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To mentor and to be mentored in Grade R

Abstract

Research suggests that beginner teachers face challenges when transitioning from pre-service to in-service teaching. Both international and local research found that transitioning from pre-service to newly qualified teachers can be problematic. This study explores the learning experiences of beginner foundation phase Grade R teachers. The study utilises a qualitative research design embedded in the interpretivist paradigm. Data were collected from six foundation phase Grade R teachers using semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. The findings show that beginner teachers face enormous challenges early in their careers, and their sustainability in the classroom depends on how well they address these challenges. The findings have significant implications for the implementation of formal mentoring in practice.

Keywords: *collaboration, dialogue, foundation phase, Grade R, mentee, mentor, mentoring*

1. Introduction and background

Mentoring is an essential component of professional development for beginner teachers. It involves guidance, support, learning opportunities, collaboration, and information exchange between mentors and mentees (Duse, Duse and Karkowska 2017). In its broadest definition, mentorship is a transformative and mutual partnership that empowers less experienced mentees to receive guidance from experienced and knowledgeable mentors (Rubbi Nunan, Ebrahim and Stander, 2023). Gholam (2018) emphasises the value of mentorship in a teaching and learning environment to help beginner teachers gain valuable teaching experience. The mentoring ensures that they receive the necessary support and feedback to develop their skills and become effective educators in their classrooms (Mahofa and Adendorff, 2022: 641).

In addition, the *South African Council for Educators (SACE) Act No. 31 of 2000* aims to construct a facility that would provide teachers with professional support and training for their growth and development. This initiative is intended to enhance the skills and knowledge of beginner teachers and ultimately benefit the education system as a whole (RSA, 2011: 6). Moreover, the new teacher induction



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guidelines focus on the critical period immediately following the employment of beginner teachers during this time, namely that they go through a complete induction procedure that includes teacher orientation (DBE, 2017: 2).

Although these policies are in place, several studies reveal that beginner teachers face various challenges in the classroom (Dias-Lacy and Guirguis, 2017:265). Petersen (2017) believes beginner teachers face a period of confusion and doubt as they move from university to the classroom due to various factors. At a summit focused on teacher education, the Department of Basic Education emphasises that beginner teachers often feel inadequate due to a lack of support and an understanding of expectations (DBE, 2017). Furthermore, other authors believe that many beginner teachers resign within the first three to five years of teaching, contributing to the high attrition rate in schools (Buchanan *et al.*, 2013:140). Pitsoe (2013: 314) concurs with this and states that some of the factors affecting the attrition of beginner teachers are a global problem with adverse working conditions and a lack of resources, support and leadership.

Therefore, mentorship plays an important role in supporting beginner teachers in developing and mastering essential professional skills and providing ongoing support to enhance the quality of their teaching (Suchánková and Hrbáčková, 2017). Mahofa and Adendorff (2022: 650) emphasise that competent and experienced mentors are required for the mentoring process to be effective. However, although experienced teachers act as mentors, formal mentorship programmes are still relatively new in South Africa (DBE, 2017: 2; Msila, 2015: 3). Msila (2015) highlights the importance of mentors receiving proper training to create effective schools, a trend not often observed in South African schools. Research shows that in certain countries (Finland), mentor teachers must complete training before serving as mentors (Bipath, 2022). Unfit mentors might hinder the professional growth of both the mentor and mentee. Endeley (2014) asserts that experienced mentors are crucial for effective teaching strategies, enabling mentees to engage in meaningful classroom learning experiences.

These and other challenges have been noted, which supports arguments for the value of mentorship, especially for mentee teachers in Grade R classrooms (Aspfors and Bondas, 2013). Furthermore, numerous studies have been conducted on mentoring in the education system (Bird and Hudson, 2015). However, there has been limited research on the learning experiences and mentoring of beginner foundation phase Grade R teachers in South Africa (Jugmohan and Muzvidziwa, 2017: 3; Msila, 2015). This lack of research has motivated us to undertake this study. The appreciation of Grade R teachers' professional status has been a recurring challenge, requiring attention from all stakeholders involved in education (Bipath, 2022; Excell and Linington, 2015:84). Ebrahim, Verbeek and Mashiya (2011) argue that Grade R teachers need to claim a position of agency, referring to their ability to influence their practice and bring about positive change.

