

Student Teachers' Mentorship Experiences During Teaching Practice: A Comparison of Mentor-Student Dynamics in Rural and Urban Schools

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Abstract: All teacher training institutions in South Africa send their student teachers to schools for teaching practice as part of preparation for the teaching profession. Our concern is that while teaching practice programmes have been established across various universities, limited research explores student teachers' perceptions of teaching practice and mentorship in general, especially in rural and urban schools. In this article, we explored student teachers' comparative experiences and perceptions of working with mentors from both rural and urban schools during teaching practice. Within an interpretive paradigm, this study utilised qualitative approach involving 15 third-year Bachelor of Education students. The data were generated through the use of their reflective journals as well as group debriefing discussions. To analyse the data, we employed Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis. The findings reveal that student teachers encountered different mentor teachers in both rural and urban schools, ranging from mentors who were willing to help them learn and develop knowledge about the teaching profession to those who were reluctant to work with them. The student teachers felt unsupported by rural

mentors compared to their mentorship experiences with urban mentors, as rural mentors sometimes abandoned classes for them. There is a need for the induction of school-based mentors into university expectations of their roles to ensure that they effectively support student teachers during teaching practice.

Keywords: Mentors, perceptions, rural schools, student-teachers, teaching practice, urban schools.

1. Introduction

This study originates from an urgent call to equip teachers with the professional capacity to teach in the diverse contexts that characterise South Africa today. To this end, the Department of Education (DOE) of South Africa has urged public universities to prioritise rural education in their initial teacher education programs. This call by the DoE for universities to emphasise a rural focus should be understood in the context of the post-1994 democratic dispensation, which aimed to address the educational and social inequalities resulting from the apartheid government. Mbhiza (2021) argues that rural areas have been overlooked in South African development policies, leading to a neglect of the rural dimension of basic education issues.

In response to this call, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) School of Education, in its teaching and learning strategic priorities (2012) section 2 (10) (p. 8), focuses on developing a comprehensive understanding of teaching and learning for rural areas. It was from this strategic plan that a rural teaching experience program was conceptualised within the Wits School of Education.

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In addition to the national and institutional support for a rural focus in teacher education, there is a growing body of local and international research establishing a significant discourse on rurality and associated pedagogies emphasising place consciousness (Moletsane, 2012; Pelech & Kelly, 2020). Place-conscious pedagogy, as described by Fraser (2016), aims to move educational systems away from standardised and unengaging teaching practices towards place-based education that fosters an awareness of place by linking the local context with the content being taught. Similarly, Nkambule (2017) contends that teaching in rural settings requires relevant knowledge and skills to address various challenges, necessitating teachers' ability to meet these challenges and responsibilities.

While the above studies underscore the need for research to refocus on rurality and rural education in initial teacher education and teacher professional development, we argue in this study that the shift has created a divide that hinders productive engagement between urban and rural contexts. This study aims to bridge the perceived gap between urban and rural school settings by working with student teachers and their mentors across both contexts. This approach ensures that student teachers gain exposure and preparation to teach in both rural and urban schools. It is acknowledged that oversimplifying South Africa into two geographical categories (rural and urban) is a discursive essentialist approach that overlooks the diverse and complex contextual realities and experiences of South Africa.

A notable concern is that existing literature on teaching practice within the South African context has not shed light on how student teachers' professional and pedagogical learning are influenced by the educational context, often framed in terms of rural versus urban. The decision to expose learners to both rural and urban schools was based on the belief that each context presents unique conditions for student teachers to learn and develop into effective, context-responsive educators. The study aimed to address the following research questions:

- What are student teachers' comparative experiences of rural and urban teaching practice?
- What are student teachers' experiences of mentorship in rural and urban schools during teaching practice?

We further argue that exposing student teachers to teaching in both rural and urban schools is a key approach in preparing them for various classroom environments. A specifically chosen group of 15 preservice student teachers in their third year of study participated in a six-week teaching experience in urban and rural school settings. During the first three weeks of their teaching experience, the student teachers were mentored by an educator in an urban school, while during the last three weeks, they were mentored by an educator in a rural school. This study aimed to assess the support and guidance provided to student teachers by mentors in both urban and rural schools, specifically identifying differences or similarities in their approaches.

