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UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF MENTORING IN DEVELOPING THE LEADERSHIP CAPACITY OF STUDENT TEACHERS: OPPORTUNITIES AND PITFALLS FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE MENTOR, THE MENTEE, AND THE HEAD TEACHER

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand the role of mentoring in developing the leadership capacity of student teachers from the perspectives of the mentor, the mentee, and the head teacher. It explored the opportunities and pitfalls that arise during the mentoring process and how they affect the development of leadership skills in student teachers. Data was collected through google form questionnaire and telephone interviews with the mentor, mentee (the student teacher), and the head teacher. The findings of this study revealed that mentoring could be a valuable tool for supporting the professional development and leadership capacity of student teachers. However, effective mentoring relationships depend on various factors, including the mentor's qualifications, experience, support of the mentor, the readiness and willingness of the mentee to learn, and the level of support the head teacher provides, some of which are identified as challenges in the study. Thus, effective mentoring programs should be supported by the appropriate training, resources, and support to ensure mentors are equipped to support their mentees in developing their leadership skills. The head teachers should be aware of the importance of mentoring and create an enabling environment to support mentoring program. Finally, the authors recommend for a clear framework and guideline be develop to ensure that best is attained from the practice.

Keywords: *Mentoring, Student Teacher, Pitfalls, Opportunities, Leadership Capacity, Mentee, Mentor, Head Teacher*

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring is crucial in preparing prospective leaders, particularly in educational settings. Several studies have documented the significance of mentoring in the professional development of aspiring school teachers and leaders (Augustine-shaw, 2015; Bowman, 2004; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Campbell et al., 2012; Clayton et al., 2013; Crisp & Alvarado-Young, 2018; Dziczkowski, 2013; Ehrich et al., 2004; Komives, 2007). According to Ehrich et al. (2004), the importance of mentoring is crucial for both mentees in this case (student teachers) and mentors (veteran teachers) because it avails both the opportunity to reflect, share, and engage in mutual professional development (Ehrich et al., 2004). The mentors' contribution supports the development of novice and trained teachers' instructive practices and the continued

enhancement of the school community that institutes this as a form of leadership (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009).

In most cases, teachers think of themselves as less of a leader. Thus, their leadership physiognomies and professional practices are established when they are involved in the leadership development process through mentoring (Gul et al., 2019). It is generally believed that student teachers need strong support in the school of their station and beyond through well-structured professional development programs through mentoring by inspiring them to take up more responsibilities (Muijs & Harris, 2007). Baking on the argument of (Schneider, 2008), he stressed that mentors required unequivocal drill and leadership to be efficient in their role as mentors.

Bowman (2004) underscores that proficient classroom teachers are usually aware of the affirmative improvement they bring into their learners' "academic, socio-emotional, physical, and ethical lives." Their awareness provides meaning to their personal and professional lives as educators. Sadly, for many teachers, leadership burdens appear so different that veteran teachers, including student teachers, avoid the test of leadership opportunities altogether (Bowman, 2004). This belief is not maintained by the teachers' group only. However, leadership also perceived teachers to be effective in their instructional roles and thus did not consider teachers to take up leadership positions in schools. Paradoxically, student teachers are primarily prepared to become classroom teachers; therefore, if they accept or aspire to assume leadership challenges in their schools or within the cluster, their teacher counterparts usually chastise them for demonstrating a thirst for relevance or control (Bowman, 2004).

Narrowing the practice of mentoring student teachers in the Gambian, Jabbi (2015) resonates that student-teacher on their teaching practices is dispensed with leadership tasks. According to him, these tasks did not impact their teaching practice. Instead, it helps them to grow, become more efficient and effective teachers upon completing their probation training, and take up their full-time teaching responsibilities (Jabbi, 2015). A project sponsored by the World Bank was designed to work with Gambian educators responsible for preparing and mentoring student-teachers at the primary school level. The program was piloted in 2017 to support the education ministry's agenda of teacher capacity building in mathematics and English. The program was meant to improve instructional pedagogies and student engagement (Horizons, 2017).

