

# **MENTORSHIP: A CRITICAL INNOVATIVE STRATEGY TO IMPROVE TEACHING IN A CHANGING MENTORSHIP DIDACTIC ENVIRONMENT**

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## ***Abstract.***

*To say that pre-service teacher training can never prepare teachers to teach for life is not an understatement. The contemporary education environment is characterized by new type of students, new political environment, different learning needs, changes in policy and the curriculum and knowledge explosion. These realities require innovative or new approaches to teaching that can enhance learning for the achievement of anticipated learning outcomes. This paper discusses mentorship as a critical issue, an effective and innovative strategy to improve knowledge and skills of novice teachers. It is believed this can ensure quality teaching in the ever changing didactic milieu. In a democratic society, stakeholders in education such as the government, communities, parents, donors and even students exert much pressure on the teacher's performance. These stakeholders may sometimes blame children's poor learning output on teachers. To stand up to the challenge it is crucial for every school to establish a mentorship programme to improve the teacher's knowledge and skills in teaching. The necessity of mentorship in schools, its establishment and nurturing is the substance of this paper.*

Key words: **mentorship, didactic, environment, strategy, development, transformation, novice, innovative**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Mentorship, an aspect of continuous professional development of teachers, is crucial for quality teaching in an ever changing didactic environment. It is a kind of informal learning interaction that occurs every day at virtually every kind of work place where a less knowledgeable person seeks out a more knowledgeable colleague to help in overcoming an impasse (Schlager, Poirier & Means, 1996). The unprecedented transformation taking place in education after the demise of apartheid in South Africa requires schools to provide especially novice teachers with the necessary support which may enable them transform their teaching in line with current national imperatives. The current education environment in South Africa is characterized by new type of students, a new political order, different learning needs, changes in the curriculum resulting in new learning areas [some of which are new to the teacher] and the general knowledge explosion to boot. There are about 368,000 primary and

secondary school teachers in South Africa of which 185,000 of them are new (Wikipedia, 2009). The reality is that pre-service training can neither prepare teachers to teach for life nor enable them to anticipate the cultural and environmental milieu under which they would teach after training and the possible changes which might influence teaching and learning. These realities require new teachers to acquire more knowledge in their chosen subjects and innovative or new ways of teaching that can enhance the quality of learning for the achievement of anticipated learning outcomes.

The need for mentorship programmes to be established in schools is informed by the changing didactic environment which does not make initial teacher preparation sufficient for effective teaching. The current changes taking place in education in South Africa pose some challenges to teaching in view of the fact that both the new and some experienced teachers may find themselves in difficult and unfamiliar situations with different academic and professional demands. Consequently they may not be able to teach effectively to the expectations of education stakeholders i.e. learners, parents, government and school authorities. The situation becomes even worse in the case of teachers who are entering the profession and the classroom for the first time.

Although a lot has been said or written on the subject by scholars in South Africa their focus has mainly been on pre-service teacher preparation. The novice teacher at the coal face of teaching does not seem to feature in most of the current writings. It is this seemingly missing link in continuous teacher development that this paper attempts to address. The paper advocates for the establishment of mentorship programmes in every school in South Africa as a strategy to update the teacher's knowledge and skills for the realization of quality education the country craves for.

### **SOME COMMON CHALLENGES NOVICE TEACHERS FACE AND THE NECESSITY FOR MENTORSHIP**

Schools are located in different communities which may be rural, urban or peri-urban with their own unique conditions. The novice teacher may find employment in one of the above community schools with its own unique physical, psychological and environmental conditions. The various micro environments of each school could pose some challenges to the beginner (novice) teacher. Beginner teachers may feel inadequate as teachers and may not be aware that others experience similar problems. To provide appropriate support and direction to their new teachers, principals need to

understand the problems of those teachers and the significance of their (principal's) role in helping with such problems (Brock and Grady, 1998).