2. Literature Review

In this section, we review literature related to mentorship and teaching practices in various educational settings. We start with a review of literature on teaching practices within rural schools, followed by literature on student-teacher mentorship. Lastly, we examine the literature on the qualities and roles of mentors within the context of teaching practicum.

2.1 Rural teaching experience

As a student-teacher education institution, we have recently expanded our Teaching Experience (TE) beyond urban schools to include rural and farm schools. Since 2004, the Kwena Basin TE program has been sending student teachers to farm schools in Mpumalanga (Nkambule, 2017). Over the past six years, we have also arranged for student teachers to conduct teaching practicum in Bushbuckridge (Masinire et al., 2014). Similar rural teaching experience programs are available at other universities in South Africa (Balfour et al., 2008; Mukeredzi, 2013). This expansion was partly

influenced by institutional strategic plans highlighting rurality and national rural education policies. Both initiatives are backed by local and international research, providing valuable conceptual frameworks for understanding rural contexts. There is a growing interest at both university and national levels in comprehending teaching and learning dynamics in rural schools. Within this context, our study aimed to investigate how student teachers learn to teach under the guidance of mentors from urban and rural schools.

2.2 Understanding student-teacher mentorship

Teaching practice is identified as the most powerful intervention in teachers' professional preparation. Mentoring is also noted as a fundamental process in the professional development of student teachers (Du Plessis, 2013). During teaching practice, student teachers are expected to plan, teach, reflect, and act under the guidance of a mentor teacher. The mentor teacher is responsible for providing support and inspiration while greatly influencing the progress of the preservice teacher during this time (Johnson, 2015). Stanulis (1995) observed that the classroom teacher has the greatest influence on the development of prospective teachers due to their interactions during teaching practice.

The mentor teacher is tasked with developing the personal, educational, and career potential of the student teacher, which requires skill, time, energy, awareness of the student teacher's progress, expertise in content knowledge, and a commitment to investing in the professional development of the student teacher and the teaching profession (Zeichner et al., 2015). While mentorship typically focuses on the professional development of student teachers, Fairbanks et al. (2000) suggest that mentoring contributes to the professional growth of both the mentor and the student teacher as they learn from each other during interactions. Consequently, mentors gain new educational insights, pedagogical 'ahas,' and an appreciation of their relationship with their students (Dever et al., 2000). This emphasises mentor learning and signifies specific changes in the professional knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, or actions of a teacher, transforming mentor teachers into "agents of their own teaching and learning" (Shulman, 1987).

Contrary to the assumed positive contribution of mentor teachers in student teachers' journey to become teachers, student teachers may also not be satisfied with the quality of professional support they receive from school-based mentors (Marais & Meier, 2004). Student teachers' dissatisfaction could stem from issues such as mentor teachers failing to align their mentorship styles with the students' ability to perform instructional tasks, placing excessive demands on student teachers, and stifling their innovativeness (Izadinia, 2013). In some cases, mentor teachers might assume that the university already equips student teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills and thus may not provide the support these students need. At times, they may even expect student teachers to surpass their skill levels (Picard, 2023). Other common complaints about some mentors include lack of cooperation and a failure to establish a quality professional relationship with their mentees. Reddy et al. (2008) further highlight other negative factors that influence student teachers' perceptions of teaching practice. These factors include mentor teachers lacking the competence to mentor student teachers effectively, showing no interest in helping them, and not taking the teaching practice seriously.

Against this backdrop, we designed our study to investigate student teachers' perceptions of mentorship in various school and provincial contexts. By provincial contexts, we refer to the differences in students' experiences while conducting their teaching practice in the Gauteng and Mpumalanga Provinces of South Africa. Little is known about how student teachers actually view their experiences of mentorship during practicum in distinct contextual settings. Marais and Meier (2004) lament the scarcity of research on how student teachers perceive their teaching practice experiences, stating, "Given the central role the classroom plays in the practicum setting, it is disheartening to see that research grounded in the perceptions of student teachers towards the role

of their mentors has not flourished as a research area" (p. 26). As previously noted, this study is significant as it contributes to the comprehension of student teachers' perceptions across different schooling contexts within the same year of teaching experience, an area that has been largely unexplored in the South African context.

