

## **Mentoring novice teachers: challenges and possible solutions**

**Jean Damascene Uwamahoro**

Rwanda Polytechnic, IPRC Ngoma, Rwanda

[uwajed@gmail.com](mailto:uwajed@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

This article discusses the role of mentoring for novice teachers. It also highlights the challenges encountered in the role of a mentor and possible solutions to these challenges. The article is based on a review of existing literature on mentoring as well as a reflection on the author's experiences as a mentee and as a mentor. The literature indicates that mentoring, if used adequately, can play a significant role in the professional growth of newly recruited teachers. However, there are several issues associated with mentoring role such as, judge mentoring, power relationships, unskilled mentors, mentees' resistance among other issues. Studies have suggested some solutions to these challenges. These include ONSIDE mentoring, adequate selection of mentors, training mentors and encouraging novice teachers to embrace mentoring practice.

**Keywords:** mentoring, novice teachers, judge mentoring, mentee, mentor

## **1. Introduction**

As Baguley (2019) points out, beginning to teach is not an easy task. In other words, beginning teachers often face a great deal of challenges. Some of the most perceived challenges include problems associated with classroom management, motivating learners, and dealing with their individual differences, shortage of teaching materials, assessment of students' works, teacher-parent relationships, among others (Veenman, 1984). The same concerns were expressed by novice teachers in a study by McCann, & Johannessen (2004). They added problems related to their relationships with workmates and supervisors, workloads, and their autonomy. All these challenges call for the need to strengthen school-based mentoring to help newly recruited teachers to familiarise themselves with the teaching career and develop professionally. Otherwise, as highlighted by Nahal (2010), new teachers may feel abandoned and confused about their role as teachers.

The knowledge base of mentoring in education has increased to a notably large extent in the last few decades (Fletcher, & Mullen 2012). Since the 1980s, mentoring in schools has greatly contributed to the support of induction, preparation, and development of teachers worldwide (Hobson et al., 2009). Research suggests that mentoring may be the most effective way that can be used to support professional development of novice teachers (Hobson, 2012). However, mentoring is not always successful. Some studies have shown that the work of mentors can sometimes be detrimental to beginning teachers' professional growth (ibid.). This article discusses mentoring for beginning teachers. Based on the review of existing literature and the author's experiences, the article describes the aspects of mentoring and the role of a mentor, the challenges encountered in the role of a mentor as well as potential strategies to address these challenges.

## **2. Definition of mentoring**

As Anderson, & Shannon (1988) highlight, various scholars have offered several definitions of mentoring, many of which, were criticised as being vague and ambiguous because they were too general in a sense that they were not useful for teachers who also work as mentors. For example, those definitions did not give a clear guidance of what mentors are expected to do and how to do it. Anderson, & Shannon go on to say what they think is a helpful definition of mentoring as follows:

A nurturing process in which a more skilled or more experienced person, serving as a role model, teaches, sponsors, encourages, counsels, and befriends a less skilled or

less experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter's professional and/or personal development. Mentoring functions are carried out within the context of an ongoing, caring relationship between the mentor and protégé. (p.40)

Hobson (2012) also gives the definition of mentoring which is arguably more relevant to teacher education and development. He defines mentoring as:

The one-to-one support of a novice teacher or less experienced practitioner (the mentee) by a more experienced practitioner (the mentor), designed primarily to assist the development of the mentee's expertise and to facilitate their induction into the culture of the profession (in this case teaching) and the specific local context (here, the school or college). (p.60)

These two definitions show that the relationship between a mentor and a mentee is that of support provided to the mentee. Therefore, for this relationship to yield desired results, both mentors and mentees should be well-prepared for mentoring practice.

### **3. Aspects of mentoring**

In the view of Mullen (2012), mentoring can mainly contribute to mentees' psychosocial and career development. Similarly, Gakonga (2019) points out three aspects of ideal mentoring. That is, mentoring that provides mentees with emotional support, technical support, and support with reflection. By providing emotional support, the mentor plays an affective role, and acts as a friend to the mentee to help him/her get familiar with new environment and feel welcome in the school community. Through technical support, the mentor offers classroom practice models, gives suggestions and teaching tips to the mentee. In this case, both the mentee and the mentor can observe each other's lessons and discuss teaching techniques together. From this discussion, the beginning teacher can learn from the more experienced practitioner. For support with reflection, the mentor creates an enabling environment to encourage reflective practice in the mind of the mentee. This is made possible by promoting a dialogic approach to giving feedback in which the mentee finds space to talk and reflect on his/her practices as a teacher.

