Student Teachers' Experiences as Mentees During the Teaching Practice in Rwanda

Joseph Njiku
University of Dar es Salaam - Dar es Salaam University College of Education
Tanzania

Abstract: Teaching practice is an integral part of teacher education that provides teacher trainees an opportunity to merge theory and practice. This study investigated eight student teachers' mentorship experiences during teaching practice in secondary schools in Rwanda. Respondents were interviewed toward the end of their teaching practice. The cognitive apprenticeship theory guided the study. Qualitative data were collected and analysed deductively based on the themes identified in the literature and suggested by the theory. Findings indicate that all students were paired off with mentors, had the opportunity to observe and be observed by their mentors, and appreciated the mentoring process they underwent at the placement schools. Few participants reported unwelcoming reception and unsatisfactory support for various reasons. Nevertheless, all respondents reported viewing the teaching practice experiences as valuable in their careers. The study's findings have implications for training mentors and revisiting mentoring practices for student teachers.

Key Words: teaching practice; practicum, mentorship; mentor; teacher education; apprenticeship

Introduction

Teaching practice is one of the critical components of teacher preparation. It allows student teachers to develop professional competencies from field experiences (Basturk, 2016). During the teaching practice, student teachers learn professional practices by doing. Teaching practice complements the education they receive on campus since many universities do not provide the situated learning that teaching practice may afford (Alamri, 2018; Liu, 2005). Liu (2005) contends that some features of campus-based teacher training, including tending towards theoretical training only, may hinder the development of practical knowledge and cognitive skills in facilitating instruction. Similarly, Alamri (2018) found that many teacher education programmes are less effective in enabling student teachers to assume effective classroom practices. The more theory and practice are integrated, the more efficient teacher education becomes (Basturk, 2016). This may suggest that teaching practice is an opportunity to bring into reality what student teachers learn theoretically at college. It provides room to develop key

professional competencies, link theory learnt at college and practices in schools, and develop reflective practices (Buhagiar & Chetcuti, 2014; Njiku, 2018). During this field placement, student teachers experience the actual classroom atmosphere while assuming the role of a teacher.

As part of teacher education, teaching practice is a typical professional development course in teacher education programmes. For example, in India, teaching practice is split into two parts: practicum and internship (Kumar & Thapa, 2018). Kumar and Thapa explain that in their context, the practicum involves assignments and workshops, including microteaching, while the internship involves school-based teaching that lasts for sixteen weeks. Nearly the same amount (14 – 16 weeks) of time is dedicated to teaching practice in Saudi Arabia during the last semester of university teacher education (Masadeh, 2017). In Germany, especially at the University of Cologne, the practicum is done in series, including a four-week practicum in the fourth semester and a complete semester practicum during the graduate level (Steffens, 2023). While the German education system may differ by state, countries such as Indonesia and Tanzania have a structure of teacher education that may vary across programmes or teacher qualification levels since they are managed by different authorities (Njiku, 2016; Sulistiyo et al., 2017). Teacher education research uses terms like teaching practice, field practice, practice teaching, practicum, and internship (Sulistiyo et al., 2017) to refer to professional learning where student teachers participate in actual teaching as a way of learning to teach and perform other school-related tasks as teachers. The duration of the teaching practice is as diverse across countries as programmes and educational systems themselves are diverse.

The importance of the teaching practice has stimulated interest among educators about its effectiveness (Akkoç et al., 2016; Alamri, 2018; Basturk, 2016; Mauri et al., 2019). Teacher preparation quality depends on multiple factors, including school-based mentors' competencies and collaboration between teacher education institutions and participating schools (Akkoç et al., 2016; Usak & Masalimova, 2019). Also, the role of effective teaching practice in preparing quality teachers is supported by many (Basturk, 2016; Buhagiar & Chetcuti, 14; Clarke et al., 2014; Cohen et al., 2013; Mauri et al., 2019). Teacher education institutions' commitments and practice to spend several months on school placements to offer practical skills for student teachers' professional learning indicate that they give due importance to the teaching practice (Buhagiar & Chetcuti, 14; Cohen et al., 2013). To benefit from this, participating schools must provide professional support using their experienced staff, who should support student teachers, considering contextual factors (Usak & Masalimova, 2019).

