Exploring Cooperating Teachers' and Student Teachers' Perceptions about Mentoring Styles in Practicum

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the perceptions of Cooperating Teachers (CTs) and student teachers (STs) regarding different mentoring styles during the practicum in teacher education. Drawing on a comprehensive review of literature and primary data collected from 205 CTs and 317 STs, through survey questionnaires (CTQ and STO), the study investigates how various mentoring styles—absent, directive, supportive, and educative—affect the professional development of STs. The findings reveal that the educative mentoring style is the most adopted style by CTs, both in their current practices and as perceived by STs. This suggests its prominence in shaping STs' professional development journey during the practicum. However, variability in mentoring practices, as well as discrepancies between CTs' self-perceptions and STs' experiences, highlight the need for greater awareness of mentoring styles and their significance. In addition, the study underscores the importance of professional development programs for CTs, increased collaboration between teacher education institutions and placement schools, and the implementation of feedback mechanisms to enhance the mentoring process. These recommendations aim to improve the quality of mentoring and contribute to the overall development of a skilled, reflective generation of future teachers.

Keywords: Mentoring Models, Mentoring styles, Practicum

INTRODUCTION

The existing literature on mentoring lacks a universally accepted definition, with multiple conceptualizations offered by different scholars. Some authors define mentoring as an intense interpersonal relationship between a more experienced person and a less experienced one, while others, such as Smith (2007), view it as a process that fosters developmental changes in the individuals involved. Kwan and Lopez (2005) describe mentoring as both a process and a relationship, whereas Ambrosetti (2010, 2011, 2012) and Lai (2005) define it as an event comprising three essential elements: relational, developmental, and contextual. These scholars argue that for mentoring to be effective, these elements must interconnect. Despite the variations in definitions, mentoring is commonly understood as a reciprocal relationship between a more experienced practitioner (the mentor) and a newcomer (the mentee), where both parties define their roles, expectations, and objectives.

From a meta-analysis of literature related to mentoring (published between 1978-2012), Dominquez and Hager (2013) concluded that the concept of mentoring can be applied in many contexts, including the practicum, with varying duration and intensity depending on the purpose and the approach chosen.

A meta-analysis of mentoring literature from 1978 to 2012 (Dominquez & Hager, 2013) concluded that mentoring can be applied in diverse contexts, including the practicum, with varying durations and intensities depending on the approach and purpose. In teacher education, the terms "mentoring" and "supervision" are often used interchangeably (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015). While mentoring generally involves assisting, guiding, and helping, supervision is more focused on assessment and evaluation (Bray & Nettleton, 2006). During the practicum, Cooperating Teachers (CTs) typically fulfill both mentoring and supervisory roles.

From their review of related literature, Ambrosetti and Dekkers (2010, p.52) concluded that in the context of teacher education, mentoring can be defined as "a non-hierarchical, reciprocal relationship between mentors and mentees who work towards specific professional and personal outcomes for the mentee. The relationship usually follows a developmental pattern within a specified timeframe and roles are defined, expectations are outlined, and a purpose is (ideally) clearly delineated."

Ambrosetti and Dekkers (2010, p. 52) defined mentoring in teacher education as "a non-hierarchical, reciprocal relationship between mentors and mentees who work towards specific professional and personal outcomes for the mentee." This relationship follows a developmental pattern within a set timeframe, with clearly defined roles, expectations, and purposes. In this context, student teachers (STs) are paired with more experienced classroom teachers (CTs), with the CT acting as the mentor. This traditional apprenticeship model positions the CT as the more experienced, older mentor and the ST as the less experienced, younger mentee. However, contemporary perspectives on mentoring do not necessarily rely on age or experience. Mentors can also be peers or coworkers at similar developmental levels as the mentee.

