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Reflections on doing qualitative research

Sharayi Chakanyuka
Zimbabwe Open University

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I reflect on the methodology I used for a research into mentoring and the professional development of student teachers of Masvingo Teachers College. This was a case study of the mentoring programme. Masvingo Teachers' College and six of the schools to which it deploys student teachers provided the context for the programme. I adopted the Constructivist interpretive research paradigm in order to obtain the perceptions of the three groups of participants involved in the programme on a regular basis, i.e. lecturers, student teachers and mentors. I used such ethnographic techniques as personal accounts, observations, interviews and documents to collect data. Qualitative data analysis procedures were adopted for analysing, interpreting and presenting the data. I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of these techniques in this paper. The paper also presents a summary of the major findings of this study.

INTRODUCTION

As principal of a college that had adopted mentoring for student teachers on teaching practice, I was interested to find out how mentoring contributed to the professional development of student teachers. However, in this paper, I discuss the methodology I adopted for the study. The participants were the three groups of people who were involved in mentoring on a regular basis i.e. students, mentors and lecturers during the period 1998 to 1999. The fifty-six participants were made up of thirty-two student teachers, eight mentors and sixteen lecturers. I wanted to find out how individual participants perceived and understood the mentoring programme, as college had adopted it with very little preparation for all participants. This led me into qualitative research, which was more appropriate for the research questions. Strauss and Corbin (1990) argue that the nature of the research problem determines the research design. In this study, participants' personal

experience and understanding of mentoring were of critical importance. Qualitative research enabled me to capture these.

This paper discusses the methodology I used for the study, which was for me a profound journey into a very new research paradigm. It also presents the major findings of the study. In this study, I used pseudonyms for all schools and participants involved in the study.

RESEARCH PARADIGM

For this study I used the constructivist interpretive paradigm which, according to Schwandt (1998), argues that reality is just as multifaceted as the people who experience it and the researcher therefore has to focus on the "world as it is lived, felt, undergone by the actors" (Schwandt 1998:236). Constructivists argue that knowledge and truth are a result of perspectives and meanings people place on social events, and according to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) the people's perspectives are not static but are constructed and reconstructed on the basis of the interpretations of the situations in which they find themselves. My role as a researcher was to try and understand the people's behaviour and why they behave as they do by using participant observation, which gave me access to the meanings that guide the behaviour (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Guba and Lincoln (1989) also argue that reality is relative and pluralist and the various constructions of reality, some of which may be contradictory, are all meaningful. For this study, I aimed to find out how and why mentors, lecturers and student teachers behave as they do during the mentoring process. These three groups interact in the mentoring process and, because of their different roles, their perspectives of mentoring differ. I thus aimed to uncover how the reality of mentoring for each group came to be constructed in the way that it did and to try to construct a reality of mentoring within the context of initial teacher education at Masvingo Teachers' College (MTC).

However, according to Guba and Lincoln (1989), the constructivist paradigm involves joint construction of the reality between researchers and researched of the final product. Similarly, Schwandt (1998: 243) states that:

The act of inquiry begins with issues and/or concerns of participants and unfolds through a "dialectic" of iteration, analysis, critique, reiteration, reanalysis and so on that leads eventually to a joint (among inquirer and respondents) construction of a case.

The issue of joint construction of the research results by researcher and participants is thus an important part of the constructivist paradigm. In this regard, I leaned more to the interpretive perspective and tried to present the participants' perspectives by asking them to read and endorse the observation and interview reports during the data collection period. In analysing data, I interpreted the participants' perspectives of mentoring using many extracts from field notes, personal accounts and interview reports to support my interpretation. In this way, I tried to construct the reality of mentoring held by participants I tried to understand the meanings which participants placed on the mentoring process and how participants created those meanings.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Maxwell (1996) defines a research design as, the underlying structure and interconnection of the study components and implication of each component for the others" (p. 4). Janesick (1998) adds that a research design starts with a question. For this study, the question was: how does the process of mentoring contribute to the professional development of student teachers at MTC?

While Janesick (1998) likened her research design to a dance, I viewed mine in terms of tapestry making. The whole design became clear when I, as the tapestry designer, had sewn together the different coloured strands I was using for my research. Using yet another analogy, Schuller (1988) views a case as a piece of string made up of different strands of different thickness. He argues that the thickness of the string can be adjusted by adding more strands and the end product may no longer be a string but a rope. For me, however, the tapestry image showed me that I could have a fuller picture of how participants perceived the mentoring process at MTC by sewing the different The Zimbabwe Bulletin of Teacher Education coloured strands together. The strands would be, partly, the mentoring practices of mentors, their positive effects on student teachers, the weaknesses which might mar the overall picture; and partly, the student teachers, their commitment, attitude, relationships and work ethics would be other strands. The college, its supervision and assessment, mentor training and student preparation would be a third set of strands. Other strands would be the research decisions that I made such as the data collection instruments, the data analysis procedures, the sampling decisions I made as the research progressed and

experience and understanding of mentoring were of critical importance. Qualitative research enabled me to capture these.