2.3 The qualities and roles of mentors

The professional knowledge of mentors mainly derives from their professional experiences and preferences (Clarke et al., 2013), and instructional contexts have been shown to strongly influence mentors' conceptions and practices of mentoring (Ulvik & Sunde, 2013). Moreover, a study by Clarke et al. (2013) conducted in Ireland revealed that mentors considered the acquisition and enhancement of their own teaching skills essential in their role as mentors. In a study by Gilles and Wilson (2004) involving 25 mentors, it was found that mentors acquire the ability to interpret situations and understand their mentees, determine when and how to challenge their mentees' reasoning and make their implicit expertise explicit and conscious. Mentors provide crucial constructive feedback, create opportunities for firsthand learning, foster communication, offer support, encouragement, and guidance, and act as role models (Ambrosetti et al., 2014).

Furthermore, mentors play roles in content mentoring, emphasising specialised content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), and assessment knowledge (Achinstein & Davis, 2014). They also facilitate opportunities for mentees to develop skills in presenting content knowledge, analysing subject matter, enhancing student teachers' understanding of subject matter, and organising student teachers for teaching and learning content (Gut et al., 2014). In mentoring, both the mentor and the mentee have specific roles in the mentoring relationship that influence the outcomes of mentoring. The roles of a mentee include being an active participant, listener, and observer, engaging in discussions to confirm or clarify observations regarding specific job-related qualities (Ambrosetti et al., 2014). Kamvounias et al. (2007) further suggest that mentees are accountable for their own learning by setting goals, engaging in professional conversations, and collaborating with the mentor. Hence, a clear definition of roles and goals in the mentoring context is crucial, as relationships might be guided by preconceived notions if not explicitly discussed.

3. Conceptual Framing: Learning to Teach in Context

As posited by Rusznyak and Masinire (2018), professional development, particularly the enhancement of pedagogical reasoning among preservice teachers, should be facilitated by providing opportunities for them to access conceptual knowledge. This access enables them to gain profound insights into incidents that are contextually bound. Furthermore, student teachers require opportunities to observe and analyse teaching practices within various contexts (p. 56). Acquiring such insights is not possible if the teaching-learning process is confined to a single context, whether urban or rural. Instead, initial teacher education programs should seriously consider the significance of both contexts. This study delves into the professional development of pedagogical reasoning and action during mentoring from the viewpoint of student teachers, aiming to comprehend their perceptions of mentorship in both urban and rural settings.

In line with Nkambule's (2017) findings, "both the theoretical and practical components of a preservice education program must align with the demands placed on teachers in schools situated in rural and farming communities" (p. 192). While existing studies document the mentorship experiences of student teachers (Mukeredzi et al., 2015), these studies tend to focus on the mentors' perspectives and are predominantly conducted in urban school settings.

Various relevant studies in South Africa have been conducted by Marais and Meier (2004), exploring the perspectives of student teachers during their practical teaching. Similarly, Nkambule and Mukeredzi (2017) concentrated on the professional learning experiences of preservice teachers during rural teaching practice. In Zimbabwe, Maphosa et al. (2007) examined student teachers'

perceptions of the effectiveness of their mentors in nurturing them to become proficient educators. Australia has witnessed a surge in research that intentionally centres on the professional development of student teachers in remote rural schools (Martinez-Agudo, 2016). These studies are instrumental in producing knowledge that could inform interventions to aid mentors in supporting student teachers' professional development within specific contexts. The growing emphasis on rural school teaching and the recognition of the unique characteristics arising from this context caution against adopting conventional policies, knowledge, and solutions derived from urban contexts and Western European countries (Maringe et al., 2015).