Recent literature suggests that, regardless of age, status, or expertise, the mentoring process during the practicum is beneficial to both the CT and the ST. CTs not only play a crucial role in STs' professional development but also act as partners in pedagogical inquiry (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010; Ellis et al 2020; Menter & Flores, 2021). There are various models or formats of mentoring, each offering distinct benefits for both CTs and STs. This paper explores CTs' perceptions of various mentoring styles adopted during the practicum that could potentially have significant impact on professional growth of STs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of recent literature on mentoring has demonstrated that the common mentoring model supported by most of the teacher education institutions across the globe is the traditional triad model (see Fig 1). This triad consists of three key players: a supervisor from teacher education institution, who usually play a supervisory role, a mentor teacher or, CT from the placement schools who play a crucial role in guiding STs throughout their practicum journey, and a ST (Meek, 2024).
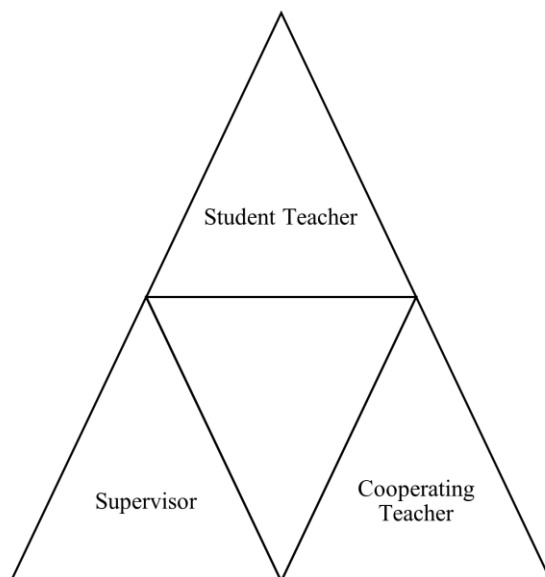

Fig 1. Traditional triad model of mentoring.

In addition, the review also has emerged three different mentoring models each offering unique advantages that can be leveraged in teacher education. The following section illustrates the advantages of these models.

Peer-Peer Mentoring. In peer-peer mentoring, generally, STs of similar experience levels often engage in the mentoring process. The mentors (STs) and mentees (STs) feel more comfortable and have an equal relationship

due to the absence of a hierarchical power structure. This absence of a hierarchical power structure fosters a collaborative learning environment where communication and mutual support are crucial. It allows STs to take more initiative and responsibility for their own learning thus encouraging self-development in authentic learning situations that closely resemble professional practice (Tiainen, & Lutovac, 2022). According to authors such as Ambrosetti (2010) and McCormack and West (2006), this model enhances communication and increases STs' confidence level. In this regard, peer mentoring sounds more beneficial than traditional, hierarchical, top-down mentoring dyad (Ambrosetti, Knight, & Dekkers, 2013).

Peer-Peer-Mentor Mentoring. Alternatively, it could take the form of two peers working with one experienced, expert mentor (i.e., Peer-Peer-Mentor). A study conducted by Ambrosetti (2010) found that first year and final year STs working with a CT is beneficial in many ways (e.g., Peer-Near-Peer-Mentor). For example, the final year STs will know the expectations, apprehension, and requirements of the first year ST as he/she has already been in their shoes, thus they can clarify, confirm their understanding, and create a collaborative learning environment. In addition, the final year STs can guide and act as mentors. Further, this might enable the CTs to give more specific, detailed feedback based on the developmental level of both first and final year STs, hence adding value to the overall mentoring process. Therefore, this model of distributed mentoring could address the issue of unavailability of sufficient CTs during the practicum placements.

Group mentoring. Mentoring groups often consist of peers and experts from similar professions and have a facilitator who provides professional support and guidance to the members in the group (Ambrosetti, Knight, & Dekkers, 2013). This group mentoring is sometimes referred to as 'a community of practice.' A community of practice is described as "a group of people who share common interests, goals, and practices" (Ambrosetti, Knight, & Dekkers 2013).