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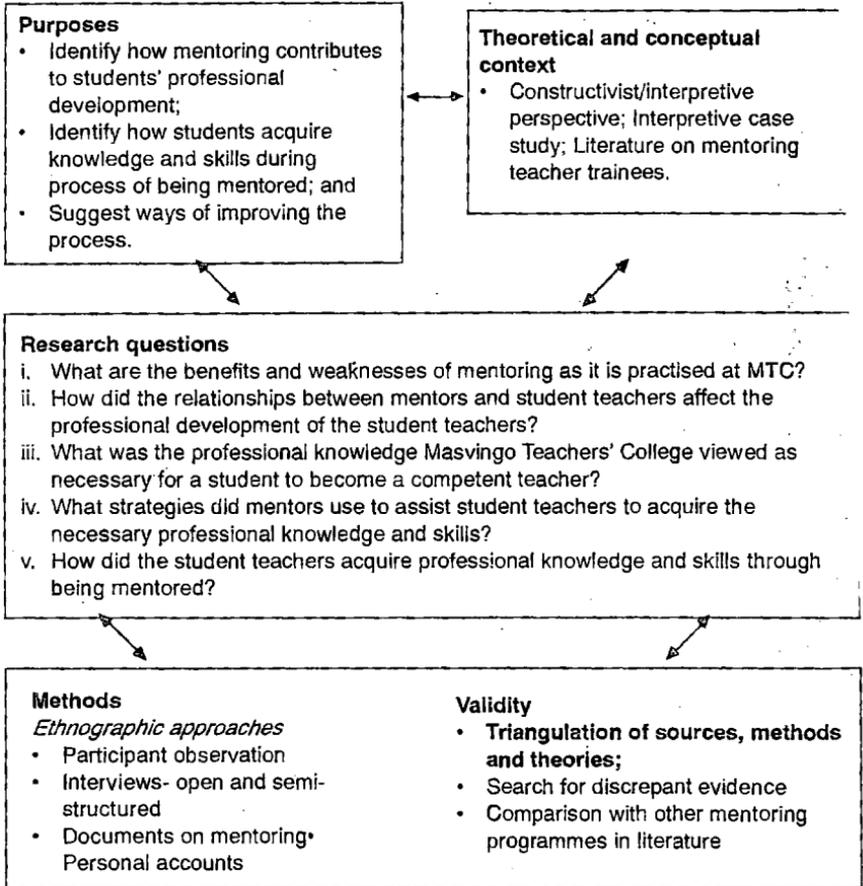
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Figure 1: Research design of mentoring as practised at MTC (adapted from Maxwell 19).



the quality of the data collected. These strands sewn together made the pattern that was, in 1999, the mentoring practice of MTC as the participants perceived it. I am aware that the richness of the data collected and its analysis affect the richness of the final tapestry and that the degree of closeness to the "truth" of the picture that the tapestry creates is dependent on the degree of validity and reliability of the data collected. Therefore, I made efforts to ensure that I collected data that was as rich, valid and reliable as possible by recording the actual words used by participants and asking

them to confirm my observation notes during fieldwork. I also triangulated data from different sources to ensure validity. Figure 1 below shows the design I adopted for this study.

As Figure 1 above shows, I decided on and clarified the research questions that would meet the purposes I had set for the study. I chose the research methods and identified the data I felt would address the questions I had decided to investigate. I used interpretive ethnographic approaches such as participant observation, structured and unstructured interviews, personal accounts and analysis of official mentoring documents as means of obtaining participants' personal perspectives on mentoring. To ensure validity, data from these sources was triangulated. This was a particularly important consideration for this study, as it affected the final picture of my tapestry. Throughout this process, I would move backwards and forwards through these stages as need arose.

The nature of these purposes and research questions led me into the interpretive constructivist paradigm in which the perspectives and the experiences of the participants about mentoring were crucial. What I learnt about mentoring depended on the perspectives of those involved in the process on a regular basis. As I had already worked at MTC, I had my own existing construction of mentoring at the college, which I needed to view critically, and this began to develop from the moment I started collecting data from different participants. The process of construction carried on into the analysis and writing up process.

Finally, as part of validation, I used various methods to triangulate data as well as compared my findings with those from other mentoring programmes. I found that the three main benefits of mentoring to emerge from my data were comparable across many programmes. One discrepant finding in my study was some mentors' use of pressure when they did not get the compliance of the student teachers in their care. This seemed to be specific to my research, as I did not find anything similar in mentoring literature.

GAINING ACCESS

Janesick (1998) states that "access and entry are sensitive components in qualitative research and the researcher must establish trust, rapport, and authentic communication patterns with participants" (p. 39-40). For this study I had to gain access at different levels shown below.