### **4. The role of a mentor**

Malderez, & Bodoczky (1999, as cited in Hobson, 2012) describe a mentor as an educator who attempts to create pertinent opportunities for the mentee's professional growth. As they mention,

Other roles that mentors may adopt include those of *model* (to inspire and to demonstrate), *acculturator* (to help induct the mentee into the professional culture), *sponsor* (to ‘open doors’), and *provider of psychological support* (to provide the mentee with a safe space to release emotions or ‘let off steam’). (p.60)

There is evidence that mentoring, if well-employed, can be beneficial to mentees, mentors, and education systems (Hobson et al. 2009). The benefits of mentoring include, among others, mentees’ enhanced confidence, self-esteem, professional development, improved problem-solving skills, and enhanced self-reflection. However, it is also very important to note that the practice of mentoring can be detrimental if it is not effectively used. The following section discusses some challenges associated with mentoring.

## **5. Challenges encountered in the role of a mentor**

There are several issues that are present in the practice of mentoring. Those include, among others, judgemental and evaluative mentoring, power relationships, mentor-led feedback, unskilled mentors, mentees’ resistance to mentoring, and time constraints.

### *Judgemental and evaluative mentoring*

One of the major problems that prevents mentoring practice from achieving its full potential is judgemental mentoring. This is what Hobson, & Malderez (2013) referred to as judgement mentoring, and they defined it as follows:

A one-to-one relationship between a relatively inexperienced teacher (the mentee) and a relatively experienced one (the mentor) in which the latter, in revealing too readily and/or too often her/his own judgements on or evaluations of the mentee’s planning and teaching (e.g. through “comments”, “feedback”, advice, praise, or criticism), compromises the mentoring relationship and its potential benefits. (p. 90)

In most cases, mentors spend their time making their judgements on mentees’ work and performance. What is worrying is that they mainly focus on negative judgements as shown in the following extract from (Hobson, & Malderez, 2013, p. 96)

My mentor would go “this went very well but”, and he seemed to focus dreadfully on the things that hadn’t gone so well. It was an oppressive atmosphere in the school. From my mentor I got nothing but criticism and pressure from day one. She was criticising everything I did.

The above extract shows that the mentee was not comfortable with the everyday criticism from the mentor. This means that their relationship is already affected by the mentor's negative judgements.

Looking at this example which was taken from a study carried out in England, and reflecting on my own experience, I could say that judgementoring is affecting many contexts. I remember my colleagues, who, in their everyday casual conversations, complain about the negative judgements they always receive from their mentors. For example, they always wonder why their mentors always seem to come to their classes only to observe what goes wrong. Instead of helping to improve, too many negative judgements can worsen one's performance and affect his/her well-being.

Judgementoring interferes with the emotional support, which mentees expect from mentors. It also impedes greatly the beginning teachers' professional development in several ways. Firstly, mentees are discouraged to seek help from their mentors for the fear of negative criticism. Secondly, beginning teachers withhold their openness towards their mentors. Additionally, mentees start to avoid any interactions with their mentors because they do not want to reveal their weaknesses (Hobson, 2016).

#### *Power relationships*

This is another issue that hampers the support mentees are supposed to get from mentors. In many cases, mentors find themselves in conflicting roles (Hobson, & Malderez, 2013), that is for example, working both as mentors and as assessors of the mentees' teaching. This puts them in the position of authority, which becomes an obstacle for them to give unconditional support (Gakonga, 2019). This means that mentees cannot freely express their concerns to their mentors as in this mentor's statement from Hobson, & Malderez (2013, p. 96)

You never want to mention any potential failings that you might have to your school-based mentor because you don't know what's going to go down in writing.

This extract indicates how the mentee feels uncomfortable to talk about his/her failings to the mentor, perhaps for the fear of being evaluated as a poor performer.

#### *Mentor-led feedback*

As highlighted by Gakonga (2019) mentees need space for them to reinforce their reflective practice and enhance their practices as teachers. However, studies have shown that

mentors often monopolise the talk when they are giving feedback to their mentees. This does not create an enabling environment for beginning teachers to reflect on what they do as they often expect their mentors to advise on everything they can do. This may make them less committed to their professional development and discourage them to take ownership of mentoring outcomes. As Hobson, & Malderez (2013) point out, relying solely on this directive approach does not promote the mentee's autonomous growth which is one of the main purposes of mentoring.

### *Unskilled mentors*

Even though school-based mentoring has proved to have a significant role in fostering novice teachers' professional growth, many experienced teachers are often assigned this role without being trained or prepared for it (Nguyen, 2008; Mann, & Tang, 2018). As Gakonga (2019) points out, being an experienced or expert teacher does not necessarily guarantee to be a good mentor. An expert teacher may know what works for his/her classroom, but it may be difficult for him/her to transfer this knowledge to a mentee.