With the preceding discussion in mind, this study aims to provide an answer to the research question at hand:

What are the learning experiences of mentee teachers in the Western Cape?

The following section briefly overviews the learning experiences of mentee teachers, the mentoring experiences of mentors, and their influence on mentoring beginner teachers.

2. Understanding the learning experiences of beginner foundation phase Gr R teachers (mentees)

A beginner teacher in South Africa is a recent graduate with less than five years of teaching experience who completed their professional education at higher educational institutions and is employed at private or public schools (DBE, 2017: 4). The minimum qualification for a Grade R teacher is a Diploma in Grade R teaching, offered at various institutions in South Africa. A Grade R teacher uses a play-based integrated approach to teach learners aged five to six (Shaik, 2016: 77).

Beginner teachers face significant challenges in their early years, which are considered the most demanding period of their professional careers, and their ability to remain in the classroom depends on their adeptness to navigate and overcome these challenges (Dias-Lacy and Guirguis, 2017: 195; Petersen, 2017: 1). Some challenges faced by teachers include contradictory notions of learning to teach, the inability to prioritise tasks, limited parental involvement, struggling with the curriculum, the inability to plan, a lack of administrative support, language barriers, attrition, and heavy workloads (Vallice, 2011; Dias-Lacy and Guirguis, 2017: 265; Petersen, 2017: 1).

The importance of integrating teaching and learning responsibilities in teacher education programmes for beginner teachers is emphasised by Hollins (2011). This integration helps beginner teachers to transition from being students to becoming teachers. However, Gravett (2012) highlights a significant challenge that teacher training programmes face: the theory-practice divide, leading to inadequate preparation for the classroom's complexity. Therefore, it is critical to provide beginner teachers with support, responsibility and training for their mental and emotional well-being. The lack of these factors may lead to "practice shock" or "reality shock" (Hobson and Ashby, 2012: 177), a concept that Veenman coined in 1984. Aspfors and Fransson (2015) stress that many countries lack organised mentor education, and many mentors lack the necessary skills to guide beginner teachers, exacerbated by the lack of mentor training (Asada, 2012). Mahofa and Adendorff (2022: 650) report that school mentorship programmes are often carried out loosely, despite expectations of carefully designed programmes.

To enhance the quality of mentorship practices for future teachers, mainly those responsible for teaching Grade R learners, it is imperative to gain an understanding of the mentoring experiences of HODs. Moreover, by examining the perspectives of HODs, we can identify potential areas of improvement for mentorship programmes and ensure that mentees are given the support they need to excel in their profession.

3. Understanding the mentoring experiences of heads of departments (mentors)

The role of a foundation phase HOD is complex and involves several layers of responsibility. The HOD is responsible for classroom teaching, department efficiency, and planning extracurricular events to advance subject learning areas and learners, per the DBE's Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) document (RSA, 1999). They require excellent leadership, lifelong learning commitment, and proficient reading and decision-making abilities (Mokoena, 2017: 284). HODs must inspire and guide beginner teachers and build strong relationships with colleagues through collaboration that fosters development and contributes

to educational transformation. (Bipath, 2022). In addition, the literature reveals that HODs are crucial to the implementation and management of curricula in their departments (Tapala, Van Niekerk and Mentz, 2020: 2). According to Shaked and Schechter's (2017) study, HODs not only lead their department's curriculum, but also manage teams, resources, problem-solve and assess their department's curricula.

Despite their essential role, HODs encounter several challenges in their work. Various studies conducted by researchers such as Bush (2018), Ogina (2017) and Gichobi (2012) highlight some of the significant challenges faced by HODs, such as inadequate formal leadership training, excessive workload, underdevelopment, lack of time, poor communication, and stress while mentoring. It should be noted that the context of HODs in South Africa differs from that of developed countries like the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia (Tapala *et al.*, 2020: 3). South Africa has not yet established a formal qualification for the HOD position (Tapala *et al.*, 2020: 3). Unfortunately, leadership training focuses mainly on school principals and their deputies and not on HODs. Despite this, the Curriculum Policy Assessment Statements (CAPS) require South African HODs to be specialists in their subject, which places more demands on them (Badugela, 2012).