Firstly, I secured permission of the Ministry of Higher Education and Technology (MOHET). Then I sought and secured the support of college lecturers as a group, teaching practice team leaders as individuals, the Regional Director of Education responsible for Masvingo Province, heads of schools, student teachers in six schools and their mentors. I secured the support of teaching practice team leaders as individuals because they had to include me in their plans for all visits to the districts in which schools in my sample were located.

In meetings at the schools with mentors and student teachers I explained the purpose of my research and my *modus operandi*. In order to maintain their trust, I had to keep reminding student teachers and their mentors that I was not assessing them.

Ethical issues

The case study involves obtaining a lot of personal and intimate data from respondents. Scott (1996) thus recommends that in open democratic research, participants and institutions must give their informed consent to take part in the research. Simons (1984) identifies the rights of the researched as impartiality from the researcher which allows the representation of all viewpoints; right to read and amend interview and observation transcripts and to change relevant parts of the report; right to negotiate fairly accurately and relevantly on what is reported and right to willing participation. The researcher is accountable to participants and other institutions from which data was collected. The privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of respondents must be guaranteed (Simons, 1984; Babbie, 1995) and use of aliases for both institutions and individuals would help in this respect.

In line with the recommendations above (Scott 1996, Simon 1884 and Babbie 1995), I tried to inform all my participants about the research, the data I intended to collect and what I hoped to achieve. However, I do not believe that they always gave 'informed' consent because some of the things that occurred during the research could not have been foreseen. The student teachers, mentors and lecturers had to search themselves more deeply than I had foreseen even though they were all familiar with the terms I was using in my study. I also tried to establish a non-threatening role to the student teachers by explaining how I was going to carry out the research and assuring them that I was not assessing them.

In this paper, I have used pseudonyms for all participants — those interviewed and observed and those who wrote personal accounts. I also used pseudonyms for the schools in the sample. In addition, as a means of maintaining the anonymity of heads of schools, I referred to all five heads of schools as male even though two were female.

Main field work March 1999 to August 2000

I embarked on observations of student teachers at work from March 1999 to November 1999. I observed twenty-four student teachers in March and April 1999 to give myself a feel of the work ahead and to determine which student teachers I was going to observe a second and third time. Through purposive sampling, I selected seven student teachers in six schools to be the third level of case studies on the basis of having a cross section of schools, grades taught and ability levels of student teachers. I then observed them from March to November 1999. My focus group was composed of seven student teachers (three male and four females), their seven mentors and the six schools in which they taught.

From June to November 1999, I observed the seven student teachers on two more occasions, an average of once a term. On each occasion that I went to a school, I asked the mentor and student teacher to read, correct and sign the report of the previous observation visit. I also asked lecturers and heads of schools to read, correct and sign the interview transcripts. I interviewed heads of four schools, seven MTC lecturers and collected all six schools and other documentary data. In November 1999, before the student teachers left their practice schools, I interviewed them in four school-groups. The thirty student teachers in the six focus schools wrote their personal accounts of being mentored in January 2000.

Data Collection procedures

Population

At the macro level I studied mentoring at MTC which comprised four hundred and sixty student teachers in the 1998 MTC intake and the 106 schools to which they were deployed, their 460 mentors; and the 65 Masvingo Teachers' College lecturers. I selected a random sample of thirty 1998 intake student teachers of Masvingo Teachers' College in 1998 before they proceeded to teaching practice and followed them through to 2000 when they returned from school placements.

Sampling

Flick (1998) states that sampling occurs at different points in the research process. He argues that the researcher has to sample cases to interview (case sampling) and the groups from which the cases come (sampling groups of cases). Further the researcher decides which interview data should be treated further (material sampling), the parts of the texts to be used in detailed interpretation (sampling within material) and which cases or parts of cases should be used to demonstrate findings (presentational sampling). I had to make sampling decisions in all these areas. The first decision I made at the macro level was the choice of a case to study using what Patton (1990) terms "convenience sampling" and I selected mentoring at MTC because it was my work place, easy to access and inexpensive to study. While Patton (1990) argues that cost and convenience should not be the first considerations, I had to consider these two factors first because I had to be a fieldworker and work full time concurrently. It was also strategic for me to study mentoring at MTC where I knew I would be able to implement some of my research findings and use that as a base for influencing developments in other primary teachers' colleges in the country.

Secondly, I had to sample cases for study. I used purposive sampling to select the six schools that I included in my sample. This sampling enabled me to select six schools of different grades. I had three Grade 1 schools in my sample, Rufasha (Urban), Kwedu (semi-urban), and Fundo (rural) Schools, two Grade 2 schools Pfuma (rural mining context) and Zungu (urban) Schools and one Grade 3 school — Varimi School.