In their studies, Hobson, & Malderez (2013) and Orsdemir, & Yildirim (2020) also focus on inadequate selection of mentors as one of the major impediments to successful mentoring. For example, some mentors indicated that they were doing this role not because they like it, but only because they were told by their managers to do it. All these result in failure to provide the desired support to mentees as shown in the following mentee's statement from Fantilli (2009, p. 87).

The mentor I had was not effective...she did not have sound teaching practice, didn't have good systems in place. Was terribly disorganised... what I would do was seek out other people for assistance. Overall, I like the idea of having a mentor, but the mentor I had was not a good person to be a mentor.

This extract reveals that some mentees do not get the support they expect from their mentors because some mentors are assigned this role without being prepared for it. Others may not be familiar with mentoring practice or do not understand what mentoring is for (Hobson, & Malderez, 2013).

### *Mentees' resistance*

Another challenge encountered in mentoring is mentees' reluctance to learn and change. Roehrig et al. (2008) assert that the end results of mentoring relationships depend greatly on mentees' attitudes. Therefore, it is clear that mentees' negative attitudes lead to an

unfavourable relationship with their mentors as one mentor mentions in this extract from Roehrig et al. (2008, p. 700)

My mentee didn't act like she wanted to be at the meetings-what you get out of it is what you put in it.

In another study by Hobson, & Malderez (2013), mentors affirm that their ability to assume their mentoring role was hampered by mentees. This is perhaps because some beginning teachers think that the knowledge and skills they get from school are enough for them to undertake their role of teachers. Consequently, they could think that they do not need support from mentors. However, this unfavourable mentoring relationship could also originate from the context in which mentoring takes place. For instance, mentee's lack of interest in mentoring may be attributed to the mentors' failure to create a 'safe and trusting relationship' (ibid. p.95).

#### *Time constraints*

Since mentors are selected from experienced teachers, mentoring is often added to their usual workload. Consequently, they do not have enough time for this important activity. This was evidenced by mentees in a study by Smith, & McLay (2007) claiming that school-based mentors did not have sufficient time to dedicate to this role, and they often did it unprepared. Although most respondents in this study recognised the role of mentoring in their lives, they claimed that their mentors were too busy to arrange meetings for them. Hobson, & Malderez (2013) also point out that in some schools, mentoring is not timetabled to match mentors' availability with that of mentees. As a result, mentors make their own arrangements to meet their mentees after school, and this is hard for them because they both feel rushed during the meetings.

### **6. My experience as a mentee and as a mentor**

I had a great opportunity to learn about mentoring practice and related issues in the module of Teacher Education and Development (TED) on my MA in TESOL programme. It is from this module that I have been able to understand the concept of mentoring in the context of TED. Even though I was involved in mentoring (as a mentee or a mentor) during my journey as a teacher and a teacher trainee, I did not have a clear picture of what mentoring is and how it is conducted. From my experience as a mentee and mentor, I can say that I encountered most (if not all) of the issues discussed in the previous section.

To begin with my experience as a mentee, I remember when I was doing a teacher training course (as a pre-service teacher) at university, school practice was one of the requirements to graduate. Therefore, I was assigned two mentors or supervisors (the term that was used by the university) to guide and evaluate my three-month school practice. Although I was teaching English, one of the mentors assigned to me was a science lecturer. What I remember is that my mentors would sometimes come to my classroom and observe some of my lessons. They would later call me to have a look at their written comments and the grade assigned to me on the evaluation sheet and ask me to sign it. Their comments focused on what had gone wrong in my lessons with statements like “You were not able to engage learners in the discussion” or “Your lesson introduction was not clear”. When they felt that I had done something great, they would only write for example, “well-done!”. It was unfortunate that they could not allow me some time to discuss with them what went well or wrong in my classes so that I could build on that to improve. Whatever support I got was from other teachers at the school where I did my teaching practice. In brief, their classroom observations were only for assessment and reporting purposes.

When I graduated from university, I joined a Teacher Training College to start my career as a full-time teacher. Unfortunately, I was not officially assigned a mentor to help me get familiar with the new work environment. I would only seek support from colleagues who were willing to help. In the first few months of my teaching career, I was instead selected as a mentor for a number of students who were being trained as primary school teachers. However, there was no prior training or preparedness for this role. In addition to my teaching schedule of at least 35 hours per week, I was expected to observe my mentees’ lessons during their teaching practice at the neighbouring primary schools. Honestly, due to my busy schedule as a teacher and lack of mentoring skills and experience, I could not offer my mentees the support they needed. All I did was to observe my mentees’ lessons and fill in the forms that were provided by the school for evaluation and reporting purposes. In fact, I followed the example from my mentors at university as discussed in the above paragraph. The only difference is that I could find a few minutes to give my mentees oral feedback which mainly focused on giving them some advice to improve their teaching.