Novice teachers' could face problems which may range from lack of skills in lesson planning, preparation, classroom management, discipline, handling of students' conflicts, dealing with students from different backgrounds and varying abilities, feeling inadequate as teachers, inability to motivate learners to insufficient knowledge of the subject or learning areas they teach. A first time teacher may always be surrounded by fear, anxiety, stress, lack of confidence and authority. These difficulties may emanate from the fact that pre- service teacher preparation programmes cannot expose teacher- trainees to all the hazards, problems, challenges or conditions under which they will be working after their training. The observation by many is that becoming a teacher and beginning to teach have long been and continue to be problematic for those who want to teach and for those whose task it is to assist and prepare them. School teaching remains notoriously hard to learn (Hargreaves & Jacka, 1995).

Thus in spite of their initial training beginner teachers may need to learn new knowledge and professional skills when they enter teaching. The need to learn the techniques of teaching makes it imperative for schools to support novice teachers through mentorship programmes. Without such support programmes novice teachers could be helpless and ineffective in teaching and may decide to 'vote with their feet'. Citing Black (2001) and Whitaker (2001) Steyn and Schulze (2005) report that because of poor induction programmes, up to 50% of educators in urban schools in the USA leave the teaching profession within three years. The situation may be similar to South Africa where teacher shortage has become a problem in recent years. Teacher attrition may be reduced when schools support their new teachers through mentorship programmes. To this end mentoring schemes need to be devised to assist new teachers to take on their responsibilities more gradually, with supervision and support from their experienced colleagues. This gradual process of inducting new teachers into the teaching profession calls for the establishment of mentorship programmes where novice teachers could be assigned to more experienced colleagues to be guided through first difficult steps in their career. Thus for beginner teachers to settle in a teaching environment with confidence and comfort they need to be mentored. A mentorship programme should take a long period. For example a programme that takes one academic year, under expert teachers could go a long way in assisting novice teachers to know the sophisticated knowledge in their chosen subjects and

skills in teaching. Hargreaves and Jacka (1995) add that expert teachers possess ‘special knowledge but novices lack it.

In spite of the fact that novice teachers experience numerous problems and need academic and professional support, mentoring of new teachers has not received the attention it deserves. The few schools that attempt to assist novice teachers seem to confuse induction with mentorship and their programmes may be hotchpotch and ad hoc leaving the beginner teachers more confused and frustrated. In the South African context very often principals, deputy principals and heads of departments are the sole presenters of such programmes with no mentors involved (Steyn & Schulze, 2005). The department of education may organize staff development programmes for school teachers but such programmes may be either too generic in nature or not focused on local contexts and specific learning needs of individual teachers which is why schools have to do their own in-house training. Various people involved in mentorship activities may agree that the process can be a powerful and cost-effective way of increasing personal and organizational focus central to a school’s staff development strategies and plans. Mentorship programmes are not merely ways and means of soothing new teachers’ entry into the profession or taking them through unnecessary bureaucratic procedures (Quan-Baffour, 2007).

### **A NEW DIMENSION OF MENTORSHIP IN A CHANGING DIDACTIC ENVIRONMENT**

Currently in both global and local contexts there is a general and drastic transformation of society and the didactic environment (teaching and learning) cannot be an exception to this reality or trend. In South Africa, among other things, education transformation focuses on quality teaching for the achievement of relevant learning outcomes in knowledge and skills. The changing society requires citizens who are not only well informed but also possess relevant knowledge and skills for socio-economic development of the country. To be able to achieve these ideals the key role players, particularly, [new] teachers need to be mentored to enable them teach effectively and contribute to the achievement of goals set for national education i.e. provision of practical knowledge and skills.

The current reality is that the didactic environment is literally invaded by new learning areas, methods of delivery, learning and assessment techniques. In view of these new developments in teaching and learning

mentorship must go beyond professional aspects of teaching such as classroom management, discipline and how to teach particular subjects. In addition to these professional practices mentorship must focus on knowledge of content of specific subjects or learning areas. An in-depth knowledge of content of a learning area must go hand in hand with how to teach that particular learning area or content. It is important for the teacher to be more knowledgeable of the subject content as well as the appropriate mode of delivering it to learners for the realization of quality education. Nolder and Johnson (1995) affirm that the teacher's professional development should focus on both knowledge of subject matter as well as the understanding of how children learn specific content.