The third sampling decision I had to make was selection of which of the thirty student teachers in the six schools I would observe. I first observed twenty-four student teachers deployed to the six schools in the sample once and decided to follow up seven of the student teachers on the basis of their performance up to that point and of the classes they taught.

Instruments

I collected data through interviews, personal accounts, documents on mentoring, and observation of the interactions between mentors and their student teachers. I discuss each of these below.

Observation

According to Cohen and Manion (1994), a major feature of case study research is observation. Foster (1996) argues that such observational data is often combined with data from other sources such as interviews, documentary data and is less structured than quantitative observation. Foster (1996) views the purpose of this type of observation as seeing the object of the research from the point of view of those being observed. I used the qualitative observational strategy for this study for the benefits Foster (1996) outlines above.

I observed student teachers teaching and held post lesson discussions with their mentors. During observation, I was interested in the language of interaction in the classroom and the ways in which student teachers perceived and made sense of their daily routines, from the time they began their teaching practice to the time they finished. I also tried to understand and report how student teachers, mentors and lecturers perceived mentoring. I observed how student teachers taught the lessons, how mentors helped them to understand the strengths and weaknesses of such lessons and how MTC lecturers supervised and assessed the same lessons and discussed them with the students and mentors afterwards. Observation allowed me to describe in words the behaviour of the student teachers and their mentors. Babbie (1995) states that an observer can be either a participant or non-participant observer. I observed as a non-participant observer strategically positioned to see all the student's actions. In all my observations, the relevant mentor was in the room with me, as I was interested in observing the mentor's interaction with the student after the lesson both of us would have observed.

After the lesson, I observed the mentor and student teacher discussing the lesson. I then interviewed them both in their classroom, in the naturalistic tradition, asking further questions about the student teachers' experience from the perspective of both the mentors and the student teachers. Through interviews, I aimed to find out from student teachers and their mentors how they interpreted their classroom experiences as well as specifically those situations I had observed. However, in some cases, the mentors and student teachers found it difficult to express their ideas and perspectives in words. In other cases, mentors explained clearly what they had observed and suggested strategies for student teachers to improve their practice. I took

extensive notes of the lessons taught, the interactions between mentors and student teachers and the interviews afterwards. The examples from my field notes show some of the data I collected during post-observation discussion with mentors and student teachers, as the example below shows. Patricia's mentor had the following comments on the lesson she and I had observed Patricia teaching:

Patricia was lively. The lesson was lively as well. This was a Physical Education lesson. Patricia has improved. She is more outgoing and active this term and children become active as well. Patricia helped pupils with the exercises. Length of the lesson was too short because of poor pacing (Patricia's mentor, Pfuma School, extract from fieldnotes, June 1999)

In this example, Patricia's mentor focussed on lesson delivery. She felt that Patricia had improved somewhat in the teaching of Physical Education, as the pupils participated more than before. The mentor made other suggestions on how Patricia's lesson could have been better e.g. lesson timing.

In the second example during the interview based on the same lesson, Patricia commented on her own development as follows:

I have no problems with class control any more. I have developed a system of handling pupils' requests. My voice projection has improved. I am confident in selection of content. I still have problems with time allocation, as I can't make pupils understand concepts quickly (<biblio>).

My field notes thus covered the lesson observed, mentors' comments on the lessons, the student teachers' comments on the lessons and comments from both mentors and student teachers on the student teachers' development.

I also studied data from lesson plans, schemes of work, assessment records and monitoring of pupils' work and progress. These documents were important to teachers in training, as MTC considered thorough preparation an important part of successful practice. The plans formed a key part of the judgement of whether the lessons had achieved their purposes or not. On

my first visit to the schools, I observed only one lesson for each student teacher but observed more on subsequent visits to get a fuller picture of how the student teachers managed the lessons.

I was able to observe only seven of the student teachers on three different occasions each. I attempted to maintain the breadth of the study by using different school types and different levels of student performance.

Interviews

In order to overcome the limitations of observation data, I also collected data through interviews, personal accounts and documentary data. I used semi-structured interviews with the heads of the six schools in the sample and the student teachers in their six school groups. I also used semi-structured interviews with seven lecturers and mentors and student teachers during post-observation interviews. I used interview data to validate data from observation and personal accounts through triangulation and also to provide the participants' perspectives of what they felt was happening.

