Journal of Education and Learning Technology (JELT)
ISSN 2720-7730 Volume 7 Issue 2 2026, 392 - 402
Available online at: https://noyam.org/journals/jelt/
DOI: https://doi.org/10.38159/jelt.20267226

One size does not fit all: Adaptive Mentorship in South African Primary Teacher Education

Lindiwe N. J. Jiyane[1] & Blandina Manditereza[2]

[1] Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Mpumalanga, South Africa.
[2] Department of Early Childhood Education. University of the Free State, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

This interpretive study reports that work-integrated learning is a crucial component of teacher education programmes, as it enables pre-service teachers to acquire practical experience in real-life classroom situations. This study builds upon a doctoral research project that investigated mentorship practices as a component of work-integrated learning, aiming to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. This depends on whether stakeholders integrate structured support, evidence-based practices, and continuous improvement mechanisms into teacher education programmes. This qualitative approach used Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. The study reported on the issue of mentorship in teacher education, particularly on how mentors adapt their approaches to accommodate the diverse learning styles of primary pre-service teachers in varied classroom contexts. The purposive sample consisted of 20 pre-service teachers, five mentor teachers, and five mentor lecturers. Data from interviews, observations, and document analysis were thematically analysed. The study focused on the principles of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development to highlight the role of responsive support in the learning process. Findings revealed that effective and astute mentors adopt flexible, student-centered, personalized, and customized approaches to meet the individual needs of their mentees. The study advocates that differentiation should be rigorously implemented in WIL mentorship programmes. The study adds to the existing literature on enhancing teacher-education programmes.

Keywords: Adaptive Mentoring, Pre-Service Teachers, Scaffolding, Student-Centred Learning, Work-Integrated Learning, Zone Of Proximal Development.

INTRODUCTION

Work-integrated learning (WIL) has become a priority in teacher education because it provides pre-service teachers with authentic and practical exposure to real-life classroom environments where theoretical knowledge and practical skills blend. One of the most critical aspects of WIL is mentoring, which ensures that pre-service teachers receive the professional guidance and support necessary for their growth and development. This mentoring support strengthens the processes between academic preparation and practical skills by equipping teacher-trainees and novice teachers with both technical and reflective skills needed for effective teaching.[1] Moreover, this study examines how mentorship can

[1] Department of Basic Education (DBE), "Inaugural New Teacher Induction Support and Teacher Development Webinar Hosted," Government Communications, 2024, https://www.education.gov.za/ArchivedDocuments/ArchivedArticles/Inaugural-New-Teacher-Induction-Support-and-Teacher-Development-Webinar-hosted-0524.aspx.

CORRESPONDENCE – Lindiwe N. J. Jiyane **Email**: Lindiwe.jiyane@ump.ac.za
PUBLICATION HISTORY - Received : 9th September, 2025 | Accepted: 8th April, 2026 | Published: 15th May, 2026.
TO CITE THIS ARTICLE – Jiyane, N. J. Lindiwe, and Blandina Manditereza. "One size does not fit all: Adaptive Mentorship in South African Primary Teacher Education." *Journal of Education and Learning Technology* 7, no.2 (2026): 392 -402. https://doi.org/10.38159/jelt.20267226

be tailored to ensure that pre-service teachers (PSTs) receive responsive support, promoting their professional competence and autonomy. However, the diversity of learners enrolled in teacher education programmes negates the one-size-fits-all model of mentoring as being insufficient and inappropriate. Instead, mentors must adopt flexible, adaptive, creative, and student-centred approaches that respond to students' unique needs, diverse learning styles, and developmental readiness to teach. It is recommended that mentors, institutional heads, the Ministry of Education, and other stakeholders review and monitor WIL programmes to enhance their effectiveness.

Mentoring in education refers to a structured and supportive relationship between an experienced teacher (the mentor) and a less experienced or novice teacher (the mentee), such as a pre-service teacher. The role of the mentor is not merely to provide technical instruction, but also to foster a professional identity, encourage reflective practice, and model effective teaching strategies. According to Hudson, quality mentorship incorporates both pedagogical guidance and emotional support, thereby promoting the holistic development of PSTs.[2] In addition, mentoring in education serves as a conduit that fosters novice teachers' confidence, refines their skills, and prepares them to make meaningful contributions to the teaching profession and society.