Despite student teachers gradually gaining exposure to teaching in rural schools, as depicted in the rural teaching experiences outlined above, and other forms of university-community engagement and partnerships, there remains a dearth of dedicated focus on understanding their mentorship experiences during their practicum in both urban and rural settings within the same academic year. Although a few studies have delved into student-teacher mentorship experiences, there is a research gap concerning both contexts. For instance, Amin and Ramrathan (2009) explored student teachers' learning to teach in diverse contexts, including rural environments. Nkambule (2017) also contributes to our comprehension of student teachers' perceptions of a teaching experience project. Notably, this study aims to investigate student teachers' mentorship experiences from both urban and rural mentors, a significant endeavour. As mentioned earlier, the originality of this study lies in amalgamating the rural and urban mentorship experiences of student teachers. A central concern in this study is that the available knowledge on urban and rural student mentorship experiences mainly stems from meta-analyses of various case studies conducted in different locations and on different students over time (Fransson & Aspfors, 2014).

Corbett (2016) provides an incisive analysis of rurality by arguing that:

“constructions of rurality need to be understood and rethought in complex ways that engage with both contemporary developments in social theory and with the massive and consequential movement of people, goods and services around the globe, which suggest the need for more engaged, relational and sensitive rural education scholarship and more spatially sophisticated teacher education practice” (p.141).

In many ways, Corbett (2016) and other scholars offer valuable conceptual and analytical tools that challenge the traditional urban-rural dichotomy prevalent in rural/urban and rural education scholarship. This study refrains from dichotomising rural and urban contexts and considers such practices counterproductive. The previous overview highlights a surveillance of rural and urban spatial boundaries, portraying these contexts as separate cartographies. Often, urban areas are portrayed as privileged and rural areas as marginalised, with the rural seen as declining and the urban as progressing. We posit that these rural-urban spatial divisions are arbitrary and do not align with reality, especially given the complex social and economic dynamics of contemporary society. A more nuanced understanding of rurality and urbanity is required in light of current trends. By acknowledging the interconnectedness of urban and rural spaces, we can enrich our conceptual discourse on place. Lichter and Brown (2011) noted that 21st-century careers frequently transcend urban, suburban, and rural boundaries, where distinctions between urban and rural areas are increasingly blurred or in flux. Embracing the evolving conceptualisation of the transient nature of rural and urban spaces (Rusznyak & Masinire, 2018), we propose exploring the experiences of student teachers during teaching placements in both rural and urban settings simultaneously.

4. Methodology

A qualitative approach rooted in the interpretive research paradigm was adopted for this study. According to Creswell et al. (2007), interpretive research involves perceiving knowledge and reality as socially constructed and inter-subjective. Given that the research aimed to investigate and

comprehend student teachers' mentoring experiences in urban and rural schools, which could be explored through listening to and documenting their reflective narratives, a qualitative approach and interpretive paradigm were deemed appropriate. Prior to commencing the study, ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand Ethics Committee, and informed consent was secured from all participating students, assuring them that their involvement in the research was entirely voluntary and that opting out would not result in any disadvantages. To safeguard the participants' anonymity, pseudonyms such as 'student 1, student 2, etc.,' were used instead of their real names.

4.2 Sampling strategies

The study involved 15 student teachers in their third year of the Bachelor of Education program. They were purposefully selected from a pool of 650 students. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), it is crucial for researchers to choose a sample that possesses the necessary characteristics. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) also recommended purposive sampling for identifying settings, groups, and individuals where the processes under investigation are likely to occur. For this study, the primary criterion for selection was the participants' willingness to spend the final three weeks of their Teaching Experience (TE) in a rural area of Bushbuckridge in Mpumalanga, away from Johannesburg. More than sixty applications were received of which fifteen participants were chosen based on their academic performance over the preceding two years and their achievements in the prior TE, as we aimed for individuals who had maintained an average score of 60% across both years. It was assumed that participants with such academic qualifications would be adept at elucidating the themes explored in the study. This aligns with McMillan and Schumacher's (2010) assertion that purposive sampling enables researchers to select the most informed participants about the phenomenon under investigation. Given the nature of purposive sampling, the third-year students were selected on the premise that they had acquired adequate theoretical knowledge to reflect on their practices during the TE.

