

Chapter # 2

INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION: TEACHING OBSERVATION ORAL FEEDBACK PRACTICES IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

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ABSTRACT

School-based practice is widely recognised as a cornerstone of effective initial teacher education programmes, with mentor feedback playing a crucial role in student-teacher development. This action research study focuses on post-teaching observation feedback (PTOF), the discussions between mentors and mentees following observed teaching sessions. Conducted at an initial teacher education institution for Emirati women in the United Arab Emirates, the study examines and enhances PTOF practices from the perspectives of Emirati and expatriate college mentors, as well as Emirati student-teachers. Cycle 1 gathered insights through qualitative questionnaires and focus group interviews, informing a series of professional development sessions that produced new practice guidelines. Cycle 2 assessed the impact of these interventions, with data collected through interviews and focus groups. Thematic analysis was used to evaluate data from both cycles. Findings from Cycle 1 revealed significant inconsistencies in PTOF practices, while Cycle 2 indicated improved structure and consistency. To further enhance PTOF, the study recommends allocating more time and providing contextual developmental support.

Keywords: initial teacher education, teaching observation feedback, mentoring, reflective practice, Emirati student-teachers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning through practice has long been recognised as a fundamental component of effective initial teacher education (ITE) programmes (Allen, Singh, & Rowan, 2019). Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) emphasise that mentor feedback during school-based practice (SBP) is essential for student-teachers to develop into competent and well-prepared educators. This study focuses on mentor feedback, specifically the oral feedback provided by mentors after observing student-teachers during SBP. This interaction, referred to as post-teaching observation feedback (PTOF), involves mentors meeting with mentees to discuss their recently observed teaching.

Bjørndal (2020) identifies PTOF as a critical element in fostering student-teacher development, asserting that effective feedback must be collaborative, critical, and reflective. Similarly, Clarke, Triggs, and Nielsen (2014) highlight PTOF as a central responsibility of mentors. However, a notable limitation in the existing literature is its predominantly Western-centric perspective. To address this gap, this research investigates whether findings from Western PTOF literature are applicable within the context of ITE in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

This study examines professional and programme development, evaluates a shift towards collaborative approaches, and provides participants with a platform to voice their perspectives. Using an action research (AR) methodology, the study comprises two cycles.

The first cycle explores the perspectives of expatriate and Emirati college mentors and female Emirati student-teachers regarding PTOF practices at a federal ITE institution. Insights from Cycle 1 informed the design of professional development (PD) sessions, during which new practice guidelines were developed. Cycle 2 evaluates the effectiveness of these PD sessions and the subsequent implementation of the revised practice guidelines, drawing on participant feedback.

2. BACKGROUND

This action research study was conducted within the ITE department of a female higher education (HE) institution in the UAE. This institution, the largest HE provider in the country, operates 16 gender-segregated campuses across the UAE. The ITE programme, offered on five female campuses across four emirates, is an eight-semester (four-year) undergraduate bachelor's degree. The research setting is one of these campuses, where 12 education faculty members are evenly split between Emirati and expatriate staff. The expatriate faculty originate from five countries spanning four continents, with three of the 12 faculty members being male. While most students join the education programme directly from secondary school, a small proportion are mature students.

The institution is currently accredited to offer a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, which qualifies graduates to teach in kindergartens and up to grade 2 in UAE public schools. Student-teachers undertake both core and general education courses alongside a School-Based Practice (SBP) course each semester. These courses are designed to integrate practice and theory to support student-teachers during their SBP experiences.

During SBP, college mentors—typically education faculty—observe student-teachers and provide PTOF. Additionally, school-based mentors, usually the classroom teachers, observe student-teachers during their teaching sessions. Over the course of the programme, student-teachers spend between 10 and 40 days per semester in schools, with the duration increasing incrementally. By the end of the programme, each student-teacher completes a total of 155 days of school-based practice.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The critical components of PTOF explored in this study—reflective practice, mentoring, and feedback—are integral to teacher education. Each plays a pivotal role in bridging theory and practice for student-teachers and shaping their professional development.

3.1. Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is a cornerstone of the initial teacher education (ITE) model at this institution, enabling student-teachers to connect theory and practice during school-based placements (SBP). It fosters their ability to develop pedagogical skills while constructing a reflective understanding of teaching. Gadsby (2022) situates reflective practice at the heart of teacher development. Bjørndal (2020) concurs, noting that reflection enhances PTOF by enabling mentors to guide student-teachers in cultivating dispositions, knowledge, and skills.