Briefly, looking back at my mentoring experience (as a mentee and as a mentor) I can say that it was typical of judgementoring as pointed out by Hobson, & Malderez (2013). Apart from assessing mentees’ performance and giving some pieces advice on teaching, it did not offer any emotional support, nor did it encourage reflective practice. However, this could be

attributed to the education system which could not create an enabling environment for mentoring practice (e.g. by training and preparing mentors and providing them with sufficient time to assume this role).

## **7. Possible strategies to address mentoring challenges**

After discussing some issues associated with mentoring and giving a summary of my experience as a mentee/mentor and issues that arose, it is important to talk about the strategies that can be used to address these issues to realise the benefits of mentoring.

As it was discussed earlier, one of the major problems affecting mentoring is judgementoring. It could be argued that many other mentoring issues stem from judgementoring. To address this issue, Hobson (2016) suggests a framework which could be used to eradicate it. That is, ONSIDE mentoring. This means that mentoring should be

- ✓ Off-line: mentors should not be at the same time mentees' assessors as this affects mentees' openness to them.
- ✓ Non-evaluative and non-judgemental: this can help in building trust between mentor and mentee, it can also enhance mentees' professional growth and well-being.
- ✓ Supportive: the focus should be on mentees' well-being and psychosocial support as this influences the way mentees learn and grow professionally.
- ✓ Individualistic: the support provided to mentees should not be generalised. Instead, it should cater for mentees' individual needs and contexts.
- ✓ Developmental: mentors should challenge mentees in a way that encourages their professional growth.
- ✓ Empowering: mentors should progressively encourage mentees' independent learning for them to be able find solutions to problems they encounter rather than being overly dependent on their mentors.

The suggestions made by Hobson might yield positive changes as many of them are in the power of individual mentors. What it requires is mentor's commitment and understanding of their role. However, schools also have a very important role to play in planning mentoring to make it off-line.

Another issue discussed in the mentoring literature is that some mentors are not knowledgeable enough about this role while others are not even committed to it. This is attributed to inadequate selection of mentors and less training opportunities provided to them as highlighted in many studies. In response to this problem, Fantilli (2009) suggests strong

emphasis on mentors training and qualification to help them fulfil their duties in this role. Nguyen (2008) also stresses the importance of training and adequate selection of mentors. Nguyen suggests that the selection of mentors should take into consideration their potential to model successful teaching tips, work collaboratively, and manage time accordingly. Moreover, Gakonga (2019) proposes some points that mentors' training should focus on. These include, among others, mentoring methodology, approaches to giving feedback, mentoring practice (role-plays), evaluation of mentor-mentee talk (e.g. by listening and examining recorded mentoring sessions), and suggestions to avoid face threatening discourse during mentoring exercise (e.g. by introducing the polite language that can be used in giving oral or written feedback).

Additionally, it is critical to encourage mentors to help mentees develop reflective practice through dialogic feedback. For example, during post observation conference, mentors could give their mentees sufficient time to reflect and say what they think about their lesson. From mentees' ideas, mentors could ask some prompt questions to elicit more thinking about their classroom practices. This practice could make mentees more independent practitioners who can find solutions to problems they encounter.

Regarding mentee's resistance to mentoring, as it has been mentioned earlier, their lack of interest in this activity could be attributed to the mentors' failure to create an ideal mentoring environment. Therefore, it could be believed that adequate selection of mentors, their training, and preparedness could help in addressing this issue. In addition, mentees could be offered mentoring induction in their first days of teaching career to raise their awareness about the potential benefits of mentoring for the teaching career. This could encourage them to embrace this important programme.

It is also very important to consider the issue of time which is consistent in the literature of mentoring. As Kilburg (2007) suggests, mentors and mentees need to be provided with sufficient time for their meetings and lesson observations. This could be more helpful if the time allocated to mentoring is incorporated into the usual school timetable.

## **8. Conclusion**

This article has discussed mentoring in the context of teacher education and development. The focus has been on issues associated with mentoring and how these can be

addressed. As highlighted in several studies, mentoring plays a pivotal role in supporting beginning teachers' professional development. However, mentoring can be a challenging role (Gakonga, 2019) because there are many issues associated with it. These include judgemental mentoring, problems associated with mentors' skills and preparedness, mentees' reluctance to learn, and issue of time allocated to mentoring. If these are not well-addressed, they could lead to the failure to achieve mentoring purposes.

To address these issues, several suggestions were made from different studies, and the most important thing to consider is that "mentoring is first and foremost a relationship" (Fletcher, & Mullen 2012, p.68). In other words, the success or failure of mentoring depend on the interactions between the mentor and the mentee as well as the extent to which they build comfort and trust together (ibid). Therefore, it is critical for those involved in designing mentoring programmes to be able to create a conducive environment in which mentoring can flourish and yield the desired results.

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