Adaptive mentoring requires flexibility and responsiveness to the unique needs of each mentee. In contrast to rigid and prescriptive forms of guidance, adaptive mentoring.[3] enables mentors to tailor their approaches to the pre-service teacher's developmental stage, learning style, and context. In congruence, Aspfors and Fransson assert that adaptive mentors can strike a balance between providing scaffolding for mentees and allowing autonomy for more advanced ones.[4] By aligning Vygotsky's principle of the ZPD, adaptive mentoring ensures that support is relevant, equitable, and capable of transcending PSTs' current level of competence to reach professional independence.[5]

By contrast, differentiated mentoring tends to rely on pre-defined categories of mentee needs, often informed by initial assessments or profiles (e.g., novice vs. experienced, high vs. low competence, content-area weaknesses). Mentoring strategies are then adjusted, either once or intermittently, based on these categories. It is therefore structured, planned, and classification-driven. The goal is fit-for-purpose support, but the adjustments are typically static or infrequent, rather than iterative or relational.

Student-centred learning is an approach that positions learners as active participants in their own educational journey. In teacher education, this means that PSTs are not passive recipients of knowledge, but rather co-constructors of their own professional development. Gravett and Cilliers elaborate that student-centred learning fosters agency, autonomy, and critical reflection.[6] In mentoring, student-centredness requires mentors to recognise individual goals, interests, and learning preferences by adapting their guidance techniques to enable self-directed growth. This approach not only enhances the quality of WIL but also prepares PSTs to adopt learner-focused pedagogies in their future profession.

Since many teacher education programmes continue to rely on generic models that overlook learner diversity, this study was necessary to engender change, as mentoring in education plays a crucial role in preparing competent and confident teachers. By focusing on adaptive mentoring, the study highlights the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in tailoring support to meet the specific developmental needs of PSTs. Furthermore, integrating student-centred learning into mentorship ensures that PSTs are empowered to assume ownership of their professional growth while being supported to enact their individuality.

This study has become necessary because of the persistent challenges observed in WIL, where some PSTs thrived under mentoring programmes. In contrast, others struggled, despite being immersed

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[2] Peter Hudson and Sue Hudson, "Mentoring Preservice Teachers: Identifying Tensions and Possible Resolutions," *Teacher Development* 22, no. 1 (2018): 16–30.

[3] Linda Darling-Hammond et al., *Empowered Educators: How High-Performing Systems Shape Teaching Quality around the World* (John Wiley & Sons, 2017).

[4] J. Aspfors and G. Fransson, "Mentoring as a Tool for Professional Development: A Study of Mentors' Experiences in Finland and Sweden," *Teacher Development* 24, no. 5 (2020): 654–70.

[5] Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, ed. Michael Cole et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

[6] S. Gravett and F Cilliers, "Mentorship in Teacher Education: Reflecting on Practice and Progress. ," *Journal of Teacher Education* 73, no. 1 (2022): 39–56.

in the same programme under similar guidance structures. This situation raises concerns about the relevance of traditional standardised mentorship approaches where learners' individuality, background, prior knowledge and learning preferences differ significantly. Hence, this research explored how mentorship could be enhanced in terms of responsiveness, impartiality and context sensitivity so that all PSTs, regardless of their differences, could benefit fully from WIL. The study seeks to answer the following question: How do mentor teachers and mentor lecturers adapt their mentorship practices to accommodate the diverse learning styles of PSTs in WIL learning contexts?

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Perspectives

Globally, mentoring in teacher education is a key strategy for integrating theory and practice into instruction, although its effectiveness hinges on its design and implementation. International studies increasingly emphasise the importance of adaptive mentorship in fostering teacher agency and reflective practice (Aspfors & Fransson, 2020). For example, Aspfors and Fransson found that in countries such as Finland and Sweden, adaptive mentoring that fosters dialogue and reflection is crucial for empowering PSTs with critical thinking skills.[7] In support, Hudson, who worked in Australia, agreed that flexible, structured frameworks provide essential pedagogical and emotional support, which enhances PSTs' classroom readiness.[8] While these studies indicate a global transition to dynamic, student-centred mentoring, they also implicitly call for context-specific adaptations – particularly relevant in the African context.