During the teaching practice, student teachers learn to teach from the setting where teaching occurs. They observe veteran teachers at work, prepare lesson materials for pupils, then teach them with or without assistance from the mentors, and lead the entire classroom session under observation by the veteran teacher (Busher et al., 2014; Njiku, 2016). This process involves experienced teachers acting as mentors. Student teachers' quality of the mentorship experience influences their professional development (Akkoç et al., 2016). The efficacy of the mentorship experience depends on, among others, the school teachers' mentoring style and competencies and the relationship built between student teachers, school mentors, and the faculty (Mauri et al., 2019). It must be active and explicit (Niyibizi, 2021), suggesting the need to plan and reflect on practices. Theoretically, student teachers must benefit from the mentorship relationship at the teaching practice centre (Henning et al., 2015). Buhagiar and Chetcuti (2014) and Niyibizi (2021) noted that student teachers may not necessarily experience good practices during the teaching practice. Studies have mainly investigated student teachers' and educators'

perceptions and beliefs about teaching practice (Niyibizi, 2021; Otara, 2014). But what mentorship experiences do student teachers receive during the teaching practice? The dearth of research on students' experiences as mentees motivated this study. This study discusses mentorship experienced by some student teachers from the College of Education of the University of Rwanda.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the cognitive apprenticeship theory. The theory assumes that learning occurs in formal and informal situations where the apprentice learns information or skills gradually until one reaches proficiency. An apprenticeship may, therefore, be understood as a process where a more knowledgeable and more skilled person provides support to the less knowledgeable and less experienced person, resulting in the latter acquiring these competencies (Dennen & Burner, 2008; Liu, 2005). Considering the fact that the teaching profession requires multiple competencies beyond psychomotor skills and that teaching practice involves cognitive processes to develop proficiency in managing instruction, the cognitive apprenticeship would best describe the learning process that student teachers undergo during the internship. In cognitive apprenticeship, learners are exposed to more challenging tasks that would not easily be accomplished on their own but through assistance from more experienced others (Dennen & Burner, 2008)

Although cognitive apprenticeship can occur spontaneously as one gets involved in social life, in education, where learning and assessment are rigorous, cognitive apprenticeship is intentional and planned. It involves the active consciousness of both the apprentice and the more experienced persons. It is a planned process where mentors and mentees are identified and work together towards some learning objectives. As such, Dennen and Burner (2008) explained that cognitive apprenticeship involves modelling – the demonstration of the thinking process, coaching or scaffolding – actively supporting learners' cognitive activities, reflection – rethinking and assessing one's cognitive activities, articulation – overtly expressing the results of reflection, and exploration – forming and testing hypotheses formed from this practice. Collins et al. (1987) discussed six strategies: modelling, coaching, scaffolding, articulation, reflection, and exploration. In practice, an apprenticeship may not explicitly follow each of these strategies since they overlap. However, the identification of these strategies facilitates obtaining evidence of practice.

Multiple studies have investigated similar activities as articulated by the cognitive apprenticeship theory. Different wording such as mentorship, modelling, and apprenticeship have been used in the literature to indicate the relationship between experienced teachers in charge of/and student teachers (see Akkoç et al., 2016; Basturk, 2016; Buhagiar & Chetcuti, 2014; Niyibizi, 2021). Also, these studies show that cognitive apprenticeship is not only suggested by many researchers in teacher education but is believed to be effective in developing teachers' professional competencies. For example, Basturk (2016) argued that the main objective of field experience in schools is to provide student teachers with professional development within the framework of cooperation between the faculty and the school. During the teaching practice, student teachers learn curriculum implementation by merging what they have learnt at the college and from the school under the guidance of school mentors.