HODs, who are both members of the management team and teaching staff, should undergo training and development to prepare them for future challenges. Tapala *et al.* (2020) emphasise the significance of such training to ensure they can perform their duties effectively. It is crucial to stay updated with the dynamic and ever-changing nature of education and knowledge, as it can pose challenges for HODs (Dosunmu and Adeyemo, 2018). Therefore, it is vital to invest in the growth and development of HODs to ensure they possess the necessary skills and knowledge to handle their responsibilities effectively and, ultimately, support and guide mentee teachers.

4. The influence of mentors on mentoring beginner teachers

According to Bush and Glover (2012), HODs supervise the teaching and learning. They provide support and guidance to teachers regarding lesson design and teaching practices to improve the overall learning experiences of the learners. HODs play a pivotal role in ensuring that teachers are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to facilitate learners' learning effectively. Their actions have a significant impact on the academic achievement of learners, especially in Grade R. Effective HODs oversee the curriculum and instruction, establishing the school's mission and advancing teaching and learning (Bush and Glover, 2012).

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) found that creative and ongoing support in educational settings is crucial for teachers. Their study reveals that intentional staff capacity building could improve learner outcomes, classroom practices, and teacher attitudes. To achieve this, HODs should mentor and provide professional development to mentee teachers, preparing them for the reality of teaching (Bipath, 2022: 139).

5. Theoretical framework

The frameworks underpinned by Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory, Freire's dialogic theory and Guskey's theory of change were used as the theoretical framings for this study. The three theories are not mentorship theories, but can be applied to mentorship, as in the case of this study. These theories offer a comprehensive knowledge of adult learning,

professional growth, dialogue and support. Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist approach, Freire's (1972) Dialogical Theory, and Guskey's (1986) Change Theory are foundations for building mentoring relationships. They emphasise trust-based interactions that support the development of these teachers into professional teaching roles.

6. Vygotsky's, Gusky's and Freire's perspectives on mentoring and professional development

Vygotsky's (1978) constructivism theory advocates teachers' mentoring through a social constructivist approach, arguing that cognitive development is driven by social interactions, cultural resources, and personal circumstances rather than individual transmission. In this instance, beginner teachers learn new roles, requiring classroom management and learner engagement. As such, schools can promote teacher mentoring by integrating them through an orientation programme.

Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism principle suggests knowledge is co-constructed through social interactions, highlighting the importance of collaboration and language in enhancing mentorship effectiveness, supported by social and cultural norms (Vygotsky, 1978; Berk and Winsler, 1995). Language represents culture and social life. Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development emphasises small-group work, especially with skilled members. HODs can guide beginner teachers through task-oriented interactions, reducing reliance on experienced teachers and promoting learning (Daniels, 2001). Vygotsky's (1978: 89) social constructivist approach promotes positive teacher-learner relationships and aligns with Guskey's Change Theory, enhancing development through co-construction, collaboration and dialogue.

Guskey's (1986) theory of change suggests that professional development enhances teachers' knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and skills, improving learners' understanding, proficiency and effectiveness. Additionally, teachers view professional development as a means to enhance their skills and find fulfilment, with significant changes in beliefs and attitudes likely to occur with academic performance achievements. Therefore, Guskey's (1986) change theory offers insights into how beginner teachers might change and how the change could lead to a change in learner behaviour and possibly increased learning.

This study also uses Freire's (1972) perspective on dialogical pedagogy as a framework for recognising and analysing possible challenges in communication between beginner teachers and their HODs. Freire (1972) claims dialogue is an exchange of ideas in which learners and teachers collaborate to produce new, original knowledge. In this study, Freire's (1972) dialogical pedagogy theory involves beginner teachers and HODs sharing experiences in a non-hierarchical way. The dialogical method, a strategy for HODs, encourages appreciation for uniqueness and promotes non-threatening social and personal reform by involving beginner teachers in critical thinking and questioning, preventing regress and potential efficiency freeze. HODs play a crucial role in mentoring, leadership, addressing challenges, initiating dialogues, and supporting beginner teachers, which aligns with Freire's (1972) dialogical pedagogy. This dialogical pedagogy promotes collaboration and co-construction and seeks to unite HODs and beginner teachers. In this context, beginner teachers are regarded as co-constructors of the curriculum rather than mere implementers (Jamodien, 2023; Dockett, 2019: 738).

7. Research design and methods

A qualitative interpretivist research approach was adopted to determine mentees' learning experiences and mentors' mentoring experiences. The study participants were specifically chosen based on their ability to provide valuable insights into the research question and to improve comprehension of the subject being examined (Creswell, 2013: 179). To achieve this, six mentee teachers from foundation phase Grade R and (their) three HODs hailing from three different schools in two suburbs of the Western Cape were purposively selected. To meet the selection criteria, the minimum qualification required for teachers was a Diploma in Grade R teaching. The research investigation conformed with the ethical guidelines established by the Ethics Research Committee of CPUT. Additionally, the WCED Director of Research, the school principals, the HODs, and the mentee teachers permitted us to conduct the research. Protecting participants, obtaining informed consent, safeguarding anonymity and confidentiality, obtaining permission to record, and maintaining honesty and transparency were also part of the ethical considerations for the research. Semi-structured interviews and reflective journal entries were used to gather in-depth knowledge of mentees' professional learning experiences and mentor teachers' mentoring experiences (Crowe *et al.*, 2011; Creswell, 2013). Data were analysed using Creswell's six-step process: transcribing, reading, coding, describing themes, and interpreting findings (Creswell, 2013). To enhance the credibility of the study, each participant confirmed data accuracy to prevent information loss.

8. Findings

The study revealed that the Grade R teachers in this study encountered a multitude of challenges while learning to teach. These challenges ranged from dealing with diverse learners' needs to navigating complex classroom dynamics. Despite these challenges, the study also found that the mentoring provided by mentors played a crucial role in helping these mentees navigate these difficulties. The research reveals four key findings: challenges in curriculum delivery, classroom management, limited parental involvement and collaboration, dialogue and collegiality.

The following findings focus on the challenges experienced by mentee teachers.

8.1 Delivery of the curriculum

The findings, which focused on the experiences of six beginner foundation phase Grade R teachers from three different Western Cape primary schools, demonstrated how challenging it has been to apply the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in the classroom.

The following excerpts highlight this.

I struggle to prioritise tasks while teaching and integrating the CAPS document and annual teaching plans. (Interview SA-TA1)

We need support and orientation so that we can deliver the curriculum effectively. I am practical, so I require instructions. I'm struggling ... (Reflective Journal: SC-TC1)

Both mentee teachers, TA1 and TC1, clearly stated that they were encountering significant challenges in delivering the curriculum and require support. Woest (2018) states that the frequent changes in the South African school curriculum have created a void in tertiary education. Thus, student teachers must receive training to handle South African schools'

varied curricula and requirements effectively. Understandably, beginner teachers may need support as they acclimatise to their new surroundings and navigate their roles. They can develop the skills and confidence necessary to excel in their profession with guidance and assistance.

For this reason, HODs should mentor and guide mentees adjusting to their new environment and on issues related to the curriculum (Van der Nest, 2012: 5). Moreover, Guskey (1986: 383) suggests that professional development programmes can enhance classroom efforts, especially for Grade R teachers struggling with implementing the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). In essence, ongoing professional development encourages change in teachers to advance their careers. Guskey's (1986) concept of the teacher-change process is predicated on the notion that change is a progressive learning process for teachers.

According to the literature, beginner teachers enter the teaching profession with high standards for the school, the educational system, and themselves (Meanwell and Kleiner, 2013:19). However, these beginner teachers must cultivate realistic expectations to prevent disillusionment and maintain motivation (Woest, 2018). In other words, a teacher's first year in the profession should be a time for support and guidance to help them progress toward proficiency (Vygotsky, 1978; Casperen and Raaen, 2014). Additionally, guided, task-based interaction with HODs can help mentees develop cognitive abilities and skills while allowing independent work. Vygotsky's theory (1978: 62) suggests that mentees can benefit from challenging tasks completed with mentor guidance. The objective is to enable beginner teachers to work independently to the best of their abilities. At the same time, HODs can assist when necessary to ensure the successful completion of tasks and lesson plans. As Vygotsky (1978:62) emphasised, learners benefit from engaging in challenging tasks that they can complete successfully with appropriate guidance.

Another challenge that mentees experienced was classroom management.

8.2 Challenges with classroom management

In this study, it was important to understand how beginner teachers managed their everyday experiences in the classroom, since classroom management is a crucial component of practical teaching knowledge (Wolff *et al.*, 2016). As can be seen from the mentees' responses below, classroom management is a challenging task, which Van Tartwijk, Veldman and Verloop (2011) indicate is commonly acknowledged as an everyday challenge for beginner teachers:

I'm overwhelmed by administrative tasks like managing learners, creating lesson plans, and meeting deadlines. It's challenging to prioritise and manage my time, leaving me demotivated and frustrated. (Interview SA-TA1)

I struggled with multiculturalism in my classroom. I wasn't prepared for such a diverse group of learners, but I'm learning to manage myself and my learners by getting to know them better. (Reflective Journal SC-TC2)

The above quotes confirm that mentees struggled with classroom management due to feeling underprepared, overworked and unmotivated. TA1 expressed feeling overwhelmed, while TC2 stated being unprepared for class. Esau and Maarman (2019) found that initial teacher education programmes often prioritise theoretical knowledge over practical classroom experience, making beginner teachers feel unprepared. Consequently, their perceived unpreparedness may contribute to workload imbalance and emotional fatigue. This may make it

difficult for inexperienced teachers to effectively manage their time, ultimately affecting their classroom ability. A study by Sasidher *et al.* (2012) found that time management problems were linked to challenges in classroom management. As a result, beginner teachers could benefit from mentoring by their HODs to develop strong time management skills. Upon further probing, mentees were asked if inexperience contributed to time management challenges. The following response was given.

I need support and assistance, but my HOD is always busy with meetings and other things ... Uhm ... I need direction on how to manage everything. (Interview: SB-TB2)

The results indicate a requirement for additional support, as mentioned by the above mentee, TB2. Unfortunately, it seems that the necessary support is not being provided, which leads to feelings of discomfort and anxiety. According to Van Tartwijk *et al.* (2011), identifying the difficulties faced in managing a classroom is the initial step towards addressing them. However, it will be beneficial that HODs give mentees the induction and orientation training they require to prepare them for the classroom (Le Maistre and Paré, 2010). HODs must support mentees regarding academic policies, the design of the learning environment, lesson plans and other administrative issues. Moreover, HODs must plan orientation programmes for mentees from the onset so that they can develop problem-solving strategies for handling the constant flow of initial challenges involved in contextual school and teaching situations (Le Maistre and Paré, 2010).

8.3 Limited parental involvement

A significant challenge that the mentees of this study mentioned was the limited parental involvement of parents in their children's education, which led to a breakdown in the parent-teacher relationship. The mentees reported that parents were hardly involved,

There is not enough communication between my learners' parents and me. Some show very little interest. I keep them informed via our booklet. I ... uhm ... do need parents to assist learners at home to read, write and support them. (Interview: SA-TA2)

The sad reality is that it seems as if these parents do not have enough time to spend with their children regarding schoolwork. It might be that they are working too much. (Reflective Journal: SC-TC2)

They tell their children they must work and do not have time. As a result, the teacher is responsible for the child's well-being in school, which places an extra burden on us. (Reflective Journal: SA-TA1)

From the above excerpts, all the teachers TA2, TC2 and TA1 indicated an apparent lack of commitment and collaboration among staff and parents (legal guardians). According to the mentees' observations, the parents did not cooperate. Despite the mentees' persistent efforts to involve parents in their children's education, they noted that parents could not participate for various reasons. This lack of parental involvement might potentially hinder the learners' academic progress. Mansfield-Barry and Stwayi (2017: 78) claim that parent-school partnerships require teachers to collaborate to protect each learner's right to education. Tabaeian (2016: 2) agrees with them, stating that parents are crucial in their children's education.

The sad reality expressed in the above excerpt is that some parents might not have enough time to spend with their children and their schoolwork because their socioeconomic conditions might not allow them to do so (Msila, 2012). Some of them need to work long hours to support

their children and might not have the time to assist them with reading or writing. This might be a case where parents do not have control, but on the other hand, it places an unfair burden on the mentees to take on responsibilities belonging to the parents.

HODs are instrumental in fostering collaboration among schools, parents and teachers to ensure collaboration and learner achievement. Msila (2012) contends that because parental involvement is likely advantageous to the school, HODs must form partnerships to promote greater family involvement. Moreover, to increase the likelihood of mentees benefiting from better teaching and learning, HODs should lead initiatives to encourage parental involvement (Epstein, 2018). Building connections with parents will automatically foster stronger bonds between parents and the school. For instance, HODs can host events like extensive walks or games evenings and involve the community, emphasising interaction with family and community members (Tekin, 2011; Msila, 2012).

8.4 Collaboration, dialogue and collegiality

In this study, gaining a deeper understanding of the collaboration, dialogue and collegiality between mentors and mentees was important, as it can offer valuable insights for improving and strengthening their relationships. HODs collaborating and engaging in dialogue with mentees is crucial for their professional growth (Ingersoll and Strong, 2011). The mentees of School A and B noted,

I like it when the HOD schedules time to collaborate, but it's not often enough. (Interview SA-TA1)

I lacked confidence when teaching, but my HOD helped me gain it by gradually increasing my responsibilities ... (Interview SA-TA2)

My HOD allowed me to work with other teachers during a helpful team-teaching session, but she did not avail herself to provide guidance. (Interview: SB-TB2)

The excerpts mentioned above demonstrate that the process of mentoring mentees concerning collaboration and dialogue can vary. TA1 noted that she did not spend enough time with her HOD, which might hinder her development, while TA2 verified that her HOD had helped her build self-assurance. Teacher TB2 discovered that the HOD was less engaged. This highlights that successful teacher collaboration is not automatic, but requires effort from all parties involved (Vangrieken *et al.*, 2015:29). This study emphasises the importance of working on the relationship between the individual role-players to achieve successful teacher collaboration.

However, to achieve a successful outcome, it is essential to collaborate and co-construct through meaningful social interactions where dialogue plays a primary role (Vygotsky, 1978; Freire and Shor, 1987). HODs should foster collaboration, open-mindedness, knowledge and constructive feedback with mentees to create an engaging and dialogic environment (Salleh and Tan, 2013: 152). The partnership will enable mentee teachers and HODs to share teaching ideas, improve professional standards, and enhance teaching quality.

9. Conclusions

This study explored the learning experiences of beginner foundation phase Grade R teachers. The findings indicate that the mentees of this study may lack the skills to apply what they have learned in their teacher preparation programmes and may require mentorship to further develop as educators. The mentees reported challenges in delivering the curriculum, citing the CAPS as being too rigid and not allowing enough room for creativity. The findings revealed that mentees encountered challenges regarding limited parental involvement in their children's schooling and anticipated more collaboration from parents. Regarding collaboration and dialogue, the fourth finding has produced contradictory results from the mentees.

It is possible that the mentees who participated in this study may not have had the necessary skills to apply what they learned during their training. Therefore, they may require guidance and mentoring to improve their teaching abilities. It can also be inferred from the findings that the teaching profession is demanding for the mentees, especially the transition from theory to practice. This is in response to the claims made by Gravett, Henning and Eiselen (2011) that universities cannot produce "fully prepared" teachers, as was found in this study.

Furthermore, according to the findings of this study, beginner teachers require regular feedback and monitoring, which is an essential element in mentoring and guiding teachers. Bandura (1997) claims that effective feedback that vehemently challenges one's ingrained disbelief in one's abilities is something that can lead to an improvement in self-efficacy. This assistance should provide beginner teachers with effective learning and classroom transformation opportunities. According to Mathur, Jugdev and Fung (2013), mentoring programmes benefit both the mentor and the mentee, because both can benefit from the mentoring process. Thus, it is essential to support and guide beginner teachers to help them develop their teaching skills effectively. Furthermore, additional research is required, which could contribute to developing mandatory mentorship programmes.

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