From their review of literature on mentoring, Hobson, Ashby, Malderez and Tomlinson (2009) highlighted that all the approaches to mentoring are effective if they fit the purposes and the demands of the learner. These authors elaborated on this statement by explaining that it implies the mentor should respect the needs of the learner and should be aware of the objectives of the whole process. Further, the mentoring process should proceed with setting up the goals and objectives of mentoring upon mutual agreement which could later be revisited, reviewed and revised if required.

The literature on mentoring highlighted four different essential characteristics of an effective mentor that seems to be successful across various contexts (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez & Tomlinson 2009). First, effective mentors make the learner feel welcome and accepted by providing both emotional and psychological support. Second, they devote sufficient time to the learners by arranging scheduled meetings and being available for informal discussions. Third, they give autonomy to the learner to implement his/her own styles. Fourth, the most important part of mentoring is observations of the mentee's practice. In teacher education, lesson observation is most valued and effective if the goal of the observation is set in the pre-conference meeting.

Additionally, conducting a post-observation conference that focuses on specific aspects of the teaching is equally essential to enhance and enrich STs' learning during practicum. Further, this learning experience is heightened by giving opportunities to the STs to articulate their strengths and weaknesses and jointly think aloud the strategies to resolve the issues faced. Furthermore, the research suggests that the feedback given to mentees should be challenging and educative to bring about substantial professional development.

Mentoring Styles

This section illustrates different mentoring styles that have been documented in the literature, and that have potential applicability to the practicum in teacher education.

Mentoring styles. Ibrahim (2013) classified the mentors into three broad categories: executive, therapist, and liberationist. The executive mentors generally adopt directive style, while the therapists follow a collaborative style, and the liberationist follow non-directive style. The growing body of literature on mentoring suggests

that these three approaches of mentoring must be used in line with the developmental level of the mentee (Ibrahim, 2013). The developmental level of mentees can be mapped along a continuum of skills ranging from unskilled to highly skilled. Figure 2 represents the continuum of STs' developmental level and the styles of mentoring applicable and appropriate at different points along with different images of mentors.
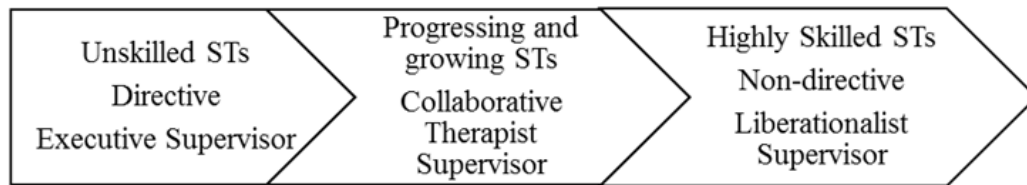

Figure 2. STs' Developmental Level and Corresponding Mentoring Styles.

At one end of the continuum, it is the executive supervisor who follows a directive style of supervision. The directive style of supervision is considered as the most appropriate and applicable style in dealing with unskilled, newly started, mentees to the profession. The supervisor frames a very well defined, structured experience for the mentee. And the mentee is given little autonomy. On the other hand, at the middle of the continuum is the collaborative therapist supervisor. These types of supervisors believe that mutual agreement is essential in dealing with the problems. The mentee is considered as an equal partner in decision making. Research suggests that this type of supervision is effective for mentees who are progressing and growing in the field. At the other end of the continuum are highly skilled mentees. These mentees are considered self-sufficient in dealing with matters arising in the practicum. Thus, the supervisors follow a non-directive approach. The philosophical underpinning of this belief is that the STs must be self-sufficient, and should be able to make sound decisions independently, for them to grow professionally. However, the non-directive approach is sometimes used as an excuse for mentors to absent themselves from the supervision of mentees.

Some researchers, such as Kim and Danforth (2012) believed that the supervision style adopted by CT is very much related to their attitude and behaviors in dealing with STs. Having this contention, Kim and Danforth (2012), conducted a study to investigate how CTs cognitively frame and give meaning to their supervising role and work. Findings of the study revealed that a collaborative approach is more positive than the traditional, hierarchical approach. The traditional approach, which is like the directive style, seems to hinder professional development of STs due to power imbalance.