Emphasis is made on mentoring in an education system, particularly in the teacher education framework. The ministry of higher and primary education, in collaboration with the Gambia College, a significant teacher training college in the Gambia, strongly emphasizes mentoring. By policy, student teachers are not meant to handle their classrooms; instead, they should be attached to veteran teachers who will help develop their professional and leadership capacity (MoBSE, 2004, 2016b, 2016a). The policy aspiration was clear, but a paradox is observed between policy and practice in implementing mentoring of student teachers during their teaching practices. Most student teachers are immediately assigned to their classrooms throughout their teaching practice. This practice defeats the purpose of grooming effective and efficient teachers/leaders through mentoring. Student teachers require professional guidance and support from experienced teachers who will prepare them to assume leadership roles in their classrooms as teacher leaders or within the school.

Ironically, the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE) still perceived mentoring as an effective tool for coaching new teacher leaders. Several write-ups were

done about mentoring programs, most of which are published in blogs and news articles, placing significance on the development of the leadership capacity of student teachers. However, the scientific approach to studying the nature of mentoring student teachers in primary schools in the Gambia is still limited. Jabbi's (2015) work entitled "Leadership Roles of Teacher Trainees in the Gambia Primary School: A Case Study of Two Primary Schools" was the only academic write that addressed leadership roles in developing the capacity of teacher trainees (student-teachers). The importance of mentoring through leadership programs cannot be overemphasized, yet, it is one of the areas least studied in the Gambia despite its emphasis by both institutions on teacher education practices.

Teacher Training in the Gambia

The Gambia has several teacher training programs to help prepare individuals for careers in education. These programs include both pre-service and in-service training options. Pre-service training typically occurs at the college or university level, while the government or other organizations often provide in-service training for current teachers looking to improve their skills. Institutions that offer teacher training in the Gambia include the University of The Gambia and the Gambia College. Additionally, several non-governmental organizations provide training and support to teachers in the country. The Gambia College is one such organization that provides pre-service training for primary and Junior high school teachers. However, the Gambia college has two types of teacher training: regular and extension.

Regular teacher training is the standard admission where students spend two years on campus, and final year; they go to the field for teaching practice. As for the extension program, teachers attend the schools as unqualified teachers and report to the college during the summer, Christmas, and Easter holidays for training for three years. On the other hand, the university of the Gambia mainly provides both pre-service and in-service teacher training to senior secondary teachers. In addition, school leaders are recruited annually for management training at the university of the Gambia to improve their professional and leadership capacity.

The Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MOBSE) and Ministry of Higher Education Research, Science, and Technology (MoHERST) play a key role in teacher training in the Gambia. They are responsible for the development of teacher training policies, as well as the implementation of training programs. These ministries work closely with the Gambia College and the University of The Gambia to provide teacher training aligned with the country's national education goals.

Another critical player in teacher training in the Gambia is the Gambia Teachers' Union (GTU). The GTU is a professional organization representing teachers' interests in the country. They work to improve the working conditions and professional development opportunities for teachers and provide members with training and support.

As mentioned above, teachers undergoing training at Gambia College spend one semester in the schools to gain practical professional experience. This practice is deliberately included in the teacher training programs to improve teachers' professional and leadership skills through learning by doing. Assigning these student teachers to mentors allows them to learn from experienced teachers and prepares them for future roles as teachers and leaders in schools. During the teaching practice, both MoBSE, MoHERST, and the Gambia college emphasize mentoring as they believe it is

essential to develop teachers' professional and leadership capacity as teachers are current and future educational leaders.

Overall, the Gambia has a number of teacher training options available, including traditional university programs, alternative training programs, and in-service opportunities. These programs are designed to help individuals become effective educators and to support current teachers in improving their skills and knowledge.