I used group interviews with student teachers in their school groups just before the end of the student teachers' teaching practice year. Fontana and Frey (1998) refer to group interviews as "the systematic questioning of several individuals simultaneously in formal or informal settings" (p.53). In this case, I had a set of questions to ask all groups of student teachers. Denzin (1989) states that the group interview can be used to triangulate data from other sources and to get school perspectives of the student teachers' experiences of being mentored. Fontana and Frey (1998:55) argue that the skills required for this group interview are similar to those for the other types of interview. The researcher has to be "flexible, objective, emphatic, persuasive, a good listener" (p. 55). Fontana and Frey (1998), however, indicate that the interviewer needs three additional skills, which are the ability to (a) ensure that all group members are taking part in the responses, (b) encourage unwilling group members to participate and (c) obtain responses from the whole group to ensure that the topic is answered as fully as possible. In this study, I tried to ensure that all student teachers in a group had a chance to speak and share their experiences as individuals. Where experiences applied to the entire group, one student teacher tended to speak for the group and the other members agreed.

Personal accounts

Denzin (1989:7) considers the biographical method as:

The studied use and collection of life documents. These documents will include autobiographies, diaries, letters, obituaries, life histories, life stories, personal experience, oral histories, and personal histories".

In the biographical tradition, I asked participants to write personal accounts of mentoring. The main benefit of the personal accounts is that the various accounts focus on one main issue, mentoring, and is presented in the participants' own expression. Wiersma (1986) suggests that if the personal accounts are planned carefully, they could be very useful. He suggests that the researcher should have a prepared outline and should also conduct interviews with subjects. While he finds the method time consuming and laborious, I found it useful to provide the personal data that I needed. Armstrong (1987) argues that the method is useful in that it assigns significance and value to a person's own story and the interpretations they place on their experiences as explanations for their behaviour and that it also documents the inner, subjective reality as constructed by individuals. It generally concentrates on the life of one individual but an alternative method is the use of multiple biographies within the same or similar area of research. I chose to use the multiple biographies option on participants' experiences of being involved in mentoring, as I felt that I could focus on themes I had identified for my study.

Armstrong (1987) finds this alternative useful in that it offers external validity and possibility to extract dominant themes. He also argues that the method allows the researcher to quote extracts of different lengths interspersed with comments and analysis. In my study I found I could use the personal accounts data to triangulate with data from other sources and thus increase the validity of my research. I also used extracts from the accounts as examples in my discussion.

In 2000, 30 student teachers, seven lecturers and eight of their mentors wrote personal accounts of mentoring. Gubrium and Holstein (1997: 29) find one advantage of the personal story as "letting informants tell what happened in considerable detail and in their own fashion". Most of the eight mentors, thirty student teachers and four lecturers wrote detailed

personal accounts of being involved in the mentoring process. I had constructed guidelines for the participants to use but left participants to decide what to include and not to include in their accounts. There were noticeable differences in focus of these accounts. I found that mentors concentrated more on issues of interest to them such as mentoring relationships, mentoring strategies and knowledge and skills for student teachers. Lecturers, on the other hand, tended to cover as many of the areas suggested as possible. Student teachers, generally, chose to write on relationships, personal development in terms of knowledge and skills and college supervision. This proved to be very rich data on mentoring which I believe I could not have collected through other techniques.

Documentary data collection

I also studied documents like college files, ministry circulars to uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights (Merriam, 1988) into policy on mentoring in general and on Masvingo Teachers' College in particular. I aimed to understand how mentoring was adopted, what its original aims were, what data if any had been promulgated about the programme since its adoption. I also studied policy documents from the Department of Teacher Education (University of Zimbabwe) that had been assessing student teachers on the programme from 1995. In the process, I coded data and constructed categories that captured the main characteristics of the contents of the documents. I also used other sources of secondary data such as minutes of meetings of heads of schools, mentors and student teachers, lecturers' meetings, and any other available information from schools and the college. I used the secondary data to support primary data from interviews, observation and personal accounts.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION PROCEDURES

I started to analyse my data in the field as I collected it. However, looking back at this period, I did not really make as much progress as I might have, as this kind of analysis was very new to me. At this time, I began to analyse data deductively according to the themes I had identified previously in line with the suggestions of Bogdan and Biklen (1992). After fieldwork, I began more detailed data analysis. A limitation discovered at this time was that I could no longer go back into the field if there were any missing elements or if I discovered I needed to clarify any data. However at the

same time I did find that I was able to bring a stronger analytical perspective once I was away from the field.

Observation and personal account data analysis

For this study, I used mostly the social anthropological approach, as my research was broadly ethnographic in approach. Miles and Huberman (1994) cite the common features of data analysis as coding of field notes, noting reflection or other remarks in margins, sorting and sifting through materials to identify similar phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, themes, distinct differences between subgroups and common consequences; isolating patterns and processes, commonalities and differences and taking them back to the field in the next round of data collection; gradually elaborating a small set of generalisations that cover consistencies discerned in the data base; and confronting those generalisations with formalised body of knowledge in the form of constraints and theories. They identify the data analysis process as data collection, data reduction during and after data collection, data display and data verification and conclusion drawing.

Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that the four steps are interwoven and carry through from data collection to writing up of the report. The data reduction stage involves selecting, abstracting and transforming data from written field notes to focus on, writing summaries, codes, themes, etc. This process carried on throughout the research process. The third step involves organising, compressing and assembling data in ways that allow drawing conclusions in the form of extended texts.

The last step, drawing conclusions and verifying them against field notes, involves finding out regularities, patterns, explanations and possible configurations. These led to the final conclusions at the end of the fieldwork. Verification occurred through constant reference to field notes, discussion with colleagues and testing meanings for plausibility by comparing with existing theories in literature. Taylor and Bogdan (1988:130) refer to the purpose of this stage of data analysis as "to come up with reasonable conclusions and generalisations based on a preponderance of the data".

Flick (1998) suggests a similar process when he writes that data analysis should start with recording data, editing the transcription and constructing

a new reality from the text. He also suggests that data should be reduced through paraphrasing, summarising and categorising — a process that involves coding of data for purposes of categorisation and theory development. I designed the following broad categories for my data: definition of mentoring, professional knowledge and skills, stages of student teacher development, mentor/ student teacher relationships, mentor selection and training and college supervision and assessment. I arrived at these categories deductively from my reading of mentoring literature. Within these categories others emerged inductively as I analysed data, such as the types of relationships mentors preferred to have with student teachers, the strategies mentors used to guide student teachers and the effect of lecturers' previous teaching experience on the supervision of student teachers.

Glaser and Strauss (1968) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) identify four stages as well, which are: -

- (a) comparing incidents applicable to each category;
- (b) integrating categories and their properties;
- (c) delimiting the theory; and
- (d) writing the theory.

Maykut and Morehouse (1994) argue that the stage of theorising is a result of the inductive approach to data analysis and that the researcher studies data to find variables to support the hypotheses generated. The important point about this is that variables are not pre-determined but emerge from the data (Glaser and Strauss' grounded theory approach, 1968).

Like Glaser and Strauss (1968), Hopkins, Bollington and Hewett (1989) see the aim of research as generating new theory. This research used a combination of ideas from the models above. In some cases, the data lent itself to quantitative analysis when occurrences of particular themes were aggregated and frequency tables could be drawn. This strategy had the advantage of giving shape to the data. However, I used this quantification together with qualitative data so that I did not lose the richness of the data.

Analysis of interview data

Hycner (1994) suggests methods of analysing interview data and proposes a number of steps to be followed. He suggests that each interview should

be summarised and confirmed with the interviewee possibly through a second interview to ensure that as much as possible the summary is as true a reflection of the interview as possible. The next step is to modify the themes and summary in the light of the second interview. Finally, when all interviews had been processed and confirmed as above, I identified general and unique themes from all the interviews in line with the themes I had already identified and used for personal accounts and observation data. While the interviews in this research were held around pre-determined themes, some new ones emerged from the interviews and were taken into consideration and placed in the context of this research. A composite summary of the interviews was then written out. Significant individual differences among the interviews were noted and explained. Extracts from the interview material were used as part of the paper. Interview data was used to corroborate data from other sources to come up with the final tapestry.

RESEARCHER ROLE — WHAT I DID AND HOW I DID IT

In fieldwork, researchers do not play one role, as roles change from one stage to the other. Flick (1996) views the role of the researcher as being fourfold, that is, the stranger, visitor, initiate and insider. As I was researching in a familiar environment, participants did not consider me as a stranger but a visitor (coming into the school for a purpose), initiate (wanting to learn from them) and insider (because I was known to all of them). Yet there was a sense in which I was a stranger intending to learn about aspects of school life, which were routine to the participants but new to me. I intended to learn about interactions between the mentors and student teachers and about classroom activities and procedures, which were generally tacit to mentors and student teachers. From this respect, I was both an outsider and initiate. I assumed what Hitzler in Flick (1996:59) termed the "attitude of principled doubting of social evidence" to facilitate my learning process. Erickson (1973) also argues that because classrooms are familiar, there is the need for the researcher to 'make the familiar strange'. I tried to treat everything I found out as new and strange. This is different from a visitor who comes to the research site once to conduct interviews. I never took on the visitor's role, even for student teachers I observed only once. I was a familiar figure in the six schools and concluded my observations by interviewing all student teachers in a school as a group. As I carried on with my observations, my role changed from that of outsider

to initiate and to insider when I began to understand the experiences of student teachers during school placement and to notice that college routines could be unfair to student teachers. For instance, I also began to understand that at times student teachers suffer in silence to ensure that they pass teaching practice.

At the same time, I began to understand mentors and the difficulties of their role. The more I read my field notes the more I empathised with mentors. I took on the advocacy role to stand up for both mentors and student teachers in different circumstances. I assumed this advocacy role (Burgess, 1988) when I felt the need to defend mentors, e.g. Mapatya, and student teachers such as Maria, when I felt they were being presented unfairly. There was a need to distance myself, to see things in perspective and to stop behaving and feeling like a member of the groups, especially after fieldwork so that I could present the data and findings as much as possible from the various participants' points of view.