The role played by school mentors is of great importance in developing student teachers' early professional competencies (Clarke et al., 2014). Cognizant of this contribution that

mentorship can offer to student teachers, the University of Rwanda places student teachers in school practice for several months (the duration has been changing) in an internship. During this time, critical dialogue and assistance provided by veteran teachers to student teachers enable the development of teaching competencies through experience (Basturk, 2016; Clarke et al., 2014). Multiple studies have shown that school mentorship faces challenges of limited assistance from mentors, limited time for evaluation of student teachers' teaching practice, and lack of cooperation between mentors, student teachers, and the faculty (Basturk, 2016; Buhagiar & Chetcuti, 2014) among others. Competing demands for faculty and mentors' time have also been a reason for ineffective mentorship (Britton & Anderson, 2010). However, mentorship remains essential in developing student teachers professionally (Buhagiar & Chetcuti, 2014). Under this challenging mentorship environment, this study examines the experiences that student teachers have regarding the mentorship provided by the teaching practice schools they were placed in. Although the literature shows that educators in Rwanda, where this study was done, understand the importance of mentorship, they only perceive it as an implicit practice (Niyibizi, 2021). This leaves a question of what exactly are the obtained experiences by the student teachers who are the direct objects of teacher education. This is because the effectiveness of the teaching practice is dependent on the process experienced by student teachers and the relationship between student teachers, mentors, faculty, and school administrators (Basturk, 2016; Henning et al., 2015). Also, there are worries about the effectiveness of the teaching practice (Alamri, 2018), where the intended and implemented curricula are not necessarily equal to the achieved curriculum (Lavonen et al., 2019). In the global south (Niyibizi, 2021) and especially Rwanda (Otara, 2014), less attention has been given to student teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding their teaching practice. As such, this study investigates the mentorship of student teachers provided by experienced teachers in some teaching practice centres in Rwanda.

Methodology

The Design

The study adopted a multisite case study involving participants from different schools (Gut et al., 2014; Henning et al., 2015) to investigate student teachers' teaching practice experiences in Rwanda. The case study was adopted since it provided specific and rich information about the kind of experiences teaching practice placement offered to student teachers (Henning et al., 2015). Case studies are helpful in examining the phenomenon in-depth and, hence, providing detailed information. To obtain this information, the study employed electronic interviews through phone calls. The calls were recorded and stored for analysis. Six interview questions were composed. The first question addressed the first research question about reception and orientation. Five interview questions focused on the cognitive apprenticeship theory, where modelling, coaching, scaffolding, articulation, reflection, and explorations were examined.

Context of the Study

This study was done on participants from the University of Rwanda. In Rwanda, there is only one public university, but multiple colleges are available, along with other private universities. Students pursuing education degree programmes are registered in the College of

Education of the University of Rwanda and other faculties in privately owned universities. The bachelor's degree programmes at the University of Rwanda College of Education are done in two phases: coursework and internship. The coursework lasts three years, where students study two teaching subjects and educational courses. This is followed by a several-month internship programme. The number of months has been changing and ranges from three months to a year. The internship lasts long because it is meant to be an intense, full-time classroom experience learning from experienced teachers and their practices (Otara, 2014). Graduation after the internship qualifies them to teach in secondary education. When this study was undertaken, students had spent more than seven months following the uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic. To facilitate quality internship experience, the College of Education is dedicated to providing leadership in merging theory and practice by establishing collaborative efforts with public schools (Otara, 2014). This is done by the college career advisory centre, which identifies the schools and establishes an agreement with the schools and the districts they are in. At the start of the internship, the centre is responsible for the placement of student teachers in schools, considering the teaching subject needs of the participating schools. During the internship, student teachers undertake their teaching practice and write an action research report. To undertake the teaching practice, they are placed in participating secondary or teacher training colleges, both of which fall in Rwanda's twelve years of basic education. This study was carried out in the last month of the internship in the year 2021. This ensured that participants had enough experience to provide helpful information for the study.

Participants

Since the study was designed to investigate student teachers' experiences regarding their teaching practice course in Rwanda, student teachers from the University of Rwanda – College of Education participated in the study. Eight student teachers participated in the study by responding to the interview questions made through phone calls. The participants were recruited electronically during the COVID-19 pandemic when mobility was limited. They were informed about the purpose of the study, and that participation was voluntary. Those who consented were interviewed to obtain data for the study—seven participants specialised in social sciences, and only one specialised in natural science. The chain referral sampling technique may have been the reason the sample contained many participants from the social science specialisation.