Similarly, a study conducted by Ibrahim (2013) to identify the supervision styles preferred by the STs and the supervisory approaches adopted by their CTs and university supervisors revealed that 83.3 percent of STs preferred collaborative styles of supervision, and most of the CTs followed the same styles as preferred by STs. In contrast, it was found that the SLs followed a directive approach more often than other approaches. The SLs reported that it is ineffective and inappropriate to use a non-directive approach to mentoring as the STs are still in the learning process, thus they need assistance and support in many tasks that they undertake during practicum.

In addition, a synthesis of a large body of related literature, Tok (2012) sets forth four different types of mentoring styles adopted by CTs which are reminiscent of Clarke et al (2012) engagement continuum. The four styles include absent, directive, indulgent, and educative. These different types invoke different belief systems on which their actions and the goals are based on. For example, the absent CT believes that the best way to learn to teach is by giving autonomy to STs to experiment and learn through their mistakes. In other words, the best approach is to follow the 'sink or swim' model. These CTs tend to observe the lesson for a short period of time and provide a few comments and give a very short shallow assessment.

In contrast, the directive CTs believe that the best way to learn is by observing a role model and emulating precisely what the role models do. Their goal is to develop a new teacher who reflects their image. They remain in the class, or shadow with the ST to ensure that the ST follows what is prescribed. They interrupt classroom

teachings if anything happens that isn't planned. They provide quite detailed assessment and evaluate ST in their own image as an experienced teacher. Unlike absent and directive CTs, the indulgent CTs believe that the best way to learn to teach is by following a closely scripted developmental approach, where the students are given increasing responsibilities based on their developmental level. They usually don't criticize much, rather they praise the positive behaviors. Even if they feel that the ST needs lots of guidance to improve their teaching, they expect the SL from the university to identify and address those issues. In other words, hard criticism is left for the supervising lecturers.

On the other hand, the educative CTs believe that active participation is essential in learning to teach. STs need to think and reflect on their teaching. They believe that it is their professional responsibility to provide opportunities to STs, to gain a better understanding of teaching and learning. They conduct longer post-observation conference meetings and challenge the STs to think about better alternative methods in teaching. Additionally, they provide an extensive evaluation of student teaching at the end of the practicum. These four styles of mentoring could be categorized under the images of the CTs that have been mentioned earlier. The indulgent and the educative styles seem to be parallel to the therapist image, while absent style falls under the image of liberationists, and directive comes under executive.

In conclusion, it is evident from the review of the literature that the therapist mentoring image which encompasses collaborative, indulgent or supportive and educative styles of mentoring are prominent, effective, and beneficial in practicum settings in terms of the professional development of the STs. The directive and non-directive mentoring styles seem to be less efficacious with respect to the professional development of STs during the practicum.

METHODS

This paper utilizes primary data collected for a PhD study which has adopted mixed-method triangulation design in which both qualitative and quantitative data were collected in relatively short order without a significant time lapse. Specifically, this paper focuses on only quantitative data collected through survey questionnaires (CTQ and STQ) designed for CTs and STs.

Setting and Participants

The sample consisting of 205 CTs and 317 STs were selected on a voluntary basis from the purposely selected 21 Placement Schools across four geographical zones (Male' city, North Central, South Central and Southern). The aim of selecting schools from widely dispersed geographical zones was not to generalize the findings to the population but to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of CTs in various school contexts across the country.

Instrument

The study was aimed at obtaining information from the entire population of the key actors of the practicum (STs and CTs). As such, a questionnaire-based survey was considered most suitable. Fraeklin and Wallen (2009) stated that the primary purpose of a survey is to elicit detailed information from an entire population as defined by the study. In addition, due to the multifaceted nature of the practicum and the time constraints, it allows the researcher to collect information from multiple sites within the allotted time frame.