African Perspectives: A Call for Contextual Adaptability

Within the African context, mentoring is shaped by unique challenges, including resource constraints, large class sizes, and diverse sociocultural dynamics.[9] Scholars from across the continent stress the need for mentorship programmes that are not only contextually relevant but also truly developmental. Akyeampong and Lewin found a pervasive gap between formal mentoring protocols and genuine developmental engagement in their study on Ghanaian teacher education. They assert that this disconnect often leaves PSTs ill-equipped to apply theoretical knowledge effectively in diverse classrooms.[10] This is supported by Wambugu and Changeiywo, who found that in Kenya, mentoring is most impactful when it is participatory and interactive, as it enables mentees to co-construct knowledge with their mentors rather than simply receiving it.[11] These African perspectives collectively challenge the traditional passive transmission model of mentoring, underscoring the need for active, responsive and locally grounded practices.

The Complexities of Mentoring in South Africa: Intersectionality and Cultural Distinctions

In South Africa, the national policy emphasis on WIL has catapulted mentoring to the forefront, but its implementation reveals a complex interplay of strengths and systemic gaps. Research by Mphojane confirms that mentoring plays a vital role in professional identity formation; however, he criticises the widespread inconsistency of practices across schools, mainly due to mentors' overwhelming workloads and a lack of formalised training.[12] Moreover, Gravett and Cilliers acknowledge that adaptive and reflective mentoring can enhance PSTs' confidence, but implore the urgent need for structured, supportive frameworks to standardise practices and ensure quality.[13]

The challenges are compounded by South Africa's deep-rooted multiculturalism and intersecting identities. Mphojane reiterates that the nation's linguistic diversity and multitude of cultural

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[7] Aspfors and Fransson, “Mentoring as a Tool for Professional Development: A Study of Mentors’ Experiences in Finland and Sweden.”

[8] Hudson and Hudson, “Mentoring Preservice Teachers: Identifying Tensions and Possible Resolutions.”

[9] K. Akyeampong and K. M. Lewin, *Rethinking Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Routledge, 2020).

[10] Akyeampong and Lewin, *Rethinking Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa*.

[11] Patriciah W Wambugu and Johnson M Changeiywo, “Effects of Mastery Learning Approach on Secondary School Students’ Physics Achievement,” *Eurasia Journal of Mathematics, Science and Technology Education* 4, no. 3 (2008): 293–302.

[12] D. Mphojane, “Building Professional Capital in Teacher Education: The Role of Mentoring,” *South African Journal of Education* 39, no. 4 (2019): 112–29.

[13] Gravett and Cilliers, “Mentorship in Teacher Education: Reflecting on Practice and Progress. .”

groups highlight significant complexities in the mentor–mentee relationship.[14] A key concern is the potential for cultural and communication misunderstandings, as nonverbal cues and perceptions of authority can differ significantly between groups. For instance, a mentee's silence, which may be intended as a sign of respect in one cultural context, could be misinterpreted by a mentor from another culture as disengagement.[15]

In addition, successful mentoring is profoundly influenced by the intersectionality of a mentee's identity, including their race, gender, socioeconomic status, and educational background. According to Akyeampong and Lewin, a pre-service teacher from a rural, under-resourced school faces a distinct set of challenges, such as overcrowded classrooms and limited resources, that a mentor from an urban, privileged background may not comprehend.[16] Effective mentorship, therefore, requires mentors to be culturally aware and knowledgeable of these intersecting identities in order to craft their support to the mentee's specific lived experiences, rather than applying a generic approach.[17]

In South Africa, mentoring has gained prominence due to the emphasis on WIL in teacher education programmes. Research describes both the strengths and gaps in mentoring frameworks; for example, Mphojane asserts that while mentoring contributes to the professional identity formation of PSTs, it is often inconsistent across schools because some mentors provide limited guidance due to burdensome workloads.[18] These perspectives illustrate that while South Africa has made strides in embedding mentoring in teacher education, significant progress is still required to standardise practices to ensure that mentoring significantly enhances teacher preparedness.