Thus, I realised that I may not be able to be objective in the data collection and analysis as I was the main instrument of data collection (LeCompte and Preissle 1993). My feelings and perceptions were part of the process of data collection and analysis. I was heavily involved mentally and attitudinally in the people I was researching.

In interviews, I tried to take a backseat role and allow the interviewees to speak as freely as possible. I would probe for more information with follow up questions. I gave interviewees a lot of freedom to share their mentoring experiences with me. In the group interviews, I asked questions and tried to ensure that every member of the group took part in the discussions.

After fieldwork, I became the researcher again, anxious to gain as much knowledge on the mentoring process as possible. I had the major task of studying all data collected, making sense of it, analysing it and producing a report. In the next section, I present the findings of this study.

THE FINDINGS

I present a summary of the findings thematically according to the research questions.

Definition of the concept "mentoring"

Participants generally viewed mentoring as a process of sharing of classes between mentors and student teachers attached to them, which involved the mentors in guiding and assisting student teachers to acquire professional knowledge and skills necessary for them to become competent teachers. Lecturers generally viewed it as a long-drawn process in which experienced teachers (mentors) introduced student teachers to teaching. During the process student teachers acquired the professional skills and knowledge discussed below.

Professional knowledge and skills for student teachers

Brown and McIntyre (1993: 113) argue that, "without a clear conception of what one is trying to learn, one's learning must be inefficient". While there was no college curriculum for mentoring, participants generally felt that student teachers needed to acquire knowledge and skills in lesson planning and preparation, lesson delivery, teaching approaches and methods, class management, selection and design of teaching/learning aids and documentation. Because of the absence of a college curriculum, each mentor in this study seemed to focus on some or all the identified knowledge and skills. The mentors also chose strategies they liked, as there was no proper training for them.

One area that this study did not have any data on was how student teachers acquired these professional knowledge and skills. There is need for MTC to find out the process of student teacher development through being mentored, as this would enable mentors to determine what areas to focus on in order to give maximum assistance to student teachers.

Mentor strategies

In analysing and presenting data on mentor strategies, I used Tomlinson's (1995) classification of student learning — learning from observing the mentors, learning from their own practice, learning from collaborative teaching with their mentors and learning from discussion of other issues relevant to teaching and learning.

In the first category mentors demonstrated their practice from lesson planning, lesson delivery to evaluation of the lessons taught. All mentors

in this study used this strategy. The effectiveness of the demonstration lessons varied according to the guidance mentors gave the student teachers. Where mentors clearly helped student teachers in what to focus on during observation, student teachers gained a lot from their mentors. Where such guidance was missing, student teachers did not gain much. There was also a variation in how mentors viewed their modelling role. Some mentors believed that all their lessons were demonstration lessons and therefore made great efforts to ensure student teachers had something to learn from every lesson the mentors taught. Other mentors held demonstration lessons in the early weeks of the student teachers' attachment and when introducing new concepts.

In the second category mentors observed student teachers teaching and gave them feedback sometimes during lessons but more commonly after lessons. While this was the crux of student teacher learning, there were variations in how even this role was performed. Some mentors made notes while student teachers taught and carefully discussed these with the student teachers after the lessons. Other mentors did not do this and just picked key points from the lessons to discuss with the student teachers. Most mentors helped student teachers with the planning of the lessons beforehand to help the student teachers with ideas on what subject matter to include in a lesson, how to present lessons and how to evaluate lessons. Another area of focus was pupil discipline and class control.

This category of student teacher learning was seriously affected by the nature of the relationship between mentors and student. Some mentors were hostile in their performance of this task, while others were more sensitive to student teachers' feelings.

Very few mentors involved themselves in the last two areas of collaborative teaching and exploring other issues in education and learning. The few who used collaborative teaching planned, taught and evaluated lessons together with student teachers on very few occasions.

Strengths and weaknesses of mentoring

Participants generally agreed that mentoring had three main benefits. The first benefit, which the majority of participants agreed on, was that student teachers learnt in a safe environment under the guidance and support of mentors in real school contexts. During the process, mentors and student

teachers shared classes and ideas on teaching and learning. As a result student teachers had lighter teaching loads than when they were treated as full time teachers. This afforded student teachers time to reflect and carry out other teaching duties like marking of pupils' exercise books. The third benefit was that as part of the sharing, mentors gained new ideas and knowledge from student teachers.

Participants thus viewed mentoring as an effective programme for introducing student teachers to practical teaching because mentors guided, nurtured and groomed them into competent teachers.