Building on Dewey's (1933) belief that reflection arises from doubt and problem-solving, Schön (1983; 1987) introduced the concept of "professional artistry," wherein reflective practitioners integrate intuition and experiential knowledge to manage complex teaching situations. Schön emphasises two key forms of reflection: reflection in action (during the event) and reflection on action (post-event). These processes enable

student-teachers to draw on tacit knowledge, learn from experience, and achieve greater expertise.

While reflection is critical, its implementation in ITE often lacks structure. Ward and McCotter (2004) highlight that reflective practice is embedded rather than explicitly taught in ITE curricula. Yet, deliberate instruction is essential, as reflection is not intuitive (Williams & Grudnoff, 2011; Farrell, 2019). Mulryan-Kyne (2021) advocates for stronger emphasis on reflection in coursework, while Dyer and Taylor (2012) underscore the importance of mentorship in fostering reflective skills. However, Russell (2013) cautions that poorly defined reflective practices by mentors may hinder student-teacher development, suggesting the need for improved mentor training. Reflection evolves in sophistication, progressing from technical to critical, iterative thinking (Slade, Burnham, Catalana, & Waters, 2019; Dervent, 2015). This underscores the necessity of repeated opportunities for reflection throughout ITE.

3.2. Mentoring

Mentoring plays a central role in supporting student-teachers during PTOF. Ellis, Alonzo, and Nguyen (2020) propose that mentoring should be reciprocal, involving dialogue and co-construction of knowledge. However, Mena, Hennissen, and Loughran (2017) observe that traditional, directive mentoring models persist in many ITE contexts.

Effective mentoring hinges on adequate mentor preparation. Studies (e.g., Nguyen, 2017; Wexler, 2019) reveal that insufficient mentor training undermines the quality of mentoring. Orland-Barak (2016) emphasises the need for mentors to be equipped with skills to support and challenge mentees. Izadinia (2017) criticises the lack of structured mentor development programmes in many ITE institutions. Mackie (2020) argues for consistent mentor education to address the complexity of mentoring, highlighting that teaching expertise alone does not guarantee effective mentorship (Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, & Major, 2014). Without professional development, mentors often default to hierarchical approaches based on their personal experiences (Jones, Tones, Foulkes, & Jones, 2022).

The mentor-mentee relationship is pivotal to the success of SBP (Ellis & Osborne, 2015). Effective relationships are built on respect and collaboration, though time constraints during short placements can hinder this process (Wilson & Huynh, 2020). Empathy, support, and open communication are essential mentor attributes (Sheridan & Young, 2017; Yuan & Lee, 2016). Collaborative models, as proposed by Clutterbuck (2004), promote reciprocal partnerships and empower mentees to set agendas and develop their teaching philosophies. However, traditional models with power imbalances can lead to vulnerability and hinder professional growth (Mackie, 2020).

3.3. Feedback

Mentor feedback is a critical component of PTOF, bridging theory and practice (Akkuzu, 2014). Despite its importance, research on PTOF, particularly in the Middle East, remains limited (Rehman & Al-Bargi, 2014; Ibrahim, 2013). Western contexts dominate the discourse, suggesting a need for localised studies to inform practice.

Evaluative feedback, such as grading lesson observations, is contentious. While it may motivate some student-teachers (Entwistle & McCune, 2004; Hojeij, Atallah, Baroudi, & Tamim, 2021), it often fosters ambiguity and power imbalances in the mentor-mentee relationship (Jones, Tones, Foulkes, & Jones, 2021). Conversely, dialogical feedback emphasises collaboration and enquiry, aligning with this institution's reflective ITE model (Ellis et al., 2020; Ambrosetti, Knight, & Dekkers, 2014). Grimmett, Forgasz, and White (2018) highlight the transformative potential of dialogic practices, which enable mentees to critically examine their teaching and adopt new approaches.

3.4. Conclusion

Reflective practice, mentoring, and feedback are interconnected elements of PTOF that significantly influence student-teacher development. While existing literature provides valuable insights, there are gaps in localised research and inconsistencies in practice, particularly in mentor training and the application of reflective models. Addressing these challenges requires a more structured approach to mentor development and a greater emphasis on dialogical feedback to align with the reflective ethos of this institution's ITE programme.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addresses six investigatory research questions. The first three explore participants' pre-intervention perspectives on PTOF and inform the subsequent interventions. The latter three evaluate the impact of these interventions and their implementation, as perceived by the participants.