In order to build teacher knowledge, it is recommended that teachers engage in the kinds of learning that they are expected to practice with their students. This is the new paradigm or dimension in mentoring - provision of more subject knowledge and how to impart it. The growth in teaching requires interrelated changes in cognition, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. To focus on one in the absence of others is unlikely to bring about significant changes in the beginning teacher (Elliot & Calderhead, 1995). Mentorship as an important aspect of teacher development must be an ongoing programme which focuses on a wide range of knowledge, skills and attitudes required to educate learners more effectively (O'Neil, 1994). Affective components of learning to teach, including attitudes towards children, parents and other teachers as well as attitudes about subject matter, may be well developed during periods of mentorship. Research highlighting the differences between experienced and novice teachers and the changes reported by students during training implies that teachers undergo a growth process which is complex and multi-dimensional in nature. For example effective teaching involves changes in knowledge and beliefs and not only changes in skill (Elliot & Calderhead, 1995).

### **ESTABLISHMENT OF A MENTORSHIP PROGRAMME**

The professional growth of teachers is influenced by many factors which may include the nature of the school environment. The novice teacher's academic and or continuous professional development, to a very large extent, would depend on the managerial environment or climate of the particular school. A school with a progressive management style may take proactive actions to make new teachers settle in with minimum stress

while a less progressive school management team may not even think of the academic and professional needs of the 'new arrival' into its fold.

The establishment of a mentorship programme in a school should be preceded by one week induction activities for all the novice teachers. Novice teachers may be new to both the physical and psychological environments of the school and therefore need an induction (i.e. orientation) as an ice-breaker to enable them to find their bearings in the new environment. A staff induction activity which precedes mentorship programmes should relate to information on school matters such as the school's culture, vision, mission, values, policy, curriculum, administrative services offered by the school, the school's organizational structure and work allocation (Steyn & Schulze, 2005.p.238). After the orientation of the new staff the school management team should do some needs analysis on the novice teachers to identify academic and professional gaps that need to be addressed by the school. The needs analysis must be done before appointing and assigning novice teachers to mentors. This may ensure that pairing is suitable.

Mentorship programmes may be established in schools, but their success may depend on how they are structured and developed and monitored. When they are well planned and executed such programmes may enable novice teachers to acquire specific competencies in content knowledge and innovative teaching strategies. A poorly established and structured mentorship programme may only encourage par-professionals who may duplicate what they have observed from their mentors. This is not to deny the real possibilities and potential that exist in such programmes but they need to be well thought through and founded on appropriate principles of professional learning (Elliot & Calderhead, 1996). The practical issues that need to be addressed when establishing a mentorship programme may include finding a pool of mentors, establishing minimum time commitments and developing conventions for assigning and accessing mentors (Schlager, Poirier & Means, 1996).

### **STRATEGIES TO MAKE MENTORSHIP WORK**

To make the programme effective, sustainable and worth its while school authorities need to identify how mentoring can be established for the realization of the best facilitation for professional growth. In this regard the following are pertinent considerations for the establishment of mentorship programmes at the school level.

- **Appointment of mentors**

In consultation with the school management team the principal must appoint mentors on the basis of knowledge and experience in a particular subject. For mentorship programmes to achieve their objectives principals must not fall into the trap where only deputy principals or heads of departments may be given the responsibility to mentor beginner teachers even where they lack the expertise to do so. A mentor must not be chosen on the basis of his or her position as a senior teacher, a deputy principal or a head of department if they do not have the necessary qualities to understand the novice teacher. Niebrand, Horn and Holmes (1992.p.85) remark that pairing a novice teacher with a master teacher, a common component in a mentoring programme, is not always the perfect solution; some mismatches occur. Administrators sometimes choose mentors on the basis of such personal criteria as responsibility, ability to articulate, skill in classroom management and popularity with parents and students. However, this same mentor may intimidate the protégé or vary so much in personality or philosophy that communication with the mentor becomes another stressor on the beginner teacher's list of anxieties.

