NOVICE TEACHERS EXPERIENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES DURING PRACTICUM

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ABSTRACT

Empirical research confirms that developing a professional identity consists of well-founded theoretical learning and the ability to use practical skills needed in a classroom and a school with ingenuity and flexibility begins during the practicum. This study investigates the experiences of school-based mentor teachers and novice teachers in relation to the development of professional identity of prospective teachers. To meet these objectives a qualitative case study design with a total of ten participants was used. Data were collected from mentors' reports, observations of facilitation of the process and semi-structured interviews with mentors as well as the novice teachers at the end of the same teaching experience. The theoretical framework based on social constructivism as a sociological theory informed the study. The findings showed that mentoring is valuable to mentors and novice teachers. In their roles as mentors the study revealed identities which were assured experts, comfortable in the I-position of experienced professionals. The study concluded that prolonged teaching practice will help in the formative development of aspirant teachers as the extended teaching practice forms part of continuous induction of students into the teaching profession.

Keywords: Teaching practice; practicum; school-based mentor teachers; identity; professional identity; organisation.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the results of an exploration of the experiences of school-based mentor teachers (SBMTs) who supported distance-learning students as they performed the teaching practical component (practicum) of their programme. The site was a real-life school and the questions we posed were about how the student teachers negotiated their professional identities. The students were enrolled for a Bachelor of Education degree to teach in the Intermediate Phase (Grades 4-7) at primary school. The emergence of evidence of a sense of a professional identity in the novice teachers was the focus of the investigation set within the context of the school as an organisation and a professional community. As Geijsel and Meijers (2005:422) say, "Professional communities are indicated by shared purpose, a collective focus on student learning, trust and respect, and reflective dialogue".

The practicum is a standard feature in the academic programme of student teachers. Among the innumerable changes in the teaching landscape ranging from policy and its implementation to the organisational changes in the structure of schools' organisation, a particular pressing problem has emerged in relation to novice teachers and their expected competencies (RSA, 2008:64). The pressure on novice teachers to have a well-developed professional identity to manage the responsibilities facing them upon entering a school to teach is considerable. Novice teachers are

required to perform at the same standard and have the same volume of work as an experienced teacher. There are eleven minimum competencies required for the novice teachers: sound subject knowledge; knowhow to teach their subject(s) and how to select, determine the sequence and pace of content to match subject and learner needs; know who their learners are, how they learn in relation to individual needs and then accommodate learners with their teaching; knowhow for effective communication in general, and for their subject(s), to mediate learning; have well-developed skills in literacy, numeracy and Information Technology (IT); understand the school curriculum so as to expertly deconstruct its specialised content, use available resources, plan and design suitable learning programmes; be sensitive to diversity and include all learners appropriately, identify learning or social problems and partner with professional service providers if necessary; must manage classrooms effectively in diverse contexts to ensure a conducive learning environment; assess learners in reliable, varied ways, using the results of assessment to improve teaching and learning. There is insufficient time during the practicum to master all these competencies yet the schools into which novice teachers go expect them to perform to these standards. To support and offer a species of induction into the school organisation, mentors are the obvious remedy.

Implementation of mentorship models in teacher education has been rather uncoordinated, without standard guidelines in higher education and in public schooling. Although government's Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa 2011-2025 (SPFTED) (DBE & DHET, 2011) emphasises mentoring at all stages of teacher education, full scale implementation is not yet in place. Quality in teaching and of teachers should improve with the implementation of this framework. During May 2017 a Master Teacher Development Plan was issued (DBE, 2017). The plan sets out specific targets and deliverables and the strategies to achieve these. However systemic underperformance is the result of a vicious cycle of schooling in South African education. The policies in place are meant to lead to a virtuous cycle (Wilmot, 2017), but their implementation in the schools as organisations are fraught with multitudinous problems (Spaull, 2014).