While South Africa's multiculturalism significantly complicates mentoring in Initial Teacher Education, it simultaneously enriches the landscape by introducing a dynamic range of linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic variables into the mentor–mentee relationship.[19] The nation's 11 official languages and multitude of cultural groups suggest that communication is rarely straightforward, even when English is used as a shared medium of instruction. Since cultural backgrounds fundamentally shape communication styles, nonverbal cues, and perceptions of authority, these factors must be central to the mentoring process. For instance, in many African cultural contexts, avoiding eye contact or remaining silent when challenged is an expression of (respect), whereas in Western pedagogical traditions, this may be viewed as a sign of passivity or a lack of critical engagement. Consequently, a mentor lacking cultural agility may misinterpret a mentee's respectful silence as insolence or incompetence, leading to a breakdown in trust.[20]

A study by Geber and Keane implicitly highlights that a cultural dissonance directly necessitates the inquiry at the heart of this study: How do mentor teachers and mentor lecturers adapt their mentorship practices to accommodate the diverse learning styles of PSTs?[21] Viewed through the theoretical lens of this study, a failure to adapt to these cultural variables results in a 'blocked' ZPD. If, as Vygotsky posits, learning is socially mediated through language and social norms, the use of cultural tools of mediation.[22] This implies the need for alignment between the mentor and the mentee. A mentor who fails to recognise the cultural logic behind a student's behaviour cannot effectively scaffold their learning. Therefore, Ubuntu becomes the necessary operational mechanism for adaptation; by prioritising (dignity) and mutual understanding, the mentor creates a psychological safety net that

[14] M. Mphojane, " Ubuntu and Education in South Africa: A Philosophical Perspective," *South African Journal of Education* 39, no. 1 (2019): 1–9.
[15] Gravett and Cilliers, "Mentorship in Teacher Education: Reflecting on Practice and Progress. ."
[16] Akyeampong and Lewin, *Rethinking Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa*.
[17] Hudson and Hudson, "Mentoring Preservice Teachers: Identifying Tensions and Possible Resolutions."
[18] Mphojane, "Building Professional Capital in Teacher Education: The Role of Mentoring."
[19] Labby Ramrathan, "Learner Poor Performance: Provoking Bourdieu's Key Concepts in Analysing School Education in South Africa," *Southern African Review of Education with Production* 23, no. 1 (2017): 23–36; Crain. Soudien, *Report on the National Review of Academic and Professional Programmes in Education* (Council on Higher Education, 2010).
[20] Gravett and Cilliers, "Mentorship in Teacher Education: Reflecting on Practice and Progress. ."
[21] H. Geber and M. Keane, "Extension of the Mandate of the Commission on Restitution of Land Rights. In Ubuntu and Transformational Mentoring in South Africa: 7 Principles of a Culturally Integrated Mentoring Response," *The Mentoring Institute*, 2013.
[22] Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*.

allows the PST to bridge their home culture with the professional culture of the school, ensuring that the ZPD becomes a space of growth rather than alienation.[23]

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To demonstrate how "Adaptive Mentoring" facilitates the transition from other regulation to self-regulation through mutual respect, the study adopted a syncretic framework combining Vygotsky's social constructivism (focusing on ZPD, mediation, and scaffolding) and the Ubuntu philosophy (focusing on interdependence, respect and humanising pedagogy).[24] The study of the re-contextualised aspect of the ZPD, from a strictly cognitive gap to a "zone of psychological safety," highlights the need for emotional stability in the mentee, as mentorship requires it. This enables the objectives of the study to move mentorship from a transactional checking of boxes (supervision) to a transformational ‘’becoming through others’’ (co-construction, of scaffolding and the ZPD, which provides a strong foundation for understanding mentoring in teacher education. Using the aspect of Ubuntu enabled the study to incorporate an ethical dimension. Since we applied the concepts of constructivism and Ubuntu, we acknowledge that the current neoliberal university structure (massification, time constraints, and output metrics) may make the time-intensive, relationship-based "adaptive mentoring" difficult to implement. Vygotsky defined the ZPD as the difference between what a learner can accomplish independently and what can be achieved with the guidance of a more knowledgeable other. This zone is not a fixed, universal space, but a highly individualised one. Each learner, including the PST, has a unique ZPD shaped by prior experiences, knowledge and abilities; so, a mentorship model that treats all PSTs as equals fails to acknowledge this individuality. This individuality can be recognised through Ubuntu because Ubuntu is not just about "kindness"; it is about recognising the individual. To deny someone's history or experience is to deny their full humanity.