Mentorship is a good strategy to offer support to beginner teachers but the selection of mentors needs serious consideration. A novice teacher's life can be lonely and miserable if there is no experienced, committed and understanding colleague to offer him or her continuous professional and academic support. Mentorship should aim at building confidence, teaching skills and trust among them. This is why the programme must be gradual and informal but systematic. The mentor has the role of organizing experiences in the school for the professional and academic growth of new teachers. Such experiences may enable the beginner teacher to learn the nitty-gritty of the teaching. This makes the appointment of experienced and knowledgeable teachers as mentors crucial to the success of the programme.

- **Mutual trust and respect**

To make a mentorship programme successful principals should choose mentors who, apart from being knowledgeable in teaching and committed to their work, can uphold confidentiality and respect the novice teacher. The onus is therefore on the mentor to establish a very good relationship between themselves and their mentees. As a senior colleague providing a new teacher a 'shoulder to cry on' the mentor must create an informal

relationship based on mutual respect and trust between him/herself and the new teacher. The mentor should try to create a conducive atmosphere that provides mutual trust and respect for the mentorship relationship. With the establishment of mutual trust the novice teacher can confide in the mentor for the latter to share his/her professional and academic experiences that can empower the beginner teacher.

- **Apprenticeship approach**

The apprenticeship approach to mentorship is based on the idea that teaching is a skill that may be learnt through observation and imitation. It is suggested here that to enable beginner teachers to learn the ‘nitty-gritty’ of teaching, mentors should take them along to classes to enable them learn teaching through observation and imitation. Since the time of Aristotle the tradition has been that certain kinds of skills, including teaching, are complex, of high moral and cultural value and can be best learnt through emulation of experienced practitioners and supervised practice under guidance (Maynard & Furlong, 1995). Thus to be able to teach well a novice teacher needs to work alongside an experienced practitioner as an apprentice.

A well planned mentorship programme must be structured in such a way that it progresses through three stages: gaining confidence in the relationship, gradually doing things with less support and finally being independent of the support. Confidence in teaching may follow confidence in the mentor and for professional growth to take place amongst novice teachers mentors need to be extremely supportive and positive so that mistakes can be made and learning to occur. Teacher development programmes should seek to establish conceptions of mentoring in such a way that the unique combinations of challenge and support necessary to foster growth are realized in mentoring contexts (Elliot& Calderhead, 1995).

- **Collaborative teaching**

One important strategy to make mentorship programme succeed is for the mentor and the novice teacher to collaborate in offering lessons to learners. The Mentor and beginner teacher may prepare lessons and present them together. Each may teach a section of the particular lesson. For example the mentor may introduce a lesson, the novice may deal with learner activities and the closure done by the mentor. In so doing the

confidence of the beginner teacher can improve because of the support from the mentor.

- **Establishment of subject clubs**

School authorities should encourage the establishment of subject clubs in their schools. For such subject clubs the novice teachers may be made patrons. The involvement of novice teachers in subject clubs may not only assist them to know more about the subject they teach but can also make students to know the new teachers well through frequent interactions and be more interested and active in their subject.

- **Nurturing of mentorship programme**

A mentorship programme must be nurtured by the authorities of a particular school. It is the responsibility of the principal, the school management team and the school governing body to provide the necessary support for the programme and ensure its success. Leaving it entirely to the mentor without psychological, material and physical support from the school management may affect the quality of the mentorship programme. As an activity to develop new teachers the school authorities must show interest in it by making it a unique project of the school.

- **Evaluation of mentorship programme**

A mentorship programme must be evaluated quarterly by the school management team, the mentor and the new teachers on the programme. The evaluation may be done through informal discussions with the stakeholders, interviews or through the use of questionnaire. The purpose must not be fault finding or a blaming session but to assist in revising the programme for improvement.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has argued that pre-service training of school teachers cannot cater for all the academic and professional needs of teachers. It can also not anticipate the kind of didactic environment they would be operating in after their training. The gaps in knowledge and skills of new teachers must be identified and filled through mentorship at the school level. In view of its importance as an innovative strategy for continuous teacher development it has been argued that mentorship programme must be given a priority and support by the management of each school. This is because

the growth in teaching is a process that occurs across a considerable period of time. The growth must be nurtured, fostered in a range of contexts and ways that are unique to the teaching profession.

## ENDNOTES

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