One's self-identity in relation to one's own global perception of oneself (personal identity) and one's social and professional identities need to be distinguished (Thoits and Virshup, 1997). *Personal identities* have to do with self-definitions (unique and idiosyncratic characteristics) of a person. The category to which a person belongs relates to one's *social identity* and *professional identity*. The last referring to the self as performing a particular role or behaviour. By 1890 William James (1842-1910), the American philosopher and psychologist was proposing that there are as many selves as there are positions that one might hold in society. Out of those earliest observations in psychology Hermans, Rijks and Kempen (1993:215) have described the *dialogical self* in a metaphor as a "dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions in the *landscape of the mind*". The dialogical self specifically refers to the many differing and changing senses we have of our own identity depending on place and time and our own emotional state.

To put it another way, Drake, Spillane and Hufferd-Ackles (2001:2) describe teachers' identities as "their sense of self as well as their knowledge and beliefs, dispositions, interests, and orientation towards work and change". Thus, the way teachers feel about themselves professionally, emotionally, and politically (Jansen, 2001) may shift based on the social and cultural conditions under which they work, and other identity positions they take up in their lives. Their teacher identity may also be in tension with official representations in policy documents

(Jansen, 2001). Everything relevant to a professional role as a teacher and what she/he tries to achieve in performing the work of a teacher is part, of course, of the personal self. In being a professional the teacher still retains a personal history and behaviours idiosyncratically their own. However, there can often be conflict between roles (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Alsup (2008) clarifies the cognitive conflicts novice teachers may have while enacting authority as they experience personal vulnerability. The taking on of a professional role for novice teachers is negotiated and fascinating to observe. We asked the question, "What was it like to observe the taking on of the role of a professional teacher?"

Research question

How the SBMTs and the novice teachers experienced the development of professional identities was the phenomenon we were curious about, as novice teachers have to perform to professional standards when they enter schools to do their practica. So, based on that observation our research question was, "What are the experiences of SBMTs and novice teachers in relation to a professional identity development?"

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

School-based mentoring is as complex an exercise as the one, the practicum, in which the student teachers learn to integrate theory and practice and compose their roles as professional teachers (Hall, Draper, Young and Bullough, 2008). During the practicum student teachers are expected to apply some of the theory accumulated at university in a real setting, but they are often faced with taking on classes on behalf of absent experienced teachers. This is one of the repeated truisms in the literature, but it is not only the theory which student teachers deploy in a real school setting (Kiggundu and Nayimuli, 2009; Aglazor, 2017). They exercise their personal capacity to *adjust* to a completely different society which is the school culture (Sabar, 2004) and much depends on their social and physical environment for their professional identity to develop (Pappa, Moate, Ruohotie-Lyhty and Eteläpelto, 2017). Negotiating a role to fit into the school they are in is a matter of external position in terms of the power exercised by the more experienced mentor-teacher and can put the student teacher into a very vulnerable frame of mind (Alsup, 2018; Myers-Scotton, 1993; Wetherell and Mohantry, 2010). The development of a professional identity which consists of well founded theoretical learning and the ability to use the very practical skills needed in a classroom and a school with ingenuity and flexibility is begun during teaching practice. In an effort to facilitate this extremely difficult transition from being a student of teaching to becoming a professional teacher, students are usually placed in schools and assigned a SBMT to guide and support them during their school experience. Mentoring is much more than simply an experienced teacher assisting a would-be teacher to succeed in a real-life school setting. Nel and Luneta (2017) state that in South African schools SBMTs are usually experienced teachers. These experienced SBMTs play a significant supportive and helpful role in the gradual professionalization of the student from being a learner to taking hers/his place within the profession. It follows that mentor teachers need to understand what mentoring means: the role he/she needs to play, the how of mentoring students, the expectations of the student and the institution as well and what practically

needs to be done during the practicum. All these concerns need to be considered prior to the actual mentoring process when student teachers are placed in schools.

