

## **IMPACT OF MENTORING ON DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES OF STUDENT TEACHERS**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Teacher Education institutions have implemented different mechanisms to improve quality of training provided for their student teachers. One such mechanism is to appoint a ‘mentor’ from the school itself to facilitate the development of professional competencies of student teachers. Mentoring is defined as,

“A process; a supportive relationship; a helping process; a teaching-learning process; a reflective process; a career development process; a formalized process and a role constructed by or for mentors (Roberts, 2000, 145). Shea (1992) describes mentoring as “a developmental, caring, sharing, and helping relationship where one person invests time, know-how, and effort in enhancing another person’s growth, knowledge and skills and responds to critical needs in the life of that person in ways that prepare the individual for greater productivity or achievement in the future”.

This definition had broadened the scope of mentoring and given an insight into the personal qualities of both mentors and mentees.

Mentoring happens in teacher education in different settings serving different purposes. Good quality mentoring makes an important contribution to empowering the continuous and lifelong development of teachers and ensuring the best quality learning experiences for pupils. On the other hand, mentoring process would support mentors to develop their highest potential through critical self reflections.

The Faculty of Education of the Open University of Sri Lanka introduced a mentoring mechanism to the Teaching Practice component of the PGDE programme in 2009 on an experimental basis. The main purpose was to provide close supervision and continuous guidance within the school and to create a facilitative environment for development of professional competencies of student teachers. An experienced, qualified and a committed teacher was identified from the school to work as the mentor of each student teacher and training workshops were conducted at different centres by the Faculty of Education to familiarize them with their roles and responsibilities. This new mechanism has been in operation for nearly two academic years. Therefore, a study was conducted to explore the impact of school mentors on development of professional competencies of student teachers and to identify the problems faced by both mentors and mentees in the fulfillment of their roles.

The study had six specific objectives.

- 1) To study the personality characteristics of student teachers before and after teaching practice stage 1
- 2) To explore the strategies implemented by school mentors to create those changes in the personality characteristics of student teachers

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- 3) To investigate the contributions of mentors in developing positive attitudes towards teaching and other school activities in student teachers
- 4) To investigate the advice and support given by school mentors for the development of school projects of student teachers and to improve their involvement in co-curricular activities
- 5) To investigate the contribution of school mentors in creating a conducive and friendly environment within the school to facilitate learning of student teachers
- 6) To examine the problems faced by the mentors and mentees under the new mentoring system and make suggestions for future development

## **METHODOLOGY**

The survey research design was selected as suitable for conducting this research study.

The sample of the study consisted of 300 school mentors (Sinhala medium only) who had submitted their reflective journals and evaluation reports on student teachers' performance and the respective student teachers (300) who had been under the guidance and support of those school mentors.

Due to the descriptive nature of this research, multiple methods were used for data collection. They included mentors' reflective journals, mentors' evaluation report I (before starting teaching practice), and II (after finishing teaching practice) and mentors' project evaluation reports. In addition, interviews were conducted with a selected set of school principals, mentors and student teachers to collect in-depth information about the contribution of school mentors.

The data analysis in this study was done by using both quantitative and qualitative methods (percentage, charts, graphs etc...). The findings of the study are aligned with each objective of the study and recommendations are made for improving the mentor's role for the professional development of student teachers.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This study revealed that all the student teachers in the sample had experienced a considerable change in their personality characteristics after ten weeks of teaching practice period. The changes were prominent in characteristics such as "Commitment to teaching" "Understanding of student differences" Interaction with other teachers' and "relationship with other teachers". As reported by the student teachers and mentors, they were outcomes of some innovative strategies implemented by the school mentors in line with the training provided by the Faculty. Further, there were similarities among school mentors in the procedures implemented for changing the personality characteristics of student teachers and for developing skills related to teaching-learning process. The most popular strategies were related to: motivating students to prepare teaching aids and lesson notes, directing student teachers to text books and teacher guides and emphasizing the need to focus on individual differences in their classes.

As reported by the school principals and student teachers, the role played by school mentors in supporting the planning and implementation of school based projects was successful though they had failed in improving the involvement of student teachers in co-curricular activities of the schools. The latter was due to reasons such as heavy work load of student teachers during teaching practice period, strong emphasis placed by the schools on academic activities and lack of facilities in schools to conduct co-curricular activities. It was further evident that the school mentors had made a significant contribution for developing positive attitudes towards their profession. One of the main problems faced by school mentors was that they were unable to commit fully to perform their roles as they were heavily burdened with administrative

responsibilities in the school. Mentees reported about not having qualified teachers within the school to work as their mentor and lack of resources in the schools to complete their projects.

### CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be concluded that the close relationship maintained between the mentors and mentees and the supportive and conducive environment established within the school had a positive impact on the development of professional competencies of student teachers. Further, the learning partnership between mentors and mentees embodied a considerable advantage to increase awareness on their potentials to promote a single school culture.

However, this study had revealed some problems that arise due to the new mentoring mechanism introduced by the Faculty of Education, Open University of Sri Lanka. Therefore, it is essential that the Faculty should take immediate steps to review the whole process and introduce both long term and short term solutions to the problems faced by all categories of people involved in the mentoring process.

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