4.3 Methods of data generation and analysis

Data were collected through reflective journal entries and group debriefing discussions. Throughout their three-week placement in urban schools in Johannesburg, student teachers documented their daily teaching experiences in an urban environment. Upon completion of this period, the student teachers reflected on their mentorship experiences in the urban school. Similarly, while situated in the rural school setting, students made daily entries regarding their experiences within those schools. The journal entries predominantly focused on learning and teaching activities in the classroom, contextual factors influencing teaching and learning effectiveness, insights into school operations, and the dynamics of interactions between teaching staff, teachers and students, as well as among students. There is inconsistency in the literature regarding the definition of reflective journaling (Nkambule & Mukeredzi, 2017). Given that the student teachers participating had no previous exposure to rural teaching practicum, they were encouraged to document any significant incidents related to the nature of teaching and learning in rural areas, highlighting differences and similarities compared to their observations in urban schools during their Teacher Education (TE) program. The information documented by student teachers in their reflective journals was subsequently utilised during group reflective sessions.

To guarantee continuous student supervision and support, alongside effective leadership, researchers resided at the lodge, where all students were accommodated throughout the three-week period, providing them with professional guidance and assistance. Each day, from 19:00 to 20:00, students engaged in reflective discussions under the mentorship of university mentors. These sessions involved debriefing on their school experiences, with mentors offering professional guidance. Specifically, students' reflections were structured around a series of reflective questions each day: *Is there anything new you have experienced at school today? Why did things happen the way they*

did? What could you have done differently? How does this compare to your experiences of teaching in an urban setting? According to Kerka (2002, p. 1), reflective activities play a crucial role in disrupting ingrained thought patterns, fostering the growth of metacognitive processes, heightening awareness of implicit knowledge, supporting self-exploration, and devising solutions to challenges. Therefore, in the present research, reflective tasks were employed as a mechanism to enhance the professional development of student teachers, serving as a bridge between their preexisting knowledge and new insights into the art of teaching.

In this study, data analysis entailed a thorough examination of the transcriptions of the debriefing discussions and student teachers, along with repeated listening to the audiotapes, to interpret the entire dataset comprehensively. This analytical procedure succeeded by categorising students' statements through open coding (Creswell et al., 2007). The coding phase encompassed the segmentation of both written and spoken statements into themes, denoted as 'in vivo' (Creswell et al., 2007). Subsequently, Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was applied to meticulously scrutinise each transcript and journal entries by means of horizontalisation (Creswell et al., 2007), facilitating the revelation of latent and underlying meanings. Following horizontalisation, all core meanings were itemised, and all correlated topics were grouped together, consolidating them into themes. Three predominant themes surfaced from this analysis: "teachers abandon classes for us ... no opportunities to observe them teach", a space to be the teacher, and feeling unwelcomed by mentors.

5. Findings and Discussion

In this section, we use the information provided by the participants to discuss their mentorship experiences in both rural and urban schools. We use the utterances made by the learners as well as their recorded journal entries verbatim to exemplify students' comparative experiences of mentorship in rural and urban schools, answering the predetermined research questions.

5.1 "teachers abandon classes for us ... no opportunities to observe them teach"

The group of students selected for the Rural Teaching Experience (RTE) demonstrated enthusiasm for the chance to broaden their teaching experience in various settings. Nevertheless, the majority of their reflections, shared during group discussions, highlighted distinct encounters while working with mentor teachers in rural and urban environments. The following excerpts illustrate these differences:

In Joburg, the mentors were very helpful. They stay in the classroom as you teach and give you informative feedback, and you grow there. Plus, they know their content. Here (rural), teachers abandon classes for us, they are abnormally absent, there are no opportunities to observe them teach [Student 1 group debriefing discussion].

When I arrived at the school (Acornhoek), my mentor assigned me his classes and since then, I have been on my own, I do all the work on my own. The teacher does not come to class with me to observe and give me feedback, that's what the Joburg [Johannesburg] teachers do you know, they always help you prepare, give you teaching and learning materials and observe you teach, you really grow from their feedback [Student 2 group debriefing discussion].

I also do not feel supported here (Acornhoek), maybe we are coming with the expectation that mentor teachers would be helpful because of our previous experiences in Johannesburg, maybe we were expecting teachers to plan lessons with us, observe their lessons and that they should be there when we teach and that is not the case here, different contexts, different mentors [Student 3 group debriefing discussion].