In terms of what a mentor teacher is professionally, that is how hers/his broad theoretical knowledge has become an intrinsic driver of the experiential work performed as a professional in a school setting, there are many views to consider. The concept that mentorship is a strictly hierarchical relationship between a mentor and the mentee, in which the mentor is more experienced, knowledgeable and better skilled than the mentee (Aladejana, Aladejana & Ehindero, 2006) is not sufficiently productive. The assumption in this sort of definition is that the mentor "has it all" and can provide what the mentee yearns to grasp and learn. This puts the mentee into the role of an empty vessel in a particular area of knowledge. In contrast mentoring has been described mentoring as a developmental alliance, a relationship between equals in which someone is helped to develop. Negovan (2006) regards it as a component of the partnership movement between schools, employers, and the community or an opportunity for individuals to have a positive influence on youth. But it is not only youth who become student teachers. The view of Siegel and Reinstein (2001) who define mentoring as a valuable resource for individual and organisational learning, and for coping with an unstable and dynamically changing workplace, is broader. It has been suggested that mentoring in the pre-service teacher context should also be considered as a reciprocal relationship as both the mentor teacher and pre-service teacher bring their own expertise, skills, and knowledge to the relationship. The descriptions of what mentoring is from various points of view is helpful to broaden the ambit of the professional identity of the mentor and the mentee.

Adopting a poststructuralist perspective on identity, personal or professional, enables a discussion of identity as "multiple, dynamic, and subject to change, and the relationship between language and identity as mutually constitutive" (Blackledge and Pavlenko, 2001:249) because one expresses one's sense of identity through language. Geijsel and Meijers (2005:424) say of identity in this sense that it is "the ever-changing configuration of interpretations that individuals attach to themselves, as related to the activities that they participate in". In the case of the student teachers, their activities in the school are supposed to be those of professional teachers but what is a novice teacher to make of hers or his identity when the policy documents outline an ideal of teachers who are supposed to be reflective, committed, critical practitioners with sound content knowledge and the student teacher interacting with a mentor and other professionals in a school is far from this ideal. Dos Reis (2012:50) speaks at length of the conflicting role expectations of mentors and student teachers basing her work on recent publications and her own research (Bradbury and Koballa, 2008; Frick, Arend and Beets, 2010; Kiggundu and Nayimuli, 2009; Maphosa, Shumba and Shumba, 2007; Mawoyo and Robinson, 2005; Quick and Siebörger, 2005). Social and material conditions maintain identity, but these conditions can lead to contradictions between the different identity positions that teachers adopt. There may also be a mismatch between the collective and the individual.

To be a teacher in the professional sense means the identity of the novice teacher must shift away from being a student learner into the less clear-cut space initially of becoming a professional. Wenger's (1998:159) description of identity and practice working in parallel is useful to describe that process. Identity is *negotiated experience,* through our participation in experiences and the process of reification which we perform on ourselves and others. The experience of playing the professional and then reflecting on it and reifying it and the other teachers and pupils enables the

adoption of a role as a professional. The second statement Wenger makes is that identity is established through community *membership* - what is familiar or unfamiliar, so the novice teacher actively moves out of the role of academic student and identifies her/himself as a member of the teaching community of professionals. Wenger's next statement on identity is that it is a *learning trajectory* - what positions we adopted before and where we are now - no longer a student learning to teach but a professional teaching pupil. Next Wenger says identity is a *nexus of multimembership* - the multiplicity of our forms of membership need to be integrated into one identity so that one can identify oneself as a professional teacher. Finally, Wenger says identity is *a relation between the local and the global* - as we identify ourselves through local ways of belonging and to broader constellations - at the school and to the larger body of professionals. Identity is not fixed but dynamic, fluid according to circumstances and multifaceted (Blackledge & Pavlenko 2002). For the novice teacher moving from the familiar role of student to practical hands-on teacher can be daunting with or without a mentor.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social constructivism as a sociological theory fitted our overall research framework as identity issues are embedded socially and knowledge and the construction of identity are predicated on interaction with other people. The study is qualitative as it relies on SBMTs' reports, semi-structured interviews with mentors and novice teachers and observation of the process of facilitation by the SBMTs to elicit what their experiences were in the practicum related to the role of professional teacher. Personal reflections and observations were valued as they gave an inside view of what happened. The study relies on Dialogical Self Theory (DST) (Meijers and Hermans, 2018) to examine at close quarters what the participants said about professional identity and the differing I-positions they adopted. Meijers and Hermans (2018:7) provide a brief definition of DST:

> ... the dialogical self can be defined as a dynamic multiplicity of I-positions in the society of mind. As a spatial construction, the self can be depicted as a landscape in which a multiplicity of positions is moving around. At the same time the mind functions as a soundscape because I-positions can assume a voice which allows dialogical relationships between positions to emerge. The dialogical relationships within this multiplicity of I-positions are supposed to function as a 'society of mind' which is part of the society at large ...

 "I" as a subject occupy differing I-positions which are described in differing ways so that the internal shift from one voice to another is the result of an internal dialogue with changing ideas, thoughts and experiences. This communication takes place within the individual. The external self is described in terms of space and time (Batory, Bąk, Oles and Pulchaska- Wasyl, 2010). Depending on circumstances and different conditions the changes in self and the position of "I" will occur as the dialogue is taking place. This means the position changes according to circumstances and conditions. "The central notion of DST, *I*-position, acknowledges the multiplicity of the self while preserving, at the same time, its coherence and unity" (Hermans, 2013:83).

Dialogical self-theory is not widely discussed in the literature in relation to novice teachers or mentors in South Africa, although Alberts (2018) has fruitfully employed it to look at the emerging

identities of adolescents in a rural school in the Cape. Novice teachers during the practicum are necessarily in the process of developing a professional identity and SBMTs, it is assumed, have a well-developed professional identity. Their theoretical bases and their beliefs together with their experiential work in the classroom may be said to be constitutive of their professional identity. And importantly their internal and external dialogues result in that professional identity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The rationale for this study was to explore the experiences of SBMTs, mentoring student teachers enrolled for a B.Ed degree, in their third year of study and exposed to teaching intermediate learners. The study adopted a qualitative case study design, and this was identified as an appropriate methodology to investigate real life situation, using a small sample (Cresswell, 2009; Yin, 2014). The case study approach was used to help in gathering information and assisting the researcher to understand the process followed in mentoring novice teachers during the practicum.

Participants

The study participants were four women and one male teacher (SBMTs) and three women and two male volunteer novice teachers. In total five volunteer SBMTs and five novice teachers participated in the study. The small group of participants suited a case study approach with purposive sampling (Yin, 2014). The SBMTs were identified after the researcher had visited second year novice teachers in the same schools. The purposive selection of participating mentor teachers was because they indicated they had been assigned students every year. It was for these reasons that they were approached as the researcher felt that their experience would yield relevant and insightful information (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). University policy dictates that teachers' mentors are required to have attended a mentor-training workshop to ensure they understand their expectations when assigned students to mentor. The novice teachers in the study participated as volunteers and their involvement was based on their enrolment in any teaching practice module and be in their third year of the B. Ed programme. Consent was obtained and as agreed with all participants their anonymity was protected (Babbie and Mouton, 2001; Bryman and Teevan, 2005).

Data Collection from various sources

Data were collected during two semesters of student teachers' school experience. Students chose the period at which they were willing to go on the practicum. They approached a school principal with a letter from their academic institution to obtain permission to practice at the school during the period indicated in the letter. Upon agreement the principal prepared staff and appointed a teacher to assume the role of a mentor in a formal way. The SBMTs were expected to enculture, develop, guide and support prospective teachers on their path towards becoming professional teachers. The enculturation of prospective teachers is very critical as they have to learn the pedagogical skills, find meaning and value in the work they plan do in future. The main sources of data for this study were observation of SBMTs facilitating the mentoring process, review of

mentors' notes and their reports, multiple in-depth interviews with volunteer participants (mentors and student teachers). The purpose of these interviews was to enquire from SBMTs and novice teachers about the relational, developmental and contextual dimensions of mentoring and being mentored to develop professional identities.