Despite the importance of mentoring in developing the leadership capacity of student teachers, little is known about the specific opportunities and pitfalls of mentoring programs in the context of The Gambia's education system. This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the role of mentoring in developing the leadership capacity of student teachers in The Gambia by exploring the perspectives of the mentor, the mentee, and the head teacher. The research examines the challenges and successes of mentoring programs, including factors that contribute to effective mentoring relationships and how mentoring impacts the professional development and leadership capacity of student teachers. The findings of this study will inform the development of more effective mentoring programs in The Gambia, ultimately supporting the growth and development of future educators in the country. As a result, the study will address the above problem by answering the following questions: *1. How does the school mentoring process develop the leadership skills of student teachers in Gambian primary schools? 2. What challenges and opportunities did mentors, mentees, and principals face during the process?*

Literature Review

Boote & Beile, (2005) argued that a researcher(s) should be familiar with their field of study before starting the actual research (Boote & Beile, 2005; Jabbi, 2015). The current study is designed to explore the role of mentoring in developing student teachers' leadership capacity. As a result, the researchers undertook an extensive reading on the subject matter to have a solid ground to stand on when conducting the study. In addition, to be able to determine a gap in the literature.

Mentoring is a fluid concept with no generally recognized definition (Crisp et al., 2017). According to Crisp and colleagues, mentoring could be best described and comprehended through an account of outstanding mentoring features "including sources of mentoring and types or forms of mentoring support" (Crisp et al., 2017; Crisp & Alvarado-Young, 2018). For Kram, mentoring has been loosely defined as a liaison between two individuals whereby the veteran or experienced party is committed to offering developmental support to the novice or inexperienced party (Arthur & Kram, 1985). Educationists consider mentoring interactions essential tools for developing student-teachers leadership capacity (Crisp & Alvarado-Young, 2018). They stressed that mentoring affects numerous leadership capabilities for students, student-teachers, and teacher leaders, comprising "socially responsible leadership capacity, leadership identity development, and leadership skills and dispositions" (Crisp & Alvarado-Young, 2018).

Mentoring process involves two categories of people, mentor, and mentee. The mentor, usually considered experienced and knowledgeable on the subject matter, takes on the role of an organized coach by observing the trainee and offering feedback (Buhagiar & Attard Tonna, 2015, chp, 1, p.1). Interaction between mentor and mentee or mentoring relations is critical in developing the leadership skills of novice teachers and aspiring leaders (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Clayton et al., 2013; Ehrich et al.,

2004). Most successful programs geared toward producing leaders have "well-crafted mentoring" (Hackmann & Wanat, 2007).

According to Daresh, the partnership between mentor (veteran) and mentee (student-teachers) have the potential to stimulate an atmosphere that favors advanced student achievement (Clayton et al., 2013; J. Daresh, 2004; J. C. Daresh, 1995; Jafar et al., 2021). The tutelage and development of student-teachers or general student fraternity as leaders have been central tenacity for higher education institutions, particularly teacher training institutions. It is mainly evident in their mission statements and the continuous manifestation of "curricular and co-curricular leadership development programs" (Komives, 2007). Gul et al. (2019) described mentoring as one of the official roles of teacher leadership; this is more crucial in supporting associates and assisting novice teachers in transforming their practices and potential (Dozier, 2007). In formal school settings, teachers are mainly considered followers; they are less regarded as leaders. However, teachers' leadership is argued to have the potential to stimulate positive school culture, favoring teaching and learning in primary, junior secondary, and senior high schools (Gul et al., 2019; Roby, 2011).

Ekiz (2006) underscored that mentoring in Turkey has been placed at a high standard; this is so because of recent efforts that are made in the corporation "established between schools and teacher education institutions to prepare student teachers for the teaching profession more effectively" (Ekiz, 2006).