These excerpts emphasise the varying degrees of mentorship experienced by preservice teachers during their Teaching Practice in rural and urban schools. Mentor teachers in urban schools exhibited willingness and availability to share their professional experiences with students, whereas their counterparts in rural schools did not offer similar levels of support. The observations suggest a deficiency in anticipated interactions between mentors and student teachers in rural settings, notably in the collaborative planning of lessons and in the lack of opportunities for mentors to observe students' teaching practices and vice versa. Such interactions are crucial for guiding students to develop their professional identities and advance their professional learning. This lack of engagement from rural mentors is further exemplified by the journal entry of a student below:

On my first day of TE (rural), I was assigned to my supervising teacher. He introduced himself to me so did I. He then showed me how their timetable works. Thereafter he took me to all the grade 7 classes he taught, introduced me to his learners, and told them I would be assisting him in his lessons. To my surprise that was never the case, what he actually meant was that I would be taking over all his classes/lessons for the next three weeks. I actually started teaching on my first day because soon after he introduced me, he vanished into thin air. I had to look at the timetable and try to find the class on my own. [Student 4 journal entry].

This reflective statement reveals that the mentor teacher regarded the preservice teacher as a substitute teacher, someone to temporarily take over his classes for a specific period, as implied by the phrase "he vanished into thin air." It is crucial to acknowledge that the dynamics of interactions between mentors and preservice teachers, along with the activities they undertake during Teaching Practice, significantly influence the development of preservice teachers' professional knowledge and their perspectives on teaching and learning processes. Preservice teachers often expressed their gratitude for the guidance provided by their urban mentors in contrast to their rural mentors, as they believed that urban mentors possessed a better grasp of mentoring practices. Consequently, urban mentors were observed engaging with student teachers during teaching sessions and offering them practical advice throughout the practicum. The absence of active mentorship is further underscored by the subsequent reflective statement:

My supervising teacher didn't even seem interested in going to class with me, she would only ask me how the lessons were going and that's all. She said on many occasions that she would come to observe me, but she never did [Student 5 journal entry].

The students' comparisons between the support they received from urban mentors and that which they received from rural mentors highlight the necessity for mentors to offer academic support. This support should involve providing students with strategies and guiding them on best practices (Rusznayak & Masinire, 2018). Such guidance could be viewed as a method of exemplifying effective teaching practices. The requirement for mentor teachers to observe and guide preservice teachers during their teaching practice, a practice students noted receiving from urban mentors but lacking from rural mentors, indicates the expectations students have regarding mentorship. Students anticipate mentors to impart pedagogical content knowledge and assist them in learning through observation (Nkambule, 2017; Nkambule & Mukeredzi, 2017).

As argued by Nkambule (2017), mentors who showed insufficient academic support to student teachers may themselves have not been effectively mentored, resulting in a lack of mentorship skills. Reflecting on their experiences with mentors from both urban and rural settings, preservice teachers emphasised the importance of observing model lessons and receiving constructive feedback. They noted that such practices, which were often absent in rural schools, are crucial for their development as competent teachers and contribute significantly to their professional identity formation (Florian & Spratt, 2013). The subsequent section will delve into student teachers' reflections on how mentorship relationships influence their professional identities.

5.2 A space to be the teacher

The identities of teachers, described as the perceptions teachers hold of themselves and their professional practice (Izadinia, 2013; Mukeredzi et al., 2015), play a crucial role in shaping their instructional approaches, encompassing their pedagogical actions and the quality of interactions they establish with their students (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Despite student teachers' expectations for mentor teachers to offer extensive instructional guidance, some expressed a preference for limited engagement with their mentors. Consequently, when mentor teachers in rural settings were absent and failed to facilitate opportunities for observation and teaching practice, students found themselves in a position to assume the role of the instructor. This dynamic contrasted with the behavior of urban mentor teachers who consistently participated in classroom activities and subtly influenced student teachers to conform to certain practices, ensuring positive feedback on evaluation forms. The following excerpts illustrate this phenomenon:

... what I enjoy about about the rural mentors is that they are never there (she laughs), you know what, I get a chance to bond with the learners and try new methods without feeling like I am being judged, I don't feel like I have to do everything right, I often felt like that in Johannesburg because teachers that side always to see what you are doing [Student 6 group debriefing discussion].