The researcher observed mentor participants according to a schedule for an entire class period. The SBMTs offered their practice records for perusal, the researcher took field notes on how the SBMTs recorded the performance of the student as observed, how they interacted with their novice teacher, how they shared their responsibilities and advice to transfer theoretical knowledge into practice as well as their participation in course-related activities. The researcher observed the facilitation of mentoring provided to the student at the end of the students' lesson presentation as well as the communication and interaction taking place between all parties.

Data Analysis

Reports were reviewed, and audiotaped interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed while field notes were left in their original state (Creswell, 2009; 2016). As the analysis of data is a slow and a messy process, the chunks of data were then divided into coherent texts and participants' related views were coded into themes (Bryman and Teevan, 2005).

The analysis of the data was through coding for recurrent themes (Kvale, 2007), as well as noting the internal and external positions which participants used to construct their identities (Meijers, 2017). DST demonstrates how "identity can be typified as both unitary and multiple, both continuous and discontinuous, and both individual and social" (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011:309). So, after the first coding, the data were examined for differing and competing ideas of identity or those which suggested fluidity and dynamism in their identities as professionals.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In their roles as mentors the SBMTs revealed identities which were assured experts, comfortable in the I-position of experienced professionals. The benefits of having aspiring professionals in their classes was noted. However, the training to be mentors was deemed inadequate and some of them felt insecure in the exercise of mentoring.:

SBMTs in I-position as observers and experts in their professional capacity:

> *"An opportunity given to student teacher to learn to teach in a real context".*

> *"Allow student teachers to observe our teaching, demonstrate to them and provide guidance to the aspirant student teachers"*

> *"A coercive way of giving student teachers practice into teaching in the real context. [I as critic of the system] and "However, it is the opportunity to learn from the knowledgeable and experienced teachers".*

> *"Our responsibility as experienced teachers is to guide the inexperienced and aspirant teachers on how to teach".*

> *"I'm honoured to transfer my teaching skills to the prospective teacher".*

Yet despite their confidence in their professional identities they were concerned about their mentoring capacity.

I-position as mentor-teacher with disappointed hopes:
> "*… we received one day workshop facilitated by UNISA. It was information session because we were bombarded with information in one day*".

I-position as mentor -teacher under undue pressure:
> *"It was a Saturday and we were expected to produce a portfolio within a month*".

I-position as mentor-teacher ready to compromise:
> "*Such training is not enough but the beauty is that we were given guidelines and material to refer to during teaching practice. The material spells out what is expected of me as a mentor and the mentee as well. So, we can refer do the documents provided*".

The SBMTs felt the mentoring was onerous:
> *"There is no compensation, and this is extra load for me".*
>
> *"We need to have a structure for mentoring students. Now it is difficult for some of us who have not been trained".*
>
> *"The student teachers disrupt".*

The SBMTs want different arrangements to help them professionally:
> *"Five weeks is too short and disrupt my plan for the month. While we both (the student and myself) are becoming settled and the relationship start to develop, it is time for them to leave".*

The novice teachers are beneficial and perform in their professional identity to great success:
> *"Honestly, they make a difference. Having UNISA student in our classrooms from their first year of study can lessen many of the problems in our schools. For example, some of our classes are large or overcrowded, they help us with reading and discipline as well as management of the class. My learners' reading has improved because the student teacher has dedicated time to teach different groups of learners to read every day".*
>
> *"There is discipline in our classes and my learners now understand there's time for everything. The student teacher made learners aware that homework is important, and it is checked every morning before engaging in other activities. Learners now understand, and they are now responsible".*

"I like it because my student suggested some coping mechanism when I was unaware that I was complaining as they are part of us".

"My student teacher introduced technology in her teaching. Learners enjoyed her technology lesson teaching the solar system showing them on the screen and learners were able to experience different rotation, the size of each and recited the name of each planet. So, they brought new teaching strategies in our classrooms".