The novelty of the study

Based on the literature above, the authors were able to determine a gap in the discussion of mentoring in the leadership sphere, particularly in teacher leadership development. There has been extensive study on this subject worldwide. However, researchers realized that the subject is understudied in the Gambian context and needs further exploration since Jabbi's (2015) work is the only study investigating leadership in teacher training programs. The unavailability of scientific investigation in the Gambian education system made it crucial for this study to be conducted. It is long overdue to explore the leadership development process through mentoring by exploring critical analytical practice.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

By describing the opportunities and pitfalls in the mentoring process, the researchers used a qualitative approach based on a descriptive case study to investigate the role of mentoring in developing student teachers' leadership capacity. According to Creswell, J.W. & Creswell (2018), qualitative research aids researchers in investigating, discovering, and comprehending the meanings that individuals or groups ascribe to social or individual interaction. The process includes developing research questions and procedures, data collection in the participant's environment, inductive data analysis building from particulars to general themes, and the researchers interpreting the data's meaning (Creswell, J.W. & Creswell, 2018).

Participant Selection

Purposive selection is used to select research participants. According to Creswell, purposeful sampling "identifies and selects individuals or groups of individuals who are mostly conversant about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest" (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011; J.W Creswell, 2008; John W. Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Keeping

this in mind, the researchers believed that the approach is relevant to be implored in this study because the participants recruited for this study ought to fall in the following criteria: a veteran teacher acting as a mentor, a student teacher (mentee), and a head teacher. Based on those criteria, the researchers purposefully select participants for the current study. The study seeks three (3) participants: a mentor, a mentee, and a primary school principal from Sateba Lower Basic School in Niani District, in the Central River Region of the Gambia. This school was selected because access was more straightforward, and participants were willing to participate in the study. Thus, it is essential to note that the name assigned to the school above is a pseudonym.

Upon recruiting the three participants, researchers sent the interview guide questions to the participants three days prior to the interview. This allowed the participants to familiarize themselves with the interview spectrum and be prepared for the type of questions they may be potentially asked.

Data Collection

An interview and google form questionnaire were used to collect study data. An interview, according to Gay (2012), is typically designed to purposefully interact with one or more people in order to obtain specific information from the other party. Researchers can obtain important information from participants through interviews that they would not be able to obtain simply by observing them (Gay, L.R., Mills. G.E., & Airasian, 2012). Based on that fact, researchers believed that the interview is the most appropriate instrument for data collection because it allows researchers to ask participants specific questions. Also, it allows researchers to ask a follow-up question to clarify any doubt or concern raised during the interaction.

In addition, researchers used a google form questionnaire to collect additional information for triangulation because the interview was done via telephone, and sometimes the internet connection could be unstable. As a result, the researchers thought to use additional instruments containing similar questions asked in interview sessions; this will equally give the participants a chance to elaborate more on their answers during their leisure time.

Analysis Procedures

Thematic analysis is used in this study. To generate the themes from the data, researchers implore Miles & Huberman's (1994) suggested steps when analyzing data, and the steps were: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion. Researchers began data analysis immediately after the interviews by transcribing the interview audio. After transcription, the researchers started reducing the data by selecting essential phrases, sentences, and words and displayed them for further analysis. From the displayed data, researchers developed the themes discussed below.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

FINDING

Effective tool for leadership development: Mentoring is seen as an effective way to develop the leadership capacity of student teachers in Gambia, with both the mentor, the head teacher, and the mentee reporting positive experiences. For instance, the mentor and the head teacher stated that mentoring was crucial in student teachers' professional and leadership development.

Communication and goal-setting: The mentor identified the importance of clear communication and goal setting in the mentoring process and the need for ongoing support and feedback. Mentee (student teacher) reported that mentoring helped him

develop his confidence, knowledge and skills as a teacher and better understand the profession's expectations. Headteacher highlighted the importance of mentor selection and training and the need for clear guidelines and policies to ensure the effective use of mentoring.

Nevertheless, both the head teacher and the mentor described their relationship as cordial, and the mentoring process between the mentor and mentee was reciprocal as they both learned from each other. In addition, the mentee maintained that giving feedback was central to the mentoring process as he regularly receives feedback from the mentor and occasionally from the head teacher.

Instructional capacity vs. leadership capacity: The mentoring process emphasizes developing teachers' instructional capacity into their leadership capacity. Though both mentor and head teacher recognized student teachers as potential school leaders, they are seen as teachers rather than leaders at that stage of their professional careers.

Consistency and quality: One potential pitfall of mentoring is the lack of consistency in mentor quality and effectiveness, which may lead to variations in the mentees' level of support and development. Since there are no specific requirements or standards for mentor selection, this undermines the quality of mentoring, student-teacher leadership, and professional development. Thus, the head teacher highlighted the need for clear guidelines and policies to avoid this pitfall to ensure the effective use of mentoring.

The Capacity of the Mentor: The mentor does not undergo any professional training relevant to mentoring other than the regular teacher training they acquired from teacher training college. This training is generally insufficient to prepare them for a mentoring role in schools. According to the head teacher, they organize school-based workshops and other training to develop the capacity of mentors and mentees in general since there is no formal training for mentors in the schools.

Holistic approach: Another theme that emerged is the importance of mentoring as one component of a more extensive professional development program for student teachers. While mentoring can be effective in developing leadership capacity, it should not be the only form of professional development offered. Other forms of professional development, such as workshops, coursework, and job shadowing, can also provide student teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to be influential leaders.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to understand the role of mentoring in developing the leadership capacity of student teachers in Gambia from the perspectives of the mentor, the mentee, and the head teacher. Some interesting findings are highlighted above. For instance, mentoring is a great platform to develop student teachers' leadership capacity, with mentors and mentees reporting positive experiences. This position is evident given the everyday use of mentoring to prepare people for a future role; the practice could develop student teachers' capacity. However, due to various factors discussed below, it is unclear how to tailor this process toward the mentees' needs in developing their leadership capacity.

Additionally, given the importance of clear communication and goal setting highlighted by the mentor, the mentoring process must have a clear-cut direction to smoothen the process. Clear communication between the mentor and mentee is crucial for setting goals and understanding the expectations of the mentoring relationship. This

allows the mentee to be more self-aware of their strengths and weaknesses and set realistic development goals. The mentor's role is to provide ongoing support and feedback throughout the mentoring relationship, which is crucial for the mentee's growth and development.

In any relationship, communication is an essential aspect. However, in this mentoring process, there appeared to be a gap in goal setting and communication between the mentee and the mentor at the beginning of the process. According to the mentee (student teacher), he was just assigned to his mentor and started teaching without clear guidelines from the school and from the mentor on what is expected from both. It is a tradition in schools that student teachers are assigned to a mentor who should guide them during their teaching practice, but no clear guidelines are available for implementation.

However, the mentee maintained that mentoring helped him develop his confidence, knowledge and skills as a teacher and better understand the profession's expectations. Generally, this is the aspiration for teaching practice and mentoring process to ensure that student teachers have a platform to develop professionally. In this process, the mentee's role is to actively engage in the mentoring relationship and be open to learning and feedback. Through the mentoring relationship, mentees can gain a deeper understanding of the teaching profession, which can help them to develop their teaching style and become more effective teachers. Mentoring can also help mentees develop their confidence and self-awareness, which is crucial for effective leadership.

Another fascinating issue mentioned is mentor selection and training and the need for clear guidelines and policies to ensure the effective use of mentoring. Despite MoBSE, MoHERST, and the Gambia College's emphasis on the need for student teachers to be under mentorship, there is no clear framework for mentors and mentees to adopt. However, the primary role of the head teacher is to provide oversight and guidance for the mentoring program. This includes selecting and training mentors and providing clear guidelines and policies to ensure the effective use of mentoring. Headteachers can provide support and oversight to ensure that the mentoring program is aligned with the school's goals and objectives.

Though the head teacher tries hard to guide the mentor and mentee, several challenges make this impossible for him, according to the head teacher. Some of these challenges are discussed below, including human and material resources. Teachers could be more useful if they had clear guidelines and policies to support the program. Thus, the authors echoed the position of the head teacher to provide a clear framework for mentoring student teachers during their teaching practice.

Furthermore, another potential pitfall in mentoring student teachers at Sateba Lower Basic School is the lack of consistency in mentor quality and effectiveness; this might lead to variations in the level of support and development for mentees. This is particularly important to consider when selecting and training mentors. It is essential that mentors have the necessary knowledge, skills, and experience to provide effective mentoring and that they have been trained in effective mentoring practices. In addition, ongoing support and evaluation of mentors can help ensure that mentees receive the support they need to achieve their goals.

Providing mentors an opportunity to acquire the relevant skill sets and knowledge will improve their capacity and remedy the deficit in the capacity of mentors. Attaining a Diploma and an advanced diploma in primary education should not be the only training provided to mentors. There should be a standard requirement and training

programs for mentors and head teachers to help the student teachers develop their professional and leadership capacity. Creating a clear framework that guides the program and building mentors' capacity would potentially build student teachers' capacity. In addition, there should be proper coordination between the mentors in the hosting schools and the Gambia College to better help the student teachers develop in their professional development.

Given that leadership capacity building is the central thesis of the paper, there appeared to be a misunderstanding of teachers' position as a leader and a teacher. The authors believe every teacher is a leader. Therefore, preparing student teachers should not be limited to instructional capacity but should be prepared teacher leaders and future school leaders. Teachers in their classrooms assume a teacher and a leadership role because they lead students toward the organizational goals set for students. A leader is mainly a person who guides, inspires, cares, nurtures, and facilitates the development of an individual or something for the better. If that are some of the characteristics of leadership, then student teachers, or any other category of teachers, are leaders and should be trained to become better ones.

Mentoring can be a powerful tool for developing the leadership capacity of student teachers, but it is essential to have clear guidelines, policies, and training in place to ensure its effective implementation. This includes selecting and training mentors, providing them with clear guidelines and programs, and ensuring effective communication and coordination between mentors, mentees, and head teachers. Additionally, regular evaluation of the mentoring program is crucial to ensure that mentees receive the support they need to achieve their goals and make necessary adjustments to the program.

Therefore, It is important to note that mentoring should be seen as one component of a more extensive professional development program for student teachers. While mentoring can be effective in developing leadership capacity, it should not be the only form of professional development offered. Other forms of professional development, such as workshops, coursework, and job shadowing, can also be necessary for providing student teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to be influential leaders.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the opportunities and pitfalls of mentoring programs in the context of The Gambia's education system by exploring the perspectives of the mentor, the mentee, and the head teacher. The findings of this study revealed that mentoring could be a valuable tool for supporting the professional development and leadership capacity of student teachers. However, effective mentoring relationships depend on various factors, including the mentor's qualifications, experience, and support of the mentor, the readiness and willingness of the mentee to learn, and the level of support the head teacher provides. Effective mentoring programs should be supported by the appropriate training, resources, and support to ensure mentors are equipped to support their mentees in developing their leadership skills. The head teachers should be aware of the importance of mentoring and create an enabling environment to support mentoring program. Overall, this study has highlighted the importance of mentoring in developing future educators in The Gambia and the need for continued research and investment in mentoring programs in the country.

The study has several limitations that have prevented researchers from gathering sufficient data to draw firm conclusions. The sole data-gathering methods employed in the study were phone interviews, and Google Form surveys are one of the study's weaknesses. Since participants could not be observed in the field and face-to-face interviews could not be conducted, there is a lack of data due to the distance that restricts the study's conclusions. Due to low internet and ITC literacy, several participants did not respond to the google form, which is another important constraint. Researchers recommend conducting additional research with a broader focus and accumulating extensive data. Additionally, researchers advise using an in-depth interview strategy to gather enough information to come to valid and convincing conclusions.

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