I won't lie, I was shocked when the teacher here (rural school) abandoned the class and left me alone, but I soon realised that the learners come to me with questions and they treat me like their teacher, I now know how it feels to be in charge of the class, they don't even call me a student teacher as they did in urban schools, I am the teacher ... I don't feel like I always have to do everything the right way [Student 7 group debriefing discussion].

For the first time I felt like I am the teacher, it is a totally different experience from doing TE in Johannesburg. The teachers here just let you go to class alone and the learners want to learn from me, they respond to me as someone in charge, not just another teacher in the classroom, I am the teacher here, I think I learn more when the mentor is not physically with me in the classroom [Student 8 group debriefing discussion].

These statements exemplify the preference of student teachers to work autonomously, assuming responsibility for both classroom management and content expertise, aiming to embody the role of 'the teacher' rather than 'a student teacher'. The students acknowledge the necessity of mentor teachers being accessible to provide professional guidance. However, they noted that the lack of active mentors in rural schools symbolically opened the gateway to the teaching profession. In contrast, they felt that the presence of mentor teachers in urban schools influenced their teaching practices, prompting them to behave and instruct in manners they might not have otherwise, had the mentors physically exited the classroom space. The complete absence of mentors observing student teachers in rural schools empowered the students to cultivate relationships with the learners and experiment with teaching approaches of their choosing, without feeling under scrutiny to conform to the mentors' expectations of 'doing everything correctly'. An excerpt from a student's reflective journal further supports the notion of mentors' absence as an opportunity for students to establish connections with learners.

My supervising teacher at Sunshine Primary School (pseudonym) only came to supervise one lesson. She gave me the textbooks I needed for Mathematics and Introduced me to the class. She left and never came back to supervise me and every lesson I planned, I planned on my own. I had no assistance from her or even the principal. Every concept I taught I taught alone, but this helped me build a solid relationship with my learners. They respected me as their teacher, not student teacher [Student 9 journal entry].

I never got support from him (rural mentor) or any of the staff members. I did my own thing and just believed that I am doing the correct thing. I believe this opportunity did me good, it helped me grow as a teacher. I realised that being a teacher is not just about equipping learners with knowledge but to engage with the learners on a personal level. So that they can be free and open to you as a teacher [Student 10 journal entry].

While these statements might be perceived as expressing concern for the necessity of mentor teachers to consistently observe the student teacher's instruction and provide constructive feedback, the subsequent sections of both statements clarify that the students assumed authority, enabling them to establish connections with the learners. One could posit that a mentor teacher who is entirely absent is a significant disservice to the professional learning and identity development of student teachers (Davis & Fantozzi, 2016; Rusznyak & Masinire, 2018). The absence of mentors in rural schools led students to feel empowered and authoritative over classroom activities. Therefore, we contend that there exist varying preferences regarding the presence of mentor teachers in classrooms during student teachers' instruction: some may require ongoing observation and feedback, while others prefer autonomy to independently learn and decide how their classrooms should operate. These perspectives should not be marginalised but rather appreciated, as they provide insight into students' perceptions and attitudes towards the purpose of teaching practice.

5.3 Feeling unwelcomed by mentors

Mentorship relationships encompass more than mere instruction on teaching methods by mentors to student teachers; they involve dialogic interactions between them (Nelson et al., 2021). The findings derived from the analysis of debriefing discussions and journal entries revealed that certain student teachers experienced feelings of being undermined and a lack of belonging in both urban and rural school settings. The discourse within this section is more closely related to mentor teachers lacking welcoming personal attributes necessary for effectively collaborating with mentees and guiding them in their professional development. Students emphasised that some mentors failed to fulfill their expected role in ensuring that student teachers felt acknowledged as educators during their teaching practicum. Some students reported instances where certain mentors abused their authority, leading students to feel unwelcome. For instance, one student teacher reflected:

My supervising teacher is Johannesburg, we never walked together to a classroom that we were both going to and it felt like she did not like me. In fact, she wanted to pair with another student teacher instead of me. She wanted to refer me to another teacher on the first day. I found that demotivating. It seemed as though she had an idea of who I was and perceived me in the wrong way ... [Student 11 journal entry].