However participants believed that the process had weaknesses which could be corrected. One interesting development was that in relation to weaknesses there was no general agreement across the board. Mentors and lecturers agreed on some weaknesses while lecturers and student teachers agreed on others. Mentors and student teachers did not agree about any of the weaknesses of mentoring cited. The first weakness was that mentoring was prone to abuse because it relied on the personalities of mentors and student teachers. Some student teachers and lecturers argued that it could be abused and deny student teachers opportunities to experiment with new ideas, over load them and take away the opportunity to reflect on their performance. It would appear that the issue of time created by sharing classes could in this case be viewed as a benefit to mentors, in which case student teachers were left to carry out all the work for their classes as the mentors freed themselves to do other 'duties'.

The second weakness raised by mentors and lecturers was that mentoring was extra and thankless work for mentors, as mentors and schools in Zimbabwe did not get any financial or material benefit for being involved in the mentoring process. Schools had to bear the costs of being involved in mentoring, as they had to meet most of the teaching/learning requirements of the student teachers.

The third weakness raised by one lecturer was that mentoring was too expensive for schools, colleges and the Government of Zimbabwe, which paid two teachers for teaching the same class.

The first two weaknesses of mentoring could be corrected through proper mentor training. The third weakness refers to a burden that the country has

to pay in order to have suitably trained teachers for its schools. However, there was general agreement that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages.

Mentoring relationships

One main finding of this study was that relationships between mentors and their student teachers hindered or promoted the support that mentors gave to student teachers. Positive and harmonious relationships facilitated the scaffolding role of the mentors while negative and hostile relationships hindered mentor support and thus adversely affected student teacher development. Positive relationships varied from those described as parent/child, sibling, and free and open relationships in which mentors were found to be caring and genuinely concerned about student teachers' development. However, some parent/child relationships became so over protected that student teachers did not have the freedom to experiment and practise teaching as freely as they should have done. In three cases the relationships between mentors and student teachers were so poor that student teachers' professional development was adversely affected.

About half of the student teachers perceived the relationships they had with their mentors as similar to parent/child relationships, which in Shona culture tended to be very hierarchical and rewarded obedience to parents. Student teachers in this type of relationship were generally over protected and limited in their freedom to experiment and thus develop their full potential.

A few of the student teachers had open relationships which allowed experimentation and individual development for the student teachers concerned.

All mentors tended to prefer hierarchical relationships in which they were accorded respect for their roles as teacher trainers. As a result some mentors admitted to using pressure to get student teachers to comply with their directions. While mentoring literature accepts the importance of mentor/student teacher relationships, there appeared to be differences in the perception of such relationships. In developed countries the relationships seemed to be freer and more democratic than the ones in my study. McIntyre and Hagger (1994) even suggest that they might develop into ones of near

equals. Very few of the relationships in this study grew close enough to be anywhere near this level. The difference probably lies in the cultures of the people. Respect for elders and authority is a hallmark of African culture in general. While it tended to limit the professional development of student teachers, it is an issue I would not like to dismiss easily as it also determines the attitudes of pupils to their teachers and the atmosphere of teaching in classrooms in the country. It is a feature MTC should try and maintain in its student teachers but at the same time ensuring that mentors are trained to value the importance of a degree of assertiveness in the student teachers. Student teachers also needed to learn to be assertive within reasonable bounds to ensure effective professional development for them.

College supervision and assessment

College supervision and assessment served to support student teacher development by supplementing and endorsing mentors' strategies and assessing student teachers to determine who could pass teaching practice and the whole course, thus providing external validation for the mentors' guidance. However, the effectiveness of college supervision was adversely affected by poor lecturer training, inadequate time for individual support and unprofessional behaviour on the part of some lecturers, including sexual harassment of female student teachers. There was need for MTC to devote more time to preparing lecturers for supervision through continuous staff development, clear induction policies for new lecturers and investing more resources in teaching practice.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper discussed and justified the research design, paradigm and the methods used for data collection and data analysis. The research process generated qualitative data through interviews and observation of seven student teachers and their mentors in six schools in Masvingo province, personal accounts of mentoring written by thirty student teachers, eight mentors and seven lecturers. Data was analysed and compared so that I could begin to understand more deeply the mentoring process at Masvingo Teachers' College in 1999.

In the process of data collection, I made a number of changes, as the situation demanded. I collected data through qualitative methods and learnt

a lot about the constructivist approach to research. I was able to go backwards and forwards to my field notes to check meanings and ascertain my understanding of the various participants' perspectives of mentoring. This took a lot of time and pain but the results were both exciting and pleasing. I also found I learnt a great deal in the process.

The paper also highlights the major findings of this study. Mentoring was seen as having many advantages for student development, as students benefited from learning in real schools from experienced teachers. Students could also practise in a safe environment under the guidance of the mentors (scaffolding). While the programme could be abused to the disadvantage of the student teachers, it was generally believed that the benefits far outweighed the disadvantages. The need to train mentors, lecturers and students on their roles and responsibilities in the mentoring process was underlined.

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