Data Analysis

The audio records were first transcribed into text for each participant. Since the existing literature informed the interview questions, they were considered as codes necessary to respond to the research questions (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021); as such, deductive data analysis was used (Bingham, 2023). The deductive analysis examined the data from each participant and aligned them against existing codes as suggested by the literature. In other words, participants' responses were examined to determine which research question and teaching practice concept they reflected. Following this analysis, findings are organised according to the specific interview questions. Where necessary, direct quotations from participants' responses (using pseudo-names) are used to complement the reporting.

Findings

School Orientation for Arriving Student Teachers

Starting teaching practice is a challenging task. It is more difficult because student teachers assume teaching roles in a new environment that is quite different from the campus (Voss & Kunter, 2020). Helping student teachers familiarise themselves with the school environment is important, including the hidden aspects of teaching (Clarke et al., 2014). Some schools may, therefore, offer some orientation to student teachers before they assume teaching roles (Mauri et al., 2019). Responding to the question about how they were received at school, many participants indicated satisfaction with how the school administration treated them. Responses suggest that students had letters of introduction from the university to the placement schools. Upon arrival, they were received by the head of schools, who took them to the director of studies. Thereafter, the director of studies assigned the student teachers to their school mentors. Explaining what happened when they got to the schools, Soy explained:

> *They received and treated me well. They help me to adapt to the school. I got the chance to get accustomed to the school meaning that I gained more insights about how to teach, school life, and the discipline of the students. I have been helped by the school staff specifically the deputy principal, who is in charge of things related to the learning. They treated me well with ideas of becoming good future teachers. The deputy principal took me to the mentor. The school has a mentor in charge of the everyday issues of interns. I had to get familiar with him, get connected with him, and let him be aware of all issues of my internship. Things have gone well and right now I am writing the school report.*

Generally, many of the interviewed student teachers reported being treated well and oriented to the school practices. The directors of studies of participating schools were reported to be at the forefront in helping student teachers settle and assume teaching roles. Things did not go well for every student-teacher, as Lemoner reported, for example:

> *I was received badly because when I came to the school, I met the headmaster and gave him a letter of introduction telling him that it was the university that sent me. Then he refused saying that we were too many because we were about five interns and that my place was not going to be there. So, I chose to come back the next day to talk to the director of studies. The next day I was given pedagogical documents and requested to go to class and start teaching. Luckily, I was not devastated for being poorly received.*

It is important to note that teaching practice sets the beginning and opportunity for student teachers to develop the perception of their future profession, including the uptake of target competencies and teaching behaviours (Clarke et al., 2014; Usak & Masalimova, 2019; Voss & Kunter, 2020). The way experienced teachers receive student teachers may contribute to their professional perceptions. The findings indicate that many student teachers experienced a friendly reception, although a few felt unwelcome. The diverse initial treatment may not only be a result of differences in institutional mentoring attitude but also what Iwakuni (2017) reports as limited training that did not reach out to many experienced teachers.

Meaning and Conception of Mentorship

When at school, student teachers are expected to work under the guidance of experienced teachers, also referred to as mentors. The relationship between mentors and student teachers is two-way and requires active participation from both parties (Clarke et al., 2014; Henning et al., 2015). For student teachers to benefit from this relationship, they must first understand what and how it works. This makes them active learners (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). The study examined whether student teachers were paired off with any mentors and their perception of who the mentor is. All student teachers reported having been assigned a mentor. Many reported that their mentors were school teachers of subjects that student teachers taught. However, since the directors of studies had a significant role in guiding day-to-day school activities and, therefore, worked with student teachers in many of their routine activities, some student teachers took them as mentors, although they were not necessarily of the same subject specialisation. Explaining their understanding of who the mentor is, Beety had this to say:

> *When you start doing internship to teach say mathematics, there is a teacher who is teaching mathematics and becomes your mentor. If you are teaching social studies, the teacher of social studies becomes your mentor. This means that the mentors are the teachers of the subjects. Also, the director of studies acts as a mentor for all student teachers in the school. He may come to see how you are teaching. The mentors are so many because they are subject teachers.*

Lemoner further explained that:

> *There are two mentors in the school I teach, the director of studies and the subject teacher. So, the lesson teacher was coming to visit me, encouraging me, checking my pedagogical documents, saying you should prepare the lesson like this, evaluate this way. He was checking my availability day by day. He is the one that I worked with from the beginning. The director of studies was coming to check up to see if I was managing the class appropriately, see if I was teaching the way it should be done but would leave in just five minutes.*

From the responses, it may be deduced that the conception of a mentor depends on the role school teachers play and how such roles affect student teachers' professional development. The study found that the mentorship relationship experienced by student teachers went beyond subject teachers to include other teachers, especially those assigned the role of director of studies. This may mean student teachers' perceptions of who the mentor was were based on what the mentor did or how such mentors relate to the student teachers in school practice. These findings provide further insights into the concept of mentorship, which may be understood based on what involved parties, especially student teachers, experience (Clarke et al., 2014). Therefore, providing the best experience is important for appropriately implementing mentoring in teacher education. This is important as it informs how student teachers are likely to approach the mentoring process and their participation.

Collaboration in Lesson Preparation

The nature of professional activities done as part of the mentorship relationship determines the acquisition of professional skills by student teachers (Henning et al., 2015; Orland-Barak & Wang, 2020; Voss & Kunter, 2020). This is because student teachers cannot easily accomplish the development of professional skills entirely by themselves without the help

of experienced others (Clarke et al., 2014). To understand whether mentoring involved student teachers' teaching preparations, the study examined their lesson-planning experiences on the first days of the teaching practice. Respondents possessed diverse experiences. Explaining the experience with lesson preparation in the early days, Beety submitted that:

> *"... at the start of the internship, the mentor used to show me how to plan the lesson and how to set the lesson plan documents and also, he showed me how to prepare the scheme of work…. ….when I faced a problem, I tried to consult him and he tried to help me. It means that we were in good connection in the preparation of lesson plans and scheme of work, and on everything, I was in contact with him."*

On the other hand, some student teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with the support they received from mentors regarding preparations for teaching. This happened when student teachers received limited or no support from mentors in various activities where they needed them. For example, Soy complained, "Although the mentor was responsible for all my learning activities when I was preparing my lesson plan, he was not always there. I planned the lesson myself. I had very little time with him." And Lemoner pointed out that:

> *I did not get an opportunity to work with a mentor because she was unaware of anything. She was a recruit in the career, she was not confident in how to fill out the pedagogical documents. So, I was the one doing it myself. The other teachers were busy with their issues. I was the one doing everything in collaboration with other student teachers.*

Although student teachers are expected to work under guidance and in collaboration with school mentors (Clarke et al., 2014), this was not always reported. One reason could be limited mentorship competencies, as reported by one respondent. This is echoed in the discussion by Iwakuni (2017), who contended that in Rwanda, the training of mentors has not covered every individual in schools. Also, in some cases, school mentors may not offer the required mentorship (Njiku, 2016; Simons et al., 2020). Collaborative lesson preparation was considered important as it allows learning, complementing, and supporting each other. When collaboration is limited, peer mentorship involving student teachers becomes useful (Mauri et al., 2019; Njiku, 2018; Simons et al., 2020). Nevertheless, many respondents to this study were satisfied with their collaboration with mentors in lesson preparations.

Learning from the Lesson Led by Mentors

First lesson delivery in the classroom may be very challenging to student teachers. As such, the process of getting familiar with classroom practices should start early and advance gradually. Student teachers should begin from the peripheral by observing experienced teachers and then start their own by imitating cognitively (Niyibizi, 2021). To do this, student teachers must have an opportunity to observe lessons delivered by their mentors and learn from them (Orland-Barak & Wang, 2020). In this study, student teachers were interviewed about whether they got this opportunity and how useful it was. All student teachers reported that they had this opportunity. They reported that the first one or two weeks, depending on the school, were dedicated to observation. During these weeks, student teachers visited the lessons of their mentors and sat at the back of the class while their mentors led the learning activities. Explaining this experience, Okre said:

> *When we came for the internship, during the first two weeks, we were requested to have time to observe the lessons of mentors. And with this, we had the chance to observe other teachers' lessons and it was something good for us. We tried to see the methodology and the behaviour the teacher would experience when teaching. There were some elements we captured such as the classroom management and the way the teacher interacted with the students, the way the teacher connected the units in the lessons, and motivated students.*

These findings show that student teachers' observation of mentors' lessons was part of the mentorship process, and time was allotted for it. Observation sessions before teaching helped student teachers learn from their mentors' practice, which aligns with the cognitive apprenticeship theory, where student teachers begin as peripheral participants and slowly move toward active practitioners (Dennen & Burner, 2008). Teaching strategies and classroom management were commonly reported areas of interest by student teachers. As explained by some of them, these would later be used in their own lessons. This suggests observation provided student teachers with an opportunity to directly observe experienced teachers negotiating between the tides of classroom interaction as they applied different teaching methods.

Supervision and Feedback from Mentors

As student teachers begin to deliver their lessons in the classroom, they need to reflect on their practices. This is because teaching is a reflective practice (Njiku, 2018). To do this, they need someone to act as a critic who helps to point out strengths and weaknesses that need to be addressed (Clarke et al., 2014). Experienced teachers may visit student teachers in their lessons and observe their teaching in the mentorship relationship. After that, they may have a reflective discussion intended to improve student teachers' professional skills (Biggers et al., 2019). However, the benefits of this practice are two-dimensional, where mentors may also benefit from it. In this study, student teachers were asked whether they had an opportunity to receive feedback from mentors after being observed when teaching. Responding to the questions as to whether mentors observed student teachers' lessons to provide feedback on the way student teachers were progressing, Garly explained:

> *The mentor visited me like five times. He gave me feedback whereby he asked me to speak loudly for the first time, he encouraged me to use techniques that can help every learner to participate in the teaching and learning process. Also, he asked me to use different warmup techniques to help the learners to be attentive and motivated.*

Soy had this to say:

> *It is one of the responsibilities of the mentor to visit us once a month. My mentor was visiting me once a month. During teaching my mentor was sitting behind the class for checking what I am going to do, what I am doing, what I am teaching, the techniques, the methods, and the content. Then he writes the comments about what I am doing wrong or good and then we discuss them after the class. The importance of the comments is to improve or correct what I am doing wrong and to improve my career in teaching.*

From the responses that student teachers provided, it may be noted that the majority of the participants, except for one, were observed by mentors when teaching. The frequency of observation differed per respondent. While some were observed several times, such as five, six,

or ten times throughout the teaching practice period, for others, it was on a monthly basis. More importantly, these observation sessions were followed by a discussion where student teachers were informed about their practices and encouraged to improve in some specific areas. These findings indicate the importance of feedback as the cognitive apprenticeship theory suggests (Collins et al., 1987). They also indicate that students valued such feedback, suggesting its importance in improving their practices.

Sharing Observations of One's Practice with Mentors

The mentorship process not only helps student teachers undertake their teaching practice effectively but also helps them develop lifelong skills inherent in this professional relationship. School practice entails a range of activities that have the potential in developing multiple skills, including soft skills. To understand what student teachers learnt from the whole relationship, they were asked to comment on it. Generally, student teachers appreciated the role of mentors in their professional development. This includes assistance in lesson preparation and feedback on classroom activities. It also provides for the development of new skills, as reported by Peppy: "The mentors are rich in experience when you compare them with me. This means I learnt many things from them because of their experiences. I leant new skills, attitude, and honesty". Soy submitted that:

> *I shared information with the experienced teacher to check if we were on the same page. Sometimes when we were going to add something which is not included in the content but related and essential or crucial examples, we would share it before teaching. This was for the purpose of checking if we were on the same page.*

The mentorship relationship includes learning from the more experienced ones. This means one needs to develop an attitude of being ready to learn from others (Henning et al., 2015). It also involves working as a team where collaboration in some activities is important (Clarke et al., 2014; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Findings show that student teachers are aware that experienced teachers have a lot to offer for their professional learning, indicating their readiness to learn from them. Also, student teachers' responses suggest the awareness that professional practices in school may need teachers to work in teams. Unfortunately, this was not always the case. Where challenges with mentorship exist, particularly from experienced teachers, as reported by a few participants, peer mentorship among student teachers may also be useful (Njiku, 2018). However, the discussion about peer mentorship is not covered in this paper.

Discussion

Teaching practice is an integral part of teacher education, where student teachers develop professional skills under the supervision of experienced teachers. The student teachers become apprentices or mentees, while the experienced teachers become mentors. In this case, mentorship becomes a professional relationship. Through cognitive apprenticeship, student teachers are expected to develop skills through modelling, coaching, scaffolding, articulation, reflection, and exploration (Collins et al., 1987). Before this process begins, however, student teachers must get familiarised with the school environment through orientation or introduction to the school context by mentors (Clarke et al., 2014; Mauri et al., 2019; Voss & Kunter, 2020). Findings from

this study indicate that most of the student teachers appreciated how school administration and teachers received them in their early days at school. These first few days are crucial in informing the expected apprenticeship relationship throughout the teaching practice (Voss & Kunter, 2020). The unwelcome reception reported by some participants in this study indicates the need to revisit partnership agreements and the training of mentors continuously. This experience may also affect student teachers' perception of their teaching profession and determine their future professional relationships (Henning et al., 2015; Usak & Masalimova, 2019). It may also affect their decision regarding their future career choices and whether they should remain in teaching.

Student teachers understood who the school-based mentors were and their roles. Many of these mentors, as reported by student teachers, were subject teachers whose classes were assigned to them. This is in line with the idea by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) that effective professional development, among other things, is content-focused. Mentors being subject teachers enables student teachers to benefit from both their subject expertise and subject-specific methods. Also, mentorship may go beyond subject-specific and classroom activities. Mentors may be identified from their mentorship activities, as discussed in the following paragraphs and as the cognitive apprenticeship theory explains. Student teachers identified directors of studies who were not necessarily of the same subject specialisation as mentors based on the support they received from them. Adopting this view, Cohen et al. (2013) and Garza et al. (2019) explain mentors' roles as helping student teachers through nurturing, supporting, observing, and evaluating.

Respondents of this study indicated that they were all assigned to school-based mentors, as the University guidelines indicate (Iwakuni, 2017; University of Rwanda, 2018). To benefit from the mentors' experience, student teachers observed their mentors' lessons for either a week or two. This enabled mentors to model to student teachers by externalising internal cognitive processes and activities that student teachers would observe (Collins et al., 1987; Orland-Barak & Wang, 2020). This would allow student teachers to imitate tacit processes that have been made more explicit later. However, it should be noted that student teachers may not have opportunities to observe, or what they observe may not be what was expected for their professional development (Kang, 2020). To address this, student teachers need to practice what they have learnt through observation.

Student teachers were also observed by their mentors. From the cognitive apprenticeship theory, as Collins et al. (1987) explained, observation allows mentors to coach student teachers. Student teachers were observed teaching, and feedback was provided so that they could use it to improve their performance. This fits the university guidelines (University of Rwanda, 2018) and is in line with previous findings (Iwakuni, 2017). Although the frequency of observation by mentors differed based on the placement school, student teachers appreciated its role in ensuring effective feedback (Iwakuni, 2017). In some instances, observations by mentors did not last as long as the lesson lasted, which may indicate that some mentors in Rwanda were either not committed or unaware of their role and what it takes for effective mentorship. This may, in some ways, limit the range and quality of the feedback to student teachers. The nature of feedback informs the ability of student teachers to self-correct and self-assess performance (Lin et al., 2019).

Mentors helped student teachers in various activities, including lesson planning, preparing schemes of work, managing the class, and using specific techniques to motivate and reach the entire class (see Orland-Barak & Wang, 2020). When these activities are done together in what is referred to as co-teaching, student teachers become co-creators with their mentors in a

collaborative relationship (Rabin, 2020). This support for carrying out specific tasks is referred to as scaffolding (Collins et al., 1987). Also, it is worth noting that the nature of support in particular activities makes a difference (Voss & Kunter, 2020). It is the collaboration between mentors and student teachers in carrying out some parts of the tasks that student teachers cannot do on their own yet (Biggers et al., 2019) that contributes to positive experiences. In a few cases, however, it was reported that student teachers performed some tasks without the help of the mentors, although the help was needed and expected.