Thus, survey questionnaires for (CTQ and STQ) CTs and STs were developed and pilot tested with 40 teachers, who had experienced the role of CTs, and 30 STs before the actual data collection. Reliability of the CTQ was determined by calculating Cronbach's alpha. Cronbach's alpha value for the CTQ in the pilot sample of 40 teachers was found to be 0.702 and Cronbach's alpha value for STQ for the pilot sample of 30 STs was found to be 0. 860 Content validity of the CTQ was established through a review by six supervisors: three local supervisors who were familiar with the practicum, and three overseas experts from the field of teacher

education. These experts critically examined the content of the questionnaires. After the pilot test, no major revisions were made to the items.

Data collection and data analysis

To begin with the data collection, a liaison contact from each of the placement schools was identified. Survey questionnaires (CTQ and STQ) were then distributed to the participants, along with the consent form, during the last week of the practicum, through liaison contacts from the selected placement schools. Participants were then expected to return the completed CTQs and STQs on the final day of the practicum. Once the CTQs and STQs were collected, they were coded, and data were analyzed using SPSS, V.12 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Only descriptive statistics were calculated, and the findings are presented in charts and tables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mentoring styles of CTs were elicited by asking them to identify which style best describes their own from the given four descriptions of mentoring styles in Table 1. In addition, the fifth option was given to CTs to indicate if they didn't follow any of the styles given.

Table 1. Various Mentoring Styles

Style A	Style B	Style C	Style D
Giving full freedom to the student to do whatever s/he wants with minimal direction from cooperating teachers.	Student teachers learn best by observing a good role model and doing similarly as the role model.	The best way to learn to teach is to gradually give the student teacher increasing responsibility to take the lessons.	The student teacher must actively participate in learning to teach and must reflect on the lessons in light of experience and new knowledge.

Note. The styles were renamed under suitable headings for analysis: A=absent, B=supportive, C=directive, and D=educative.

Likewise, CTs were also asked to identify the mentoring style of their own CTs from the given five choices. The intent of asking the question was to find the degree of alignment between CTs current style of mentoring and the one used many years ago by their CTs. Such an analysis produces two useful findings: (a) changes in the prevalent mentoring styles over time, (b) the extent CTs use the style they were exposed to when they become CTs. These results are shown in Figure 3a and 3b.

(a) CTs' Perceptions about their own Mentoring Style
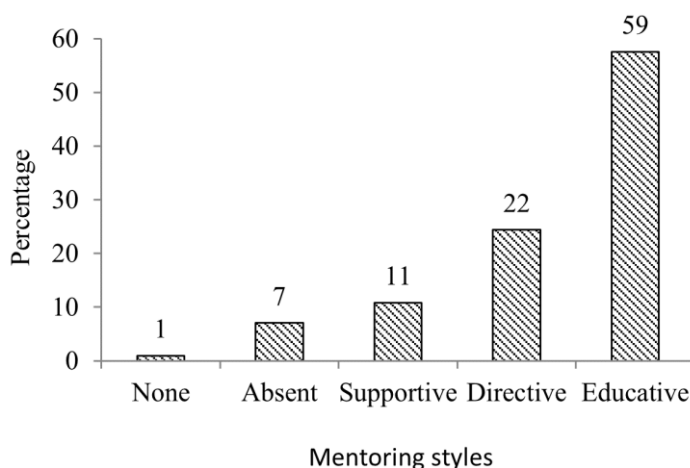
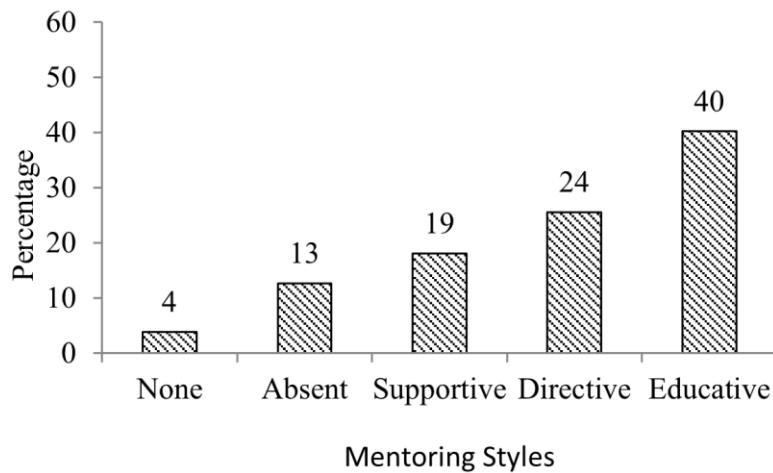(b) CTs' Perceptions about their own CTs' Mentoring Style

Figure 3. Changes in the Prevalent Mentoring Styles of CTs Over Time.

Both the figures show a similar pattern. It shows that the educative style is the most prominent one among the four styles. Additionally, comparison of Figure 2(a) and 2(b) suggests that the percentage of CTs who currently adopt an educative style has increased by 19% (59–40) compared with the mentoring styles of their own CTs.

Apart from studying the changes in the prevalent mentoring styles of CTs, an analysis was carried out to identify the number of CTs who adopted their own CT's style when they were STs. To identify these CTs, correspondence between the two responses was found for each of the CTs. The result shows that 52% of the CTs adopted their CTs' mentoring styles, while 48% did not. Further, the responses from these 52% of the CTs were disaggregated by the given four choices. The result is presented in Figure3.
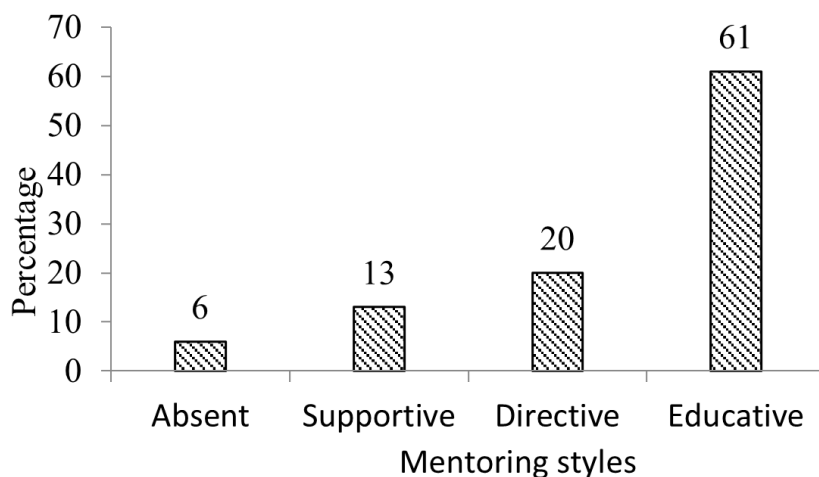

Figure 4. Percentage of CTs who Adopted their own CTs' Mentoring Styles.

This figure 4 shows that educative style was the style experienced by 61% of CTs (when they were STs) and is the style that they currently use with their STs. All other styles were reflected in the responses (experience and used currently) but to a far less extent (see Figure 5).

Similarly, in STQ, STs were also given the same descriptions of mentoring styles in Table 1 with an additional box 'none' to identify the mentoring style of their CTs. The analysis of responses is given in Figure 5.
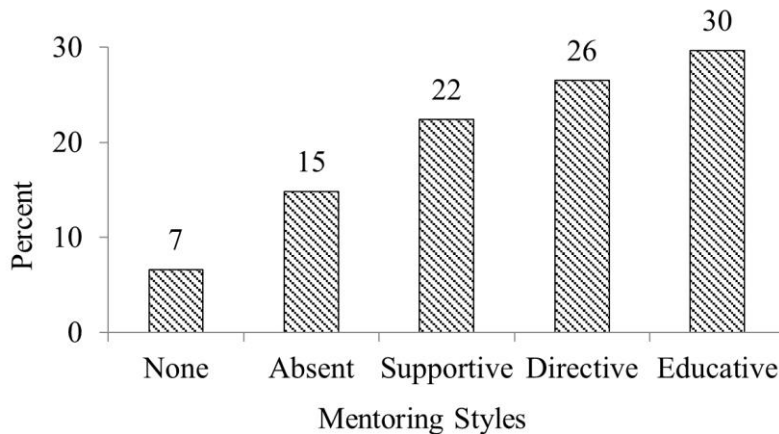
Figure 5. CTs' Mentoring Styles Perceived by STs.

Figure 4. shows that most of the CTs, from the STs' perspective, practiced supportive, directive or educative styles with a difference of four percent between each.

Among the four mentoring styles that CTs were given to choose from (absent, directive, supportive and educative), the educative style of mentoring is the most prominent among participating CTs. The less prominent styles include directive, supportive, and absent, presented here in order of decreasing prominence. There were also several CTs participating who did not follow any of the styles mentioned.

Similarly, STs also perceived that the educative style was the most predominant and the least common is absent style. Unlike the perception of CTs (1%), a comparatively higher percentage (7%) of the STs perceived that their CTs did not follow any of the styles given – educative, directive, supportive, and absent. This difference in perception may be because the CTs might not be aware of various mentoring styles and their significance in STs' professional development during the practicum. The existing literature also attests that, in some cases, CTs who volunteer to guide STs during the practicum do not know much about mentoring (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010). That means there is a need for teacher education institutions to train and make CTs more aware of the various mentoring styles and their significance to the professional development of STs.

In addition, the majority of CTs are inclined to practice the mentoring style adopted by their own CTs during the time they had practicum. This means the styles followed by the current CTs are expected to have a significant impact on the styles of their STs when they become future CTs. Therefore, it is imperative for the current CTs to be aware of the different mentoring styles and how those styles contribute to the successful development of STs. In other words, this is an important finding for the teacher education institutions to take into consideration when preparing CTs to enact their essential roles during the practicum.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the mentoring styles of CTs reveals significant insights into both the prevalent mentoring approaches and the extent to which CTs adopt the styles that they experienced during their own student teaching days. The educative mentoring style emerged as the most prominent style, both in the current practices of CTs and as perceived by STs. This style was also the most adopted by CTs during their own time as STs, suggesting that the educative approach may be an enduring model in teacher education.

Despite this dominance, the analysis also highlights the variability in mentoring practices, with some CTs adhering to more directive or supportive styles. Additionally, a notable percentage of CTs (48%) did not replicate the mentoring style they experienced from their own CTs, which points to the influence of individual preferences, professional development, and evolving pedagogical practices. The disparity between the CTs'

self-perception of their own mentoring style and how STs perceive teir mentoring suggests a possible gap in awareness and understanding of effective mentoring approaches.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the fihndings of this study, the following recommendations are made.

1. Develop professional development programs for CTs: It is imperative that both teacher education institutions and placement schools provide comprehensive professional development programs for CTs, not only on the technicalities of mentoring but also on the importance of mentoring styles and their impact on STs' professional development during the practicum. This training should help CTs recognize the value of educative mentoring approaches and encourage them to adapt their styles accordingly.
2. Enhance collaboration between teacher education institutions and placement schools: Teacher education institutions need to work more closely with the placement schools to conduct sessions on raising awareness among CTs about the variety of mentoring styles and encourage them to reflect on their own mentoring practices and compare them with the styles they experienced as STs may foster a deeper understanding of their approach. This reflective practice could lead to more deliberate and effective mentoring, improving the overall quality of the practicum experience for STs.
3. Establish a feedback mechanism: Given the discrepancy between CTs' self-perception and STs' perceptions of CTs' mentoring styles, it would be beneficial to incorporate feedback mechanisms during the practicum. This would certainly provide CTs with insights into how their mentoring is perceived by STs, helping them adjust their practices to better meet the needs of future educators.

By addressing these recommendations, it is hoped that the teacher education programs can ensure that CTs are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to mentor STs effectively, ultimately contributing to the development of a highly competent and reflective generation of future teachers.

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