traditionally, is the encouragement and guidance by an advanced career teacher who has the experience, expertise and qualities of a knowledgeable and trustworthy advisor, one who has walked the path of the trainee and understands the challenges involved (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2020). The role of a mentor can be summed up as that of bridging the change between early career training and full employment and in many contexts, mentors have an important contribution as they help decide or provide proof that the student-teacher has demonstrated the requisite professional competence (Tarihoran et al., 2021). This study seeks to determine how the shift to online teaching and learning and e-mentoring has affected the roles of mentors.

**Mentoring and Covid-19**

The outbreak of Covid-19 brought about unprecedented challenges to education that has undoubtedly and forever changed the architecture of education the world over. This has altered the traditional roles and relationships of mentors and their protégés as much as it changes the roles of teachers. The imposition of national and other forms of lockdowns restricting the movement of persons has meant that the mentors and student-teachers have also been geographically separated.

**Literature Review**

Online mentoring or e-mentoring can be defined as a computer-mediated, mutually beneficial relationship between a mentor and a student which provides mentoring that is seamless, free and profoundly different from face-to-face mentoring. In today’s world, social media platforms are some of the very important tools that are used in online mentoring. The benefits of online mentoring include flexibility of scheduling, overcoming geographic distance and facilitating access (Griffiths & Miller, 2005). The downside of online mentoring includes the requirements of access to internet connectivity, technical skills, well-coordinated meeting times, difficulties in establishing rapport...
and policy breaches that have to do with privacy and confidentiality. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp provide affordable solutions to long-distance and online mentoring. Video conferencing using WhatsApp offers potential solutions to some of the problems of online mentoring as it allows people to communicate with both video and audio modalities with very limited cost and marginal technical prowess. It allows mentors to work with their protégé from any location with an internet connection allowing them to enjoy the benefits of meeting face-to-face while separated geographically.

Mentoring has been considered to be of benefit to the mentor and the protégé hence it has become a very important requirement for teacher education in Zimbabwe. Salgür notes that “Teacher training through mentoring activities are now considered as an effective professional development method for new teachers” (2014, p. 46). Student teachers in Teaching Practice have always worked under the mentorship of some advanced career incumbent with the hope of developing and enriching both for the benefit of all. Mentorship is seen as facilitating reflection, learning and collaboration instead of acting as experts in the field rightfully observing the dynamic, reciprocal relationship in a work environment between an advanced career incumbent and a beginner.

The advent of information communication technologies has allowed for mentoring, on and off school sites, as the mentor and the protégé continue to interact even outside working hours. Mentoring as a partnership has moved away from being a rigidly structured exchange to a collegial semi-structured one that allows exchange and mutual learning through face-to-face and virtual interaction. In this new blended mentorship, “structured time is set aside as a necessary part of the collaborative collegial exchange, as it enables collaborating activities such as co-planning, co-teaching, modelling, and reflecting to take place” (Salgür, 2014, p. 47).

The relationship between the mentor and the protégé is fostered through working together and sharing experiences. Carr et al. (2005) posit that mentoring is often thought to be a benefit to the new educator, overlooking benefits to the veteran teachers. This is corroborated by Bresnahan (2011), who notes “that teachers as mentors begin to see the bigger picture of teaching and become active participants in the shaping of their schools as a result of their mentoring experience” (p. 123).

Salgür (2014) argues that there is no fixed way of mentoring, rather mentoring programmes and goals are established to support the mentors
and their mentees throughout their partnership. In this study, the focus is on how the shift to online mentoring and blended education has affected the nature of the mentor-protégé relationship in mentorship. In their study of mentoring in a digital age, Pillon & Osmun (2013) observe that e-mentoring was less effective than on-site mentoring for the mentee. They concluded that the absence of face-to-face time to plan and the lack of direct observation and technical difficulties with ICT gadgets are the major drawbacks of e-mentoring. In this study, the researcher sought to understand how digital literacy among mentors and mentees affects the efficiency of e-mentoring under blended education.

Technology is increasingly used in the mentoring process because of its widespread accessibility and potential to overcome the barriers of time and geographical location between mentors and mentees (Wong & Premkumar, 2007). The integration of the e-learning environment and traditional learning environment may combine ideally the useful aspects of both methods.

Donnelly (2010) conducted a qualitative study in the higher education context on how to combine instructional strategies in face-to-face and computer-mediated environments to use their strengths but avoid their weaknesses. The research was specifically interested in understanding the role of technology as a tool to support mentorship. The findings of the study pointed out that the combination of technology support in the form of interactive media and problem-based learning could be seen as a formidable combination but they are complementary (Delialioglu, 2012). Donnelly (2010) further argues that mentors will need to create networked environments for students to store, share, and collaboratively develop their practicums. Teachers who have been traditionally trained for face-to-face education now have to adopt new roles and competencies for online teaching for them to be effective in e-mentoring. E-mentoring programmes can be intrinsically linked to the curriculum with technology facilitating constructive learning processes between teachers and students (Tinoco-Giralgo, 2020).

**Methodology**

The study used the qualitative research paradigm. Qualitative research was ideal because it allowed the researcher to use participants’ views of their world. Qualitative research in this regard is an approach that recognizes that meaning emerges through interaction and is not
standardized from person to person as in quantitative research, and thus allowed the researcher to study issues in detail without predetermined categories of analysis (Watt, 2007). This, in turn, enabled participants to open up and reveal their understandings. Through the use of the qualitative study, the researcher was able to explore the mentorship effectiveness in Zimbabwe in light of the blended learning enforced by the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions. Meanings given by the participants were based on their beliefs, values, opinions, thoughts, understandings and actions. Qualitative research also suited this study because it was a discovery-oriented approach in the natural environment (Yin, 2009). The mentees and mentors were in different locations facing different challenges. The researcher thus had an opportunity to study specific phenomena in their natural settings, which in this case were universities (Berg, 2006; Thomas & Nelson, 2001). Justification for the qualitative approach in this study was its use of the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection (Punch, 2004; Seale, 2006). Interviews, focus group discussions and questionnaires were used as research instruments and these covered the shortcomings of the other.

Research Questions

The following research questions were identified:

1. How has mentorship of student teachers on teaching practice changed under blended education and the use of online spaces?
2. What are the challenges that are related to online teaching and mentoring that are impacting the mentoring of student teachers on teaching practice?
3. What needs to be done to make mentorship effective under blended education?

Research Objectives

The research objectives were formulated in the logic of reaching the stated purpose aimed at:

1. Specifying the changing nature of teacher mentorship under blended education as a result of Covid-19.
2. Critically analysing the challenges related to teacher mentoring in blended education.
3. Identifying key enablers of effective student-teacher mentoring under blended education in third world contexts.
Population and Sample
Student teachers on Teaching Practice were selected as a research sample focusing mainly on those who started their Teaching Practice assignment during the year 2020. The research targeted 20 pre-service student teachers within the field of language studies with universities and on a yearlong Teaching Practice assignment, together with their mentors. There are several formats of Teaching Practice formats in teacher training in the Zimbabwean education system. Under the teachers’ colleges, students undertake a two-term (approximately 9 months) teaching practice assignment while pre-service student teachers in universities go on a full year of teaching practice. For this study, students on a full year teaching practice were targeted together with their mentors to understand how they conducted mentorship.

Findings—The Changing Roles in Mentorship
Mentorship involves the pairing of a novice teacher and an experienced teacher who is expected to share their experience and knowledge with the novice. The emergence of blended education has brought about changes in mentorship as mentors were of the view that, as much as the experienced teacher is expected to explain school policies, regulations and procedures; shared methods, materials and resources; help the novice solve problems in teaching and learning; provide personal and professional support; and guide the novice in their growth, it offers the advanced career teacher numerous opportunities for learning and growth. Because the majority of student teachers are tech-savvy, mentors also expect to learn a lot from them and that will boost their digital literacy skills.

To determine the changing nature of student-teacher mentorship in teacher training, the views of mentors and their mentees on the roles of mentors in this new normal were collected. Both mentors and their mentees were asked about their expectations of mentorship as well as their roles. While mentors are still expected to be experienced and knowledgeable, a sizeable majority of them are still new to long-distance and e-mentoring. E-mentoring has changed the mentor-protégé relationship in that while the mentor has expert career knowledge, they are ‘digital immigrants’ while their protégés are digital natives. Hence, mentors have a lot to learn from their protégés. Under blended education, mentorship has become a partnership where the mentor shares career
expertise, knowledge and experience while the protégé shares digital skills and literacies, making it a mutually beneficial relationship.

E-mentoring and Digital Affordances

With the outbreak of Covid-19 and the imposition of lockdowns and travel restrictions, it meant that mentoring should also shift from physical face-to-face to online space. A prerequisite for this is the availability and access to Information and Communication Technology gadgets and infrastructure. Among these affordances are such requirements as digital literacy. According to Eshet-Alkalai (2004), digital literacy involves more than the ability to use software or operate a digital device but includes a large variety of complex cognitive, motor, sociological, and emotional skills which users need to function effectively in digital environs. This is one skill that is lacking among many of the advanced career teachers who are in this case mentors thereby negatively affecting mentorship.

Figure 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference number</th>
<th>Word document handling and processing</th>
<th>Desktop publishing</th>
<th>Basic design software</th>
<th>Podcasts and pre-recorded sessions</th>
<th>Online video conferencing</th>
<th>Emailing</th>
<th>Blogging</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mentors lack the requisite skills to effectively conduct e-mentoring sessions with mentees. The majority of them only possess the bare minimum skills for handling word documents, emailing and basic desktop publishing while only a few have skills in preparing podcasts and blogging. The deficiencies in digital literacy among mentors can be explained in terms of the socio-cultural aspects of digital literacy development. Mentors are generally older ‘digital immigrants’ who are advanced career teachers, representative of the conservative side of the African societies and this contributes to their lack of digital skills.

**Figure 2**

The unavailability of gadgets to both mentors and mentees was cited as one of the key issues affecting e-mentoring as the costs of ICT gadgets are beyond the reach of many. Regarding the student teachers, 80 per cent had personal computers or tablets that they could make use of during mentorship while 70 per cent of the mentors did not have access to these gadgets away from the workplace. The high costs of data and poor internet connectivity were cited as the major challenges by
the respondents. Mentors pointed out to limited or the total absence of institutional support regarding internet data packages, hence they could not sustain effective online mentorship programmes. Mentees could not complain about data because they did not expect to be given any data packages by the host schools or their colleges. Nonetheless some schools provided data packages to student teachers as a way of supporting online teaching and learning.

Other challenges related to communication infrastructure are poor network and power shortages. The most affected in terms of network and power are those from rural areas where there is no electricity and people rely on off-grid solar-powered sources. Those in urban areas also cited persistent power outages due to load shedding. The unreliability of power supplies meant that any pre-arranged mentoring sessions were subject to the availability of the mentor, the mentee, power and a strong network connection. This rendered online mentoring an irregular exercise that cannot be relied on.

Discussion

Although there are benefits that come with e-mentoring, there are requirements that must be met before mentees and their mentors can derive meaningful benefits from their partnership. Such benefits include flexibility of schedules and allowing interaction across geographic locations. However, there are barriers to it that include limited availability and access to a stable internet connection, limited and unreliable sources of power, a dearth of technical skills and lower levels of digital literacy that render coordination and communication ineffective. The switch to e-mentoring has created disparities among student teachers as some would have access to high quality mentoring because, together with their mentors, they receive stronger institutional support while others have no support. Thus, for some, mentorship is a continuous exercise throughout their teaching practice assignment while for others, it is an ad hoc exercise that only goes on during face-to-face interaction and cannot be sustained online due to limited resources. The adoption of virtual and online learning approaches disrupted the traditional mentor-protégé relationship where the student-teacher is learning from the advanced career teacher who would normally have a blueprint to share. It meant that all teachers, novice and veteran alike, have the challenge of reaching out to their classes using virtual learning tools.
Conclusion

The study concludes that mentorship among student teachers is changing owing to the emergence of virtual learning. With a majority of student teachers being digital natives while their would-be mentors are mostly digital immigrants, the shift to e-mentoring and virtual teaching and learning changes the power dynamics of mentoring. The students can no longer be seen as pure novices who are here to learn. Rather they are seen as and take up the role of collaborators who bring in critical skills and digital literacy that is an important component of blended education and e-mentoring. Digital literacy has become a prerequisite in student-teacher mentorship especially in the wake of Covid-19 where blended education has become the new normal. Despite the high cost of ICT gadgets and data packages in many third world contexts, such gadgets as personal computers, tablets and smartphones have also become important tools of the trade for teachers across the world. This has implications for teacher education as student teachers should expect their mentorship to be anchored on digital literacy. It would also be beneficial for trainee teachers to develop digital skills that will enable them to be of more value when they take up their teaching practice assignments.

References