In this regard, a PST with extensive prior experience in classroom settings will have a different ZPD than a novice who is just beginning their teaching career. While the experienced PST might be ready to explore complex classroom management strategies with minimal guidance, the novice may require foundational support in lesson planning and basic instructional techniques. A uniform mentoring approach would provide insufficient support for the novice, while the experienced teacher trainee would find it redundant.

In contrast, a one-size-fits-all approach overlooks this adaptive requirement, as it provides the same level and type of support for everyone, regardless of whether they are in the early stages of learning a skill, mastering it, or have already transitioned beyond the need for assistance. This misalignment between support and need is why traditional mentoring strategies often fail to foster effective professional growth for all mentees.

Linking Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory with Ubuntu Pedagogy

Vygotsky’s framework positions learning as a fundamentally social process mediated through interaction, language, and shared cultural tools. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) emphasizes that learners grow when they engage with more knowledgeable others who scaffold their participation in meaningful activities. This view aligns closely with contemporary African theories of learning, especially Ubuntu pedagogy, which posits “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”—a person becomes a person through other people. Ubuntu reframes cognition not as an individual achievement but as a collective, relational process, rooted in community obligation, compassion, and shared responsibility.

Both frameworks resist the notion of the learner as an isolated entity. Yet Ubuntu extends Vygotsky by embedding learning within ethical and cultural identities, not only developmental stages. Whereas Vygotsky foregrounds interaction as a mechanism for internalization, Ubuntu demands relational accountability—mentors, teachers, and elders are not simply sources of knowledge, but co-creators of identity, social harmony, and communal wellbeing. In mentoring, this means guidance is not merely a cognitive scaffold but a moral and communal act, where the mentor nurtures a novice as

[23] Moeketsi Letseka, “African Philosophy and Educational Discourse,” 2000; Lovemore Mbigi, *Ubuntu: The African Dream in Management* (Knowledge Resources, 1997).
[24] Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*.

part of the broader learning ecology. Thus, integrating Ubuntu into a Vygotskian model deepens its contextual legitimacy in African schooling: knowledge is mediated with and for others, shaped by shared histories, local wisdom, and the ongoing renewal of community.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design, grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which focuses on understanding the meanings that individuals attribute to social phenomena.[25] The interpretivist approach was appropriate, as it enabled the researchers to explore the lived experiences of pre-service and novice teachers, mentor lecturers, and mentor teachers regarding mentoring practices, adaptive mentoring, and student-centred learning. By selecting this paradigm, the study dissected the subjective views of participants to generate in-depth insights into how mentoring can be adapted to better support the development of PSTs.

This study focused on teacher education programmes where WIL formed the central component. A case study approach was suitable because it provided a holistic understanding of mentoring within a specific institutional setting.[26] This approach also enabled the researcher to capture the complexity of mentoring interactions, the adaptability of mentoring practices, and the extent to which these practices promoted student-centred learning.

The purposive sample consisted of 30 participants who were directly involved in the mentoring process. These included 20 PSTs, five mentor teachers, and five mentor lecturers. Purposive sampling was appropriate because it allowed the researchers to select participants who possessed knowledge and experience relevant to the study's focus.[27] For data collection, multiple methods were employed to ensure depth and triangulation of the data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with mentor teachers and lecturers to capture their perspectives and lived experiences concerning mentoring practices, and focus group discussions were conducted with PSTs to encourage collaborative reflection on their experiences. Classroom observations were conducted during teaching practice sessions to document the dynamics of mentoring in practice, and institutional documents, such as teaching practice guidelines, were analysed to understand how formal structures support or constrain mentoring. The use of these four methods ensured the rich generation of data, which increased the credibility of the findings.[28]

Data Analysis

Data collected from interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and document analysis were analysed thematically by applying Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework.[29] This process included familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, identifying patterns, reviewing and refining themes, and defining and naming themes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to this study, given the involvement of human participants in the context of WIL. Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the university's research ethics committee, ensuring that the study adhered to institutional and national guidelines for research involving human subjects.

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[25] John Ward Creswell and John David Creswell, *Research Design Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018).

[26] R. K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* , 6th ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2018).

[27] Ilker Etikan, "Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling," *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics* 5, no. 1 (2016): 1, https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11.

[28] J. G. Maree, "Innovating Counselling for Self- and Career-Construction: Connecting Conscious Knowledge with Subconscious Insight," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 34, no. 6 (2020): 1–17.

[29] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Toward Good Practice in Thematic Analysis: Avoiding Common Problems and Be(Com)Ing a *Knowing* Researcher," *International Journal of Transgender Health* 24, no. 1 (January 25, 2023): 1–6, https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis aimed to explore how mentor lecturers and mentor teachers adapted their mentoring practices to accommodate the diverse learning requirements of PSTs within the WIL context. Four main themes emerged from the analysis and are discussed below.

a.*Flexible and Adaptive Mentoring Practices*

Participants mentioned that effective mentors tailored their approaches to meet the individual learning needs, prior knowledge, and levels of confidence of their mentees. Mentor teachers described adjusting the intensity of guidance depending on the mentee's readiness by providing more scaffolding for novice teachers while allowing greater autonomy for more experienced ones. This theme aligns with Vygotsky's ZPD, which emphasises that learners progress smoothly when support is responsive to their current capabilities.[30] Similarly, Aspfors and Fransson note that adaptive mentoring enhances learning by creating an environment where mentees are challenged appropriately and supported according to their developmental stage.[31]

b. Student-centred Approaches

Mentoring that prioritised the needs, goals and preferences of PSTs was regarded as being particularly effective. Student-centred mentoring engaged mentees in goal setting, reflective discussions and co-constructing lesson plans. This approach empowered PSTs to assume ownership of their learning and their professional development. Gravett and Cilliers note that student-centred mentoring fosters agency, critical thinking and reflective practice, which are crucial for preparing teachers to implement learner-focused pedagogies in their classrooms.[32]

c. Collaborative and Relational Support

Another salient theme was the relational nature of mentoring, where mentors developed strong interpersonal relationships, demonstrated empathy and maintained open lines of communication, while creating a safe space for mentees to ask questions, make mistakes and reflect on their practice. This finding resonates with African perspectives on Ubuntu-informed mentorship, where collaboration, empathy, and communal responsibility are prioritised.[33] On the other hand, Hudson and Hudson confirm that relational mentoring fosters trust, which in turn enhances learning and motivation, particularly in diverse and challenging educational contexts.[34]

d. *Challenges and Areas for Improvement*

While mentoring was generally perceived as beneficial, participants identified challenges that hindered its effectiveness, including the inconsistent availability of mentors, large mentee-mentor ratios, and limited formal training for mentors related to adaptive and student-centred practices. Similarly, Wilson notes that the effectiveness of WIL mentorship can be constrained by contextual factors such as heavy workloads, resource scarcity and insufficient institutional support.[35] Thus, mitigating these challenges is critical to enhance the quality and success of mentoring in teacher education.

These four themes collectively illustrate that effective mentorship regarding WIL is adaptive, student-centred, relational, and context-sensitive; and that it requires both institutional support and mentor readiness. This data analysis, grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, highlights that scaffolding, dialogue, and guided participation remain central to fostering the professional growth of PSTs.[36]

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[30] Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*.
[31] Aspfors and Fransson, "Mentoring as a Tool for Professional Development: A Study of Mentors' Experiences in Finland and Sweden."
[32] Gravett and Cilliers, "Mentorship in Teacher Education: Reflecting on Practice and Progress. ."
[33] Mphojane, "Building Professional Capital in Teacher Education: The Role of Mentoring."
[34] Hudson and Hudson, "Mentoring Preservice Teachers: Identifying Tensions and Possible Resolutions."
[35] S. Wilson, "Mentoring Pre-Service Teachers: Identifying Tensions and Possible Resolutions," *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* 46, no. 10 (2019): 1–16.
[36] Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*.

The subsequent sections discuss the four sub-research questions that guided the investigation of mentorship practices regarding WIL. Each section corresponds to a sub-question and highlights key emerging themes supported by participants' verbatim responses, theoretical perspectives, and relevant literature. This structure enabled a clear and focused discussion that demonstrated how mentors adapt their approaches to meet the diverse learning needs of PSTs.

Theme 1: Flexible and Adaptive Mentoring Practices

Research Question 1: How do mentors adapt their teaching and support strategies to meet the diverse learning needs of PSTs?

Mentors reported employing flexible and adaptive strategies to support PSTs at various levels of experience and confidence. Mentor lecturers indicated that they provided more guidance for novice teachers while allowing experienced mentees greater independence. One mentor-lecturer explained:

> **ML3:** *I always observe what the student can do on his/her own, and I step in only when they struggle. Some need more guidance, while others I let explore on their own.*

This practice is indicative of Vygotsky's ZPD, which demonstrates that learning is optimised when support matches the learner's current abilities.[37] International studies support these findings by suggesting that adaptive mentoring enhances autonomy while ensuring appropriate scaffolding.[38]

Theme 2: Student-centred Approaches

Research Question 2: How do mentors incorporate student-centred approaches in their mentorship practices?

Student-centred mentoring emerged from the data analysis as a significant practice with mentors involving PSTs in lesson planning, goal setting, and reflective activities. A pre-service teacher commented:

> **PST7:** *My mentor always asks me what I want to try in the classroom before giving advice. It makes me feel involved and responsible for my learning.*

Student-centred approaches empower mentees to take ownership of their learning, while also fostering professional agency.[39] This aligns with contemporary pedagogical trends that emphasise learner autonomy and reflective practice, thus underlining that mentorship is a collaborative and participatory process, rather than a one-way transmission of knowledge.

Theme 3: Collaborative and Relational Support

Research Question 3: What roles do relationships and collaboration play in mentoring PSTs?

The relational dimension of mentoring enabled critical thinking for effective learning. Mentors who developed trusting and supportive relationships encouraged mentees to ask questions, take risks and engage in reflective practice. One mentor teacher articulated:

> **MT2:** *Some students are shy and hesitant. I always make sure to listen first and encourage them before correcting. They learn better when they feel safe to ask questions.*

This evidence resonates with the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasises empathy, relational support, and communal learning.[40] Internationally, relational mentoring is also recognised for enhancing motivation, engagement, and the co-construction of knowledge, thus demonstrating the importance of mentorship as a socially interactive process.[41]

Theme 4: Challenges and Areas for Improvement

Research Question 4: What challenges do mentors and mentees face during the mentorship process, and how can these be addressed?

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[37] Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*.
[38] Aspfors and Fransson, "Mentoring as a Tool for Professional Development: A Study of Mentors' Experiences in Finland and Sweden"; Gravett and Cilliers, "Mentorship in Teacher Education: Reflecting on Practice and Progress. ."
[39] Gravett and Cilliers, "Mentorship in Teacher Education: Reflecting on Practice and Progress. ."
[40] Mphojane, "Building Professional Capital in Teacher Education: The Role of Mentoring."
[41] Hudson and Hudson, "Mentoring Preservice Teachers: Identifying Tensions and Possible Resolutions."

Participants identified several challenges that hindered effective mentoring, including high mentee-mentor ratios, inconsistent mentor availability, and limited formal training. A pre-service teacher responded:

> **PST12:** *Sometimes we don't have enough time with our mentor, and I feel lost. I wish mentors were more readily available.*

These challenges are consistent with the findings of South African researchers who expose structural constraints concerning mentoring in relation to WIL, which include work overload and resource limitations.[42] Addressing these issues requires institutional support, structured frameworks, and professional development for mentors to ensure consistent, adaptive, and effective mentorship.

The findings indicate that effective mentorship regarding WIL is adaptive, student-centred, relational, and context sensitive. Mentors scaffold learning according to individual needs, foster agency through student-centred practices, cultivate trust, and practise collaboration. Structural challenges, such as limited mentor availability and inadequate training, must be urgently addressed to improve the quality of mentorship.

In summary, the study confirms that mentorship is most effective when it is flexible, personalised, and responsive to the diverse needs of PSTs, supporting their professional growth and preparing them for classroom readiness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that universities and schools provide structured frameworks and institutional support to guide and strengthen mentorship practices, ensuring that mentors' responsibilities and adaptive strategies are clearly defined and executed. Notably, professional development programmes should be implemented expeditiously to upskill mentors in adaptive mentoring, student-centred approaches, scaffolding, and reflective practice. Moreover, focus should be on reducing mentor–mentee ratios to allow for sufficient guidance, observation and timely feedback. In addition, mentors should actively engage PSTs in lesson planning, goal setting, and reflective discussions to foster professional agency, critical thinking and ownership of learning. Relational and collaborative practices, such as empathy, active listening, and constructive feedback, should also be prioritised to build trust and confidence. Lastly, structural and contextual challenges, such as mentor availability, workload issues and conflicts arising from tight schedules, must be addressed to enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of mentorship. This, in turn, will ultimately contribute to the professional development of PSTs and lead to improved classroom outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how mentor lecturers and mentor teachers modify their mentorship practices to cater to the diverse learning needs of PSTs within WIL contexts. The findings revealed that effective mentorship is adaptive, student-centred, relational, and context-sensitive. Mentors must adjust their support to match the developmental stage and confidence of PSTs. They should engage them in reflective and participatory practices, cultivating trusting relationships that facilitate learning and professional growth. The study also demonstrated that *one size does not fit all* – a principle that should be implemented in WIL mentorship programmes. The study emphasised that while adaptive mentorship has significant benefits for pre-service teacher development, challenges such as high mentee-mentor ratios, inconsistent mentor availability and limited formal training can hinder effectiveness. Structured frameworks, combined with adaptive and student-centred practices, can significantly enhance the quality of teacher education, ensuring that PSTs are well-prepared for diverse classroom contexts. Adaptive mentoring practice must be embedded in teacher education programmes to enhance the quality of teaching.

The advocacy for differentiation should be rigorously implemented in WIL mentorship programmes. The study emphasised that while adaptive mentorship has significant benefits for pre-

[42] Mphojane, "Building Professional Capital in Teacher Education: The Role of Mentoring"; Wilson, "Mentoring Pre-Service Teachers: Identifying Tensions and Possible Resolutions."

service teacher development, challenges such as high mentee-mentor ratios, inconsistent mentor availability and limited formal training can hinder effectiveness. Structured frameworks, combined with adaptive and student-centred practices, can significantly enhance the quality of teacher education, ensuring that PSTs are well-prepared for diverse classroom contexts. Therefore, adaptive mentoring practice must be embedded in teacher education programmes to enhance the quality of teaching.

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ABOUT AUTHORS

Dr. Lindiwe Jiyane is a lecturer and Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) Coordinator in the Faculty of Education at the University of Mpumalanga, Siyabuswa Campus. She is currently pursuing a doctoral degree and has extensive experience in teacher education, mentoring, and the coordination of Teaching Practice. Her academic and research interests include Work-Integrated Learning, mentorship in teacher education, multilingual pedagogies, educational technology, and authentic assessment practices. Dr. Jiyane has presented at national events and collaborates with institutions and stakeholders on initiatives to strengthen teacher preparation and professional development. She is actively involved in curriculum development, postgraduate supervision, and research focusing on improving the quality of teacher education in South Africa.

Dr. Blandina Manditereza is currently lecturing in the English Language, Life Skills, and Teaching Practice Modules at the University of the Free State in South Africa. Her research sits at the intersection of Early childhood Language development and Digital Pedagogy. She aims to influence education through her research and teaching to enhance Early Childhood Language Education practices.