The novice teachers negotiating their professional identities

The novice teachers were in general enthusiastic about the practicum and their mentors for inducting them into the profession of teaching. Others were unsure of their professional identity and wanted more feedback and were disappointed in the mentor. The five week-long practicums were in general considered too short. However, those student teachers who spent longer periods as teaching assistants (receiving a stipend) were more successful.

Some felt supported and directed by the mentor in developing a professional identity:
> *"I learned a great deal from my mentor and I see where I'm going now. The professional guidance I received from my mentor has increased my confidence".*

I-position of a confident and reflective professional becomes evident:
> *"I have been at this school for three years and have evolved from being a confused and a shy student to a professional student teacher. Through my mentor I learned professional ethics such as adhering to time table, understanding school policies and attending meetings held in a professional manner".*

I-position of a professional with a burgeoning professional identity:
> *"As a classroom student assistant, I now understand how the school operates. Learning this information from text without applying it is not easy to contextualise. One needs to be in the school context to learn and experience it".*

I-position of tentative professional which changes to confidence:
> *"It was difficult in the beginning because I'm shy and I never thought I will be able to do it. My mentor was patient with me and helped me to deal with myself, the learners as well as and learnt a better way to approach a lesson".*

I-position lacking in professional confidence and critical of mentoring inconsistencies:
> *"The feedback I received was always short and not that elaborate. I expected complete feedback from my mentor because I always put a lot of energy into preparing my lessons. There are times when I felt my mentor is just not open enough or not ready to guide me. I am always dissatisfied with her feedback".*

"I would be alone in the classroom for three days without her. I did not have the guts to find out from the principal or the deputy principal where my mentor is. I feel I was thrown into the deep end. This is the frustration I experienced".

"My mentor teacher was on and off with me. She skipped days without seeing me, but I was given work to do".

The I-position of professional identity revealed how the problem was resolved:
"I was happy that I have work to do and was asking guidance from my other fellow students as we were six at the same school".

I-position affirming that the more experience in the practica the more professional the novice becomes:
" have been at this school for two and a half years and delighted that my decision to change schools led me to the right direction. My new mentor understands a student teacher, is positive, patient and extremely helpful. Since coming to school, I have grown to become a professional student teacher. My mentor is open minded, knowledgeable and willing to share and learn from me. He made me realise that as people we learn from each other and learning is an ongoing process and encouraged me to take part in professional community of practice".

The overwhelming evidence is that SBMTs help novice teachers to construct a professional identity which changes and is fluid according to the external circumstances and interior states. The feedback mentors give novices is experienced differently in differing circumstances leading to the novice's shifting I-positions as a burgeoning professional. Positive modelling of a professional identity is a positive circumstance, just as neglect and dismissiveness have a negative impact on professional identity. That novice teachers have many cognitive conflicts to attend to as they negotiate a professional identity through practical hands-on teaching is evident. The more exposure to the real-life school experience the better for aspiring professionals in the organisation. The need for mentors to be trained is increasingly evident as current practice of a short workshop offered by the academic institution where the novice teachers are studying is inadequate to help them in their role as SBMTs. The many positions of the dialogical self both in the SBMTs and their mentees show a fluid and dynamic multitude of relatively autonomous stances in their mind landscapes in relation to the questioning, observing and recording of the researcher. These differing senses of identity are very dependent on place, time and particularly emotional state.

CONCLUSION

As teachers have an influence in the formative development of aspirant teachers, it will help to prolong teaching practice particularly for distance learning student teachers, keeping them in schools as Teaching Assistants. Such an insightful and innovative initiative would benefit the entire teacher education system. This extended teaching practice is in a way a form of continuous induction of students into the teaching profession. Both teacher mentors and student teachers value

mentoring as a crucial developmental relationship. The participation of volunteer mentors shows that some employees are passionate about their work and committed to go an extra mile to develop aspiring teachers because they believe it is their responsibility to develop and transfer their skills to upcoming teachers. Instituting intervention programmes such as mentoring of prospective teachers shows that teacher training institutions are supportive of their distance learning students and show concern about their learning and development. Mentoring programmes aim at establishing win-win situations for all participants (Rowland, 2012).

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