Student teachers reported benefiting gradually from the mentorship relationship. As time passed, they developed confidence and managed to lead classroom sessions independently. In cognitive apprenticeship theory, this tendency of one gradually becoming more independent and taking a leading role in activities is referred to as articulation (Collins et al., 1987). Mentors should let student teachers begin from the peripheral by acting as observers and assisting them to become critical actors slowly but steadily. Similar findings are reported by Otara (2014), who explains that student teachers felt satisfied with the mentorship process, where they were able to plan, deliver, and analyse peer lessons. Suffice it to say it is the process that matters rather than simply the presence of mentors (Voss & Kunter, 2020). Although mentorship experiences differed across schools, the satisfaction might have come from the diverse mentors involved, including directors of studies.

Reflection is an important practice, as is the apprenticeship model. Student teachers need not only to reflect on the lesson they teach but also on the mentorship process that is used to develop their teaching skills (Cohen et al., 2013). Focusing on mentorship, apprentice reflection may be about comparing one's practices, skills, and techniques with the mentor (Collins et al., 1987). It may also be self-evaluating, focusing on their own teaching (Lin et al., 2019) or what they have learned as the achieved curriculum (Lavonen et al., 2019). In this study, although student teachers did not report how close their skills were to those of their mentors by the end of the teaching practice, many of them recognised the influence of mentor skills on their own skills. The mentor teacher's role is to encourage student teachers to reflect on their experience in the placement schools (Mauri et al., 2019). Similar findings are reported by Cohen et al. (2013) in their review of literature, noting that most outcomes of the teaching practice were considered favourable by different researchers.

Benefiting from articulation and reflection, exploration is a process of using developed skills to handle teaching challenges on one's own. As support fades, student teachers begin to forge ahead (Collins et al., 1987) by formulating and trying hypotheses (Kang, 2020). Findings show that various teaching methods may be identified from the mentorship of student teachers. In this study, the six methods of mentorship were either directly or indirectly identified from student teachers' responses. This may be because the interview questions were constructed after the literature review, making it possible to align findings with the cognitive apprenticeship methods. However, the role of mentors is recognised by many, and the nature of the mentoring activities matters (Voss & Kunter, 2020). In some contexts, student teachers may find themselves isolated (Simons et al., 2020), and hence, other mentoring techniques, including peer mentoring (Njiku, 2018) and team teaching (Simons et al., 2020) may be helpful. Considering that the effectiveness of the school practice is multifactor dependent, some authors (Ketelhut et al., 2019) report a minimal difference in competencies between student teachers working under mentors and those working independently. This leaves the subject under discussion, especially the need to compare various levels or kinds of mentorship.

Limitations of the Study

The study used qualitative methods; hence, the findings may not be generalisable, but they are useful in understanding the mentorship process in some schools in Rwanda. The study was limited to interview data. Future studies may include more data collection techniques, such as observations and document analysis.

Conclusion

Mentorship is an important process of developing student teachers' professional competencies during their teaching internship or early in their career. The study investigated student teachers' experiences regarding the mentorship process they underwent during their teaching practice. Many of the student teachers reported being satisfied with the mentorship. However, a few expressed concerns based on how they were treated and supported, especially in their early days of the teaching practice. Also, findings show that mentors' role is vital in developing student teachers' cognitive professional skills. The study argues that providing mentorship to student teachers, as explained by the cognitive apprenticeship theory is a professional practice rather than is the case with the traditional apprenticeship. For teachers to effectively provide mentorship, they should be trained to become mentors. This means that not every school and subject teacher qualifies as a mentor. Working experience that may be considered exemplary and training focused on enabling teachers to become effective mentors are also important. Furthermore, mentorship is a relational practice. Schools that assign student teachers to veteran teachers for mentorship need to ensure good relationships exist between the involved parties. The mentorship process may be less effective without appropriate relationships, communication, interaction, and collaboration. The findings of this study imply the need to improve mentoring practices as a professional undertaking. They also imply the need to train school teachers to provide mentorship to student teachers.

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