The Exploratory Cycle: Cycle 1

- **Research Question 1:** How do college mentors and student-teachers describe their current experiences of giving and receiving PTOF?
- **Research Question 2:** How do college mentors and student-teachers describe their theoretical approach to, and/or practice of, mentoring and giving or receiving PTOF?
- **Research Question 3:** What suggestions, if any, do college mentors and student-teachers have for improving PTOF?

The Evaluation Cycle: Cycle 2

- **Research Question 4:** How do college mentors and student-teachers describe their post-intervention experiences of PTOF?
- **Research Question 5:** In what ways, if at all, do college mentors and student-teachers perceive that the interventions have altered their theoretical approach to, and/or practice of, mentoring and giving or receiving PTOF?
- **Research Question 6:** What suggestions, if any, do college mentors and student-teachers have for further developing PTOF practices?

5. THE ACTION RESEARCH MODEL

This study adopts the action research (AR) model proposed by Coghlan and Brannick (2014), which is designed to facilitate organisational change. The model begins with a context and purpose stage, followed by four iterative phases of the AR cycle. The approach is well-suited to the study's aim of enhancing mentoring practices within an educational institution.

6. DATA COLLECTION

6.1. Cycle 1

Eighteen student-teachers (six in each group) participated in three-year level focus group interviews, with six participants in each group. The interview protocol consisted of two main questions and eight supplementary questions, with potential follow-up prompts. Recognising that the participants spoke English as a second or additional language, the questions were designed to be concise, clear, and accessible, using familiar terminology. This approach aimed to maximise opportunities for participants to express their views.

Additionally, eight college mentors completed an anonymous online qualitative questionnaire comprising 21 questions: three closed and 18 open-ended. The closed questions were designed to be straightforward, while the open-ended ones elicited richer responses, as recommended by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011).

6.2. Cycle 2

In Cycle 2, 18 student-teachers (six in each group) participated in three-year level focus group interviews, this time with five questions and six potential follow-up prompts. Six college mentors engaged in one-to-one interviews consisting of six open-ended questions and prompts. Following Jacob and Furgerson's (2012) recommendation, initial questions were designed to be familiar and easy to answer before progressing to more in-depth queries, allowing for richer, reflective responses (Whiting, 2008).

All data were collected online due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and mandated social distancing protocols.

7. DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis (TA), as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013), was employed to examine the data. This reflexive six-stage approach enabled the development of a rich, detailed, and nuanced account of participants' perspectives. The process was iterative rather than linear, involving constant movement between data, codes, clusters, and themes.

7.1. Cycle 1 Findings

The first cycle of this AR study's findings revealed that most participants described their experience of PTOF as confusing. College mentors were uncertain of their roles and responsibilities. Student-teachers were unclear what college mentors expected from them, perceiving each college mentor to have different expectations. At the time, there were no institutional guidelines, policies, or procedures for PTOF practice. Although this institution's SBP handbook outlined college mentor roles and responsibilities, these were poorly defined, unspecific and not directly related to PTOF. Cycle 1 found consensus on beginning PTOF positively then moving onto developmental feedback; however, there was less consistency to ending PTOF, to conducting meetings before SBP, and to requesting student-teachers complete pre-PTOF self-reflections. Most participants explained that there was not enough time to give and receive PTOF. College mentors considered their SBP workload too heavy, and student-teachers recognised that PTOF was often rushed. College mentors equated longer PTOF with quality feedback and student-teachers explained they needed time during PTOF to feel comfortable enough to discuss their practice openly. Time required to build relationships was perceived as important, particularly as student-teachers preferred to be paired with a college mentor who had taught them before. Additionally, college mentors

explained that they spent time supporting school-based mentors. All the college mentors provided examples of how they were positive, sensitive and tried to instil confidence in student-teachers during PTOF. While the student-teachers mostly recognised that college mentors tried to encourage and support them, they explained that they wanted college mentors to be considerate when they gave feedback. If college mentor language was negative, they felt it was detrimental to their development. A few student-teachers explained that on occasion they received contradictory positive oral PTOF and what they perceived as negative written PTOF. It was unclear whether student-teachers misinterpreted oral PTOF or college mentors withheld less positive oral feedback.

