A small scale preliminary investigation of HCT student teachers’ perceptions of their mentors

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Introduction

The impetus for this study that led to this chapter came from a desire to improve my own mentoring during the teaching practice component of the B.Ed English Language Teaching in Schools program at the Higher Colleges of Technology’s (HCT) Abu Dhabi Women’s College (ADWC). After working on the program for almost eight years, I realized that more could be done to look at the mentoring process and how the student teachers perceived their mentors. As the teaching practice coordinator for ADWC, and therefore being responsible for placing students in schools and with mentors, I was aware that there were issues that were not always brought out into the open for discussion. Therefore my focus was to first find out how student teachers perceived their mentors prior to investigating further how to help give the students a more meaningful support during the practicum.

The most common issue noted to date, from the perspective of faculty and student teachers, is that there are differences in teaching strategies, where a more traditional teacher-centered approach is followed by some of the English teachers who are mentors in co-operating schools. A study by Cohen (1993) found that “few mentor teachers practice the kind of conceptually oriented, learner-centered teaching” (cited in Feiman-Nemser 1996, p.3). There have also been concerns raised about what the student teachers observe about the mentor’s teaching. This leads to speculation on whether or not the student teacher will pick up habits or mimic what they observe in class from the mentor or implement what they have been taught in college. A question that has been asked is; ‘if they observe poor practice, will they themselves become poor practitioners?’

Mentoring and Assessment

The teaching practice component is assessed formatively and holistically using teaching competencies which are observable: Professionalism and Understanding; Planning for Learning; Implementing and Managing Learning; Monitoring and Assessment; and Reflection. These were compiled through focus groups following a system-wide review where it was realized that the existing competencies were not appropriate, as it was difficult to properly evaluate the student teachers’ teaching abilities. The change was welcome, as Sundli highlights, “solid criteria are required since a grade of ‘non-acceptable’ might ‘nip in the bud’ a student teachers career” (2007, p.203).

It is very common to hear the Mentor School Teachers (MST) say that they are learning strategies from our student teachers during the placement and enjoy having them in their classrooms. It has been noted that it is a way of developing their own professional knowledge and teaching skills; as until recently there have been few opportunities for professional development. This is a welcome note for helping student teachers to fit in with the school and environment and underlines the importance of the students “learning to manage their mentors, who at times might feel vulnerable and in need of reassurance” (Maynard in Sundli, 2007, p.204).

There have also been situations where the principal of the cooperating school has chosen a mentor based on the fact that she is considered a ‘good’ English teacher. This teacher may not want to take on the role, but she is not in a position to refuse. As a result, a good working relationship fails to develop and subsequently the student teacher receives little input or support from the school mentor. This highlights the point that being a good teacher does not automatically mean you will be a good mentor (Feiman-Nemser 2001, Franke & Dahlgren 1996). This also causes concern for the student teacher in that it will have an impact on her grade.

Much current research looks at the relationships and mentoring practices between the co-operating school mentor and the student teacher (Sundli, 2007; Franke & Dahlgren 1996; Raujuan et al, 2007). Although there are obvious differences in teacher education programs,
depending on the context, the person usually having the most contact, and perhaps the most responsibility for the enhancement of professional knowledge of the student teacher whilst on practice, is the cooperating school mentor who invariably spends the most contact hours with the trainee (Franke & Dahlgren 1996, Crasborn et al, 2000). Regardless of whether the teacher education course follows the situated learning approach (Lave and Wenger, 1991) whereby the student teacher spends the majority of time in the co-operating school and returns to the institution for input sessions, or whether a more traditional approach is followed where the student teacher spends more time at the teacher education institution, (Sundli, 2007), few would dispute the fact that the school placement is where the student teacher develops her professional knowledge of practice.

It is a widely held belief in teacher education, that the mentor is the one who has the most and perhaps the biggest impact on student teachers prior to beginning their teaching career (Franke & Dahlgren, 1996; Parker-Katz & Bay, 2007; Raujuan et al, 2007; Sundli, 2007). Student teachers often deem the practicum as the highlight of their program as this is where they believe they learn the most (Elliot & Calderhead, 1996; Franke & Dahlgren, 1996; Raujuan et al, 2007). The fact that the teaching practice component is so essential to the development of professional competence of the student teachers inevitably increases the level of responsibility placed on the mentors. Therefore, to ensure student teachers improve their pedagogical knowledge during the practicum as well as be provided with the skills and strategies to become competent professionals, skilled mentors are required (Franke & Dahlgren 1996; Sundli, 2007).

Conceptions of Mentoring

Perceptions of mentoring are different depending on where and who you are mentoring and what your own beliefs about teaching and learning are (Sundli, 2007; Franke & Dahlgren, 1996). Zanting, Verloop and Vermunt (1998) state that “it seems impossible to formulate a standard definition of mentoring, as mentor teachers interpret their own roles individually and therefore the nature of mentoring is idiosyncratic” (p. 13). This concurs with Franke and Dahlgren’s (1996) study describing the conceptions of mentoring as being what is experienced by both mentors and student teachers during teaching practice and how that is conceived and understood, determined and carried out. Bradbury and Koballa’s study states that the “conception of mentoring refers to the set of beliefs about what mentoring is and what it should look like in practice that both mentors and interns bring to their relationship” (2008, p.2133). However, Elliot and Calderhead’s (1995) study concluded that there is:

…inconsistency in how mentors perceive their roles in what is a very complex topic. Being able to reach a consensus of what constitutes ‘good’ mentoring is problematic as each person brings with them their own beliefs and orientation to teaching (p.49).

Conceptions of the of the mentors’ roles, with regard to their purpose, are those of being communicative and cooperative, supportive and a good role model (Franke & Dahlgren, 1996). Koballa (in Bradbury & Koballa, 2008) states that the most common conception of mentoring is one of apprentice, where the mentor acts as the guide and shares practical knowledge, recommends action and is both encouraging and supportive. Furlong and Maynard (1995) believe that at the beginning of a student teacher’s training “mentors need to act as collaborative teachers” (p.22). This seems to fit with the apprenticeship model of learning where mentors model the behavior they want the trainee to develop. This is seen as an effective model, but one which perhaps hinders the ability for reflection (Sundli, 2007). Franke and Dahlgren see the master/apprenticeship model as useful but warn that “lack of analytical awareness of the fundamental perspective may be one of the major obstacles for future professional development” (p.638).

The different conceptions which describe the content of mentoring according to Franke and Dahlgren’s study is the ‘what that happens during the mentoring process. This considers the
planning and preparation; what has been implemented with learners and why it was done; the student teacher’s own reflection on the lesson and the mentor’s response to the teaching (1996). This conception of the content of mentoring is where Bradbury and Koballa believe areas of tension can arise as they both build and negotiate the role (2008).

The content of mentoring is the domain in which the teaching beliefs of the mentors play a crucial role. Elliot and Calderhead highlight the fact that “in order to facilitate growth, mentors need to have well formulated ideas about how teachers develop professionally” and that “they require not only skills for counseling but also a language of practice which incorporates the complexities of training and teaching” (1995 p.42). It is important that the approach adopted by the mentor meets the needs of the student teacher, (Williams et al, 1998, in Crasborn et al, 2008) which in turn “places great demand on the professionalism of mentor teachers in encouraging student teachers to learn from their practical experiences in the school setting” (p.499).

Adey (1997) claims it is crucial that a good relationship with mentors is established at the beginning of any practicum in order for the student teacher to accept mentors as ‘critical friends’ and that if that friendship fails to materialize then the student teacher is less likely to respond to constructive criticism. A consequence of this would be that, if the student teacher does not respond to criticism, there could be a negative impact on their ability to reflect upon their practice and this in the long term would hinder their own professional development. Reflection on why the student teachers teach the way they do is an important aspect in developing their understanding of the profession. According to Crasborn et al, “In practice, mentor teachers’ supervisory styles are manifested in large part in the intentions, the approach and the contents of their dialogues with student teachers” (2008, p.499). It is clear that good communication is a key factor when mentoring student teachers and how this is carried out is crucial. On the other hand Bullough and Baughman highlight that both aspects are important and state that not only do student teachers need ‘competent mentors’ but they also “expect to be greeted by a whole person, a caring person, one who knows who and what he is” (1997, p.24). However, it is noted that despite how well the mentor may believe things are going, sources of tension could still be there (Bradbury & Koballa, 2008). The student teacher may be wary of creating situations which may affect their evaluation and grade, so therefore deliberately suppress thoughts and feelings or behave in a way it is thought the mentor wants. It is yet another responsibility of the mentor to be aware of such things facing the student teacher.

Maynard’s study on what constitutes good mentoring revealed that the close relationship that “exists between the personal and the professional” is significant in contributing towards the student teachers’ success (2000, p.29). Therefore the role of the mentor is not just one of friend and advisor but the role of the mentor is “multi-faceted and has no simple prescription or recipe for success” (Crasborn et al, 2008, p.425). There may be no simple successful way to mentor student teachers, but it is well documented in the literature that mentoring is not just about developing close relationships and offering support and guidance, but also about how the professional knowledge of teachers is transferred to the student teacher (Elliot & Calderhead, 1995; Franke & Dahlgren, 1996; Bradbury & Koballa, 2008).

The terms mentor and mentoring in this study are in line with Tomlinson who states, “mentoring [involves] assisting student teachers to learn how to teach in school-based settings and thus a mentor is anyone involved more or less directly with the student for that purpose” (1995, p.57). Each semester on the B.Ed program, the Student teachers undertake a practicum that increases in length and differs in focus throughout the four year program. It begins with one day a week (over 10 weeks) in schools where the students complete observation tasks, with an emphasis on active engagement with the classroom teacher and begin teaching in the second semester of year one. This is in line with Norman and Feiman-Nemser who state that “things new teachers need to know can only be learned once they actually begin teaching” (2005, p.679). When student teachers are not teaching the required lessons, they are encouraged to act as assistants to the teacher. The teaching practice component culminates in a 10 week internship where the
student teacher takes 60% of the MST’s classes. Therefore, in all, 16% of the 4 year program is spent in schools. In Abu Dhabi, three of the thirty-five weeks are devoted to observing and assisting teachers, as well as teaching small groups in private English medium schools.

When student teachers are placed in schools they have two mentors: the college mentor (MCT) and the school mentor (MST). Although these roles are simultaneous and each mentor is expected to give support, act as a knowledgeable expert as well as that of assessor, in the context of Abu Dhabi, it is often the MCT who gives the most input, with regard to planning during teaching practice. As a college mentor, I have felt that I have more influence over what the student teacher plans to teach and what activities are going to be used than the MST. This is in contrast to what Franke and Dahlgren consider the most “dominating form” of a practicum, where the mentor in the school has the most influence (1996, p. 627).

Guidelines are available to both mentors on approaches to mentoring; however the guidelines for college mentors are more detailed and available for use system wide. Each mentor could be in charge of up to 14 student teachers each semester. This places limitations on the amount of time available to the student teachers. All 4 year levels are on practice at approximately the same time and the rationale for this was purely practical. In other countries mentors undertake specific training for the task and it is regarded as a very important complex role (Sundli, 2007).

However, in my context, the responsibility generally lies with the college faculty assigned to the student teacher to inform the MST, on a case by case basis, of their roles and responsibilities. These tend to be on an as needs basis, as time is limited. We are well aware that the process followed is by no means adequate and can at times lead to tension and lack of support for the student teacher.

Crasborn et al, in their study of how to promote versatility in mentoring practices highlighted the fact that good mentoring “often requires special training in less familiar supervisory skills” (2008, p.500). Bullough maintains that giving people the role of mentor and only having occasional meetings to discuss issues which arise will not improve student teachers’ practicum experiences (2005). Current research based on mentoring has highlighted that often, mentoring episodes tend to focus on the form of teaching rather than encouraging the student teacher to engage in reflection (Franke & Dahlgren, 1996; Sundli, 2007). Therefore in order to improve our mentoring practices, specific training needs to be made available to mentors from both college and cooperating schools.

**Method**

A qualitative approach was deemed the most appropriate in order to interpret the student teachers responses to the inquiry. An online survey was designed using SelectSurveyASP Advanced by ClassAPPS and sent to respondents by email and follow up semi structured interviews were used to generate data.

The survey was sent to students at the end of the first semester 2008/2009, approximately 4 weeks after the completion of the practicum. The survey was anonymous and the closed questions only asked for their year level and whether or not they would like to choose their own mentor. All other questions were open ended and required written, qualitative responses. The follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted two weeks later during class time after an initial study of the data. The aim was not to generalize in any way but to explore the variety of responses which gave their true opinions on how they perceive their mentors.

The survey sample was purposive, which means that “the researcher samples on the basis of wanting to interview people who are relevant to the research questions” Bryman (2008, p. 458). Therefore the survey was sent out to student teachers from Years 2, 3 and 4 who had all experienced mentoring by both college and school mentors. The survey took the form of
a structured interview where each respondent had the same questions and was sent to all 35 student teachers who made up the three cohorts involved. It was sent to each person by email and completed anonymously; the only identifying feature was the year level.

The group interviews were conducted in order to allow the students to interact with each other while the interviewer asked follow up questions based on the responses in the survey. Denscombe states, “the group interview is not an opportunity for the researcher to pose questions to a sequence of individuals taking turns” it is expected that the interviewees will interact with each other (2003, p.168). A negative aspect of this may be that the quieter participants may not get the chance to voice their opinions and that the opinions actually “expressed are the ones that are perceived to be ‘acceptable’ within the group” (p.168).

Analysis

The survey asked direct questions on what participants felt the roles and responsibilities of their mentors were and from these responses further exploration through the group interviews revealed the following experiences.

The number of student teachers who responded was 26. The break-down of the group interviews were 8, 11 and 6 respectively (see Figure 1).

| Year 2 | N = 9 |
| Year 3 | N = 7 |
| Year 4 | N = 9 |

**Figure 1: Break down of respondents by year level**

In order to find out whether there were any factors which may contribute to how they perceived the mentors’ roles participants were asked whether or not they looked forward to the teaching practice component. The majority of the student teachers were very positive about their placement stating that they looked forward to it and that it was the most important part of their development – they highlighted that it gave them a chance to implement what they had learnt in college. Two Year 4 students responded by saying that they did not look forward to the practicum because they felt they had too much work to do between the course work for college and the duties they are given in school. This appears to have a negative impact on their relationships:

> There is so much pressure on us from everywhere which negatively influences our relationships with teachers in the school and with our families (Year 4 student).

This could be due to the fact that in the fourth year the student teachers also carry out an action research project over the whole year as well as compiling an e-portfolio which showcases their best practice and teaching philosophy. Whereas the other Year 4 student teacher stated that the workload is manageable only if her mentor school teacher is considered good:

> …but during TP I enjoy it especially if I have a good MST, while if I had a bad MST I try hard to enjoy it without thinking of the bad things that I will face with that MST (Year 4 student).

Based on analysis of the responses and interview, an MST who is not considered good would be described as one who does not offer support or help the student teacher integrate into the school community. Integrating into the school community and being considered equal was extremely important to all student teachers.
Student teachers were asked whether or not they would like to choose who mentored them on TP and 68% responded positively. When asked why they would like to choose, the responses focused on MCTs and the relationships which have developed over time and with whom the student teachers felt most comfortable.

There are MCTs who you feel comfortable to talk to and others who you don’t feel comfortable to talk to and also as human beings there are some conflicts that could appear because the student doesn’t find explaining things to her MCT easy. That is why choosing the MCT might be a solution to reduce conflicts and make the student feel that they are not under pressure (Year 2 student).

Comments were also made relating to the difficulty of choosing an MST as they are quite often moved to different schools, or teaching different grades from term to term so it was hard to keep track. However in terms of the MST, comments focused on having the same teaching strategies as your mentor, there is more understanding and a closer relationship develops because you ‘feel free’. Those who responded negatively felt that it was important to them to get different opinions on their ability:

… because I prefer that all my teachers to have a look to my teaching so I can have different feedbacks which will help me to improve as well, as I can get fair grade (Year 4 student).

Responsibility for development

A role that student teachers perceive is that of their mentor’s responsibility for their development. Twenty-two of those of who responded believe that either one or both of their mentors is responsible for their development.

Student teachers commented that it is the honest, constructive feedback which is the key to their improvement. This would concur with Adey, who says a good relationship is important in order to garner trust and enable the students to accept constructive criticism (1997). A Year 2 student commented that being told about “the negative things I do so I will avoid doing it again” is important. One year three student stated that, “not all of the MSTs can help me to develop because they have old and antique strategies and they expect us to use it” (sic). This leads back to what Williams et al (1998) state that it is important for there to be a match in the approach used in teaching (in Crasborn et al, 2008).

Role of the MCT/MST

The majority of the student teachers placed the MCT as the most important in the triad model. The MCT was considered both teacher/guide and friend. One student considered her MCT as more than this:

For me she is everything, as a mentor she makes sure she keeps her eye on us. As a teacher she guides and scaffolds us through giving critical feedback. She is not only a friend who I really refer to when I need, she is more than a mother to me; a mother who takes care, helps, support and even protects when needed. My MCT is number one on my list to call in TP (Year 3 student).

One student teacher saw one of the roles of the MCT as one of trouble shooter and felt that it was up to her to ensure the MST did not take advantage of them. She felt it was important that it was made explicit that they were there to learn and gain experience. This was echoed during the interviews, that perhaps the MSTs do not fully understand how important the practicum is to student teachers and therefore do not appear to take their role seriously.

The MCT’s role was described as that of teacher and guide, whereas the MST was viewed as
that of facilitator in the classroom and school. Student teachers commented on the need to be accepted into the school environment and be treated as equals. There was discussion of being ‘allowed’ into the staff room and being given enough room to work. There was no mention of a close, personal relationship being important to the student teachers when working with the MST as compared with the MCT. Checking lesson plans and having pre-observation discussions were seen as a responsibility of both mentors as was engaging in immediate feedback and post-lesson discussion. Student teachers believe that both mentors should give them lots of ideas and suggestions for activities to use in class.

Due to the emphasis placed on close relationships, which seemed important to student teachers, they were asked whether or not they thought the MCT should also be the assessor. The majority of students, 78%, said they thought that it was the grade from the MCT which truly identified their teaching competence. Those who disagreed maintained that the MCT does not get the opportunity to see enough implementation of lessons, a comment by several students being that ‘they only come once a week’. They believe that it is the MST who sees their performance more often and who would be better able to give a true reflection on their ability. However this is in contrast to faculty who at times think the MST grades are higher than they should be. Student teachers’ beliefs about assessing their ability is in opposition to Handal and Lauvas who believe that teaching performance should not be evaluated but more emphasis should be placed on reflective abilities (Sundli, 2007).

Reflections

This small study has given me insight into what the student teachers think the roles of their mentors are. As mentioned previously, this is the beginning of what I hope to study further into how we can improve our mentoring practices to reduce tension, enhance student teachers’ professional knowledge and ensure that the student teachers get the best possible preparation for teaching. The study conducted by Rajuan et al, (2007) highlighting the importance of dialogue, monitoring of initial mentoring in order to observe and provide feedback to enhance relationships, is one which I believe would benefit mentors. A surprising point was that only two student teachers saw themselves as responsible for their own development. Perhaps not enough emphasis is placed on reflection after teaching practice due to the assignments to be covered for TP and other program components. If further time was given it would enable the student teachers to look in depth at their own progress and take ownership of their development.

References