This statement unveils the students' encounters with feelings of rejection, neglect, and the perception that the mentor was burdened with their presence, all of which detrimentally affected the students' professional development. Particularly noteworthy is the phrase 'I found that demotivating,' indicating a serious impact on the student's motivation. The statement encapsulates the view of student teachers as being perceived merely as a hindrance by mentor teachers. The mentors wielded their authority to isolate the student teachers and failed to facilitate their integration. Subsequent excerpts elaborating on scenarios with mentors illustrate instances where students felt unwelcome and undervalued.

I never got the opportunity to observe my supervising teacher (in rural) teach and I struggled to get him to observe my lessons. I feel, he felt a bit intimidated by me. This is mainly because; on my second day I had drafted a lesson which I wanted to run past by him before I actually started teaching. He said "I believe you can do this way better than I can. Just do what you think is best" [Student 12 journal entry].

I think the teachers feel like we are invading their work and personal spaces, they do not feel comfortable, that is why they don't want to support us. Yesterday I found my supervising teacher saying to her colleague, "I just let her teach, anyway after three weeks they will be gone". This made me aware that teachers see us as temporary problems, so they get out of our way to do our own thing, because they know that we are here for a short stay [Student 13 group debriefing discussion].

My supervising teachers, yoh, both here and in Joburg, it's a curse guys. It is a mission for me to get observed or observe their teaching, in Joburg it was the whole thing of the teachers wanting to cover the content in time and here the teacher just don't seem interested to come to class with me, it's like I am her replacement [Student 14 group debriefing discussion].

These excerpts illustrate that certain student teachers encountered mentor teachers who were reluctant to provide support, even when the student teachers took the initiative to engage with mentors and sought their assistance in their teaching practices.

One thing I can tell you about mentor teachers, both here and in Johannesburg, they just want us to leave the moment we arrive, they don't want us in their schools. The one I had in Johannesburg never wanted to be observed, and the one here just absconded, apparently she is sick. They don't want us to learn from them ... it is like we are a burden to them really, but how are we gonna learn about the field? [Student 15 group debriefing discussion].

The reluctance of mentor teachers to engage in observation activities, both as observers and as subjects of observation by students, is a significant concern, particularly given their pivotal role in fostering students' professional identities (Davis & Fantozzi, 2016). This sentiment is echoed in the argument put forth by Nkambule and Mukeredzi (2017) that emphasises the crucial role of interactions and activities in shaping student teachers' professional knowledge and cognitive development within the context of their experiences with mentor teachers. Notably, some mentor teachers perceived student teachers as transient burdens who would depart from the school and classroom after a brief three-week period. This perception underscores the essentiality of mentor teachers comprehending their roles in mentoring relationships, as evident in the scenarios described, where mentors seemed to disregard the necessity of providing emotional and professional support to their students.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The findings revealed that during Teaching Practice in rural and urban schools, preservice teachers interacted and received different mentorship experiences. The students felt unsupported by rural mentors compared to their mentorship experiences with urban mentors, as rural mentors abandoned classes for the student teachers. While some student teachers reflected that the complete absence of mentors in their classes to observe them and offer constructive feedback limited their professional learning, other student teachers emphasised that the absence of mentors empowered them to take charge of their classrooms during teaching. These experiences do not denounce that mentor teachers play significant roles in shaping preservice teachers' conceptions, positionality, beliefs as well as classroom practice as they share professional and pedagogical experiences. However, the students' experiences of the complete absence of mentors highlighted an unexpected preference for student teachers to be left alone in the classroom to teach without feeling a sense of surveillance from experienced educators. Other students' reflections revealed their experiences of feeling unwelcomed by the mentor teachers in different schools, and the students' statements captured perceptions of student teachers not being wanted and being on the periphery of relationships with their mentor teachers.

To ensure that mentors understand their roles during teaching practice, it becomes important that teacher training institutions develop manuals for mentors detailing their envisaged roles in a mentorship relationship during teaching practice. There is also a need for the induction of school-based mentors into university expectations of their roles. At the same time, the study demonstrates the need for university mentors to take an oversight role in the teaching experiences of their students and also provide necessary support when needed. We have taken the initiative during the rural teaching experience to ensure that student teachers who experience no school-based mentorship are supported during briefing sessions.

7. Declarations

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