Opinion was divided when college mentors described their theoretical approach to mentoring and PTOF. Half the college mentors said that they mostly implemented directive approaches, while the remaining half indicated that they mostly implemented either a collaborative or a combination of directive and collaborative approaches. The student-teachers perceived that they mostly received and indeed wanted directive approaches to mentoring and PTOF. It appeared that college mentors implemented their preferred approach as and when they chose, rather than when it was developmentally appropriate for student-teachers. This inconsistent implementation likely accounted for student-teachers' perceptions of differing levels of mentoring and PTOF support.

The directive approach to mentoring and PTOF appeared to be influenced by the requirement to grade each observed lesson. Again, opinion was divided. Half the college mentors felt that grading individual lessons and discussing grades during PTOF motivated student-teachers and supported their development. The other half considered grading all formative lesson observations as not conducive to student-teacher learning. Interestingly, most student-teachers explained that they found grading individual lessons unmotivating and a distraction from the developmental feedback the college mentors gave. Although half the college mentors indicated that they implemented collaborative approaches to mentoring and PTOF, there was limited evidence of developmental feedback that was assertive, questioning or 'critical' as defined by Bjørndal (2020). Student-teacher comments indicated that college mentors mostly pointed out elements of their teaching they needed to develop and directly told them how to improve, indicating linear dialogue. These findings did not appear to support the reflective practice model that underpins ITE at this institution.

7.2. Cycle 2 Findings

Cycle 1 findings informed a series of professional development sessions. New practice guidelines were developed and implemented during the next period of school-based practice (SBP). Due to the global pandemic this period of SBP was conducted online. Cycle 2 evaluated the professional development and implementation of the new practice guidelines. Cycle 2's findings revealed that the new practice guidelines supported a more consistent and structured approach to giving and receiving PTOF. College mentors indicated that they knew what their roles and responsibilities entailed. The addition of meetings before SBP facilitated student-teachers' understanding of expectations and served to build mentor/mentee relationships. After the interventions, all college mentors indicated that they found the new formative lesson observation template easier to use. It supported their provision of evidence-based feedback to student-teachers during PTOF. Additionally, most college mentors found the PD useful, and the additional resources supported them to give PTOF. Most participants preferred the convenience and flexibility of online PTOF. However, the home environment was not always conducive to student-teacher development and learning. Student-teachers mostly switched off online cameras, explaining that their families would disapprove if they showed their faces. Cycle 2's findings raised concerns that Emirati female

student-teachers who study from home may be disadvantaged. Despite no commuting, a lack of time to conduct PTOF remained a concern in Cycle 2. This suggested serious flaws in the institutional formula used to calculate lesson observation schedules.

There was a transition towards collaborative mentoring and PTOF after the interventions. Most college mentors acknowledged that the PD and new practice guidelines supported this transition. Before the interventions, these college mentors acknowledged that they mostly incorporated directive approaches to PTOF; this transition therefore represented a paradigm shift in their theoretical approach. The findings revealed that removing grades from individual observed lessons supported greater collaboration during PTOF. However, reflective practice was mostly found to be descriptive. Most student-teachers were positive, more relaxed and felt more comfortable during Cycle 2's PTOF than Cycle 1's. While the shift to online delivery likely accounted for some of this sentiment, this change indicated a transition towards collaborative approaches to mentoring and PTOF. However, challenges were experienced when holding learning conversations and giving and receiving assertive, questioning feedback, which were perceived as new practice for approximately half the college mentors. These college mentors found giving grades easier and student-teachers wanted college mentor direction to develop their knowledge and improve their teaching skills. These findings indicated that the participants could have perhaps been better prepared, suggesting directions for future development.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although not generalisable, the findings offer insights applicable to other campuses running the ITE programme. The study recommends continuing the practice of not grading individual lessons, coupled with curriculum revisions to embed PTOF development into the SBP course. Reflective practice and collaborative mentoring should be explicitly taught as part of a developmental approach. While timely PTOF remains ideal, online PTOF should only be used when same-day face-to-face sessions are unfeasible. Institutional observation schedules require revision to address time constraints. Assigning college mentors to student-teachers they teach in class and limiting class sizes could alleviate workloads and enhance relationships. A contextually appropriate mentor development programme is essential, with adequate time allocated for its delivery. Wetzel et al. (2017) emphasise that sustained PD is required for PTOF dialogue to become less directive and more reflective. Future PD efforts should involve all stakeholders—mentors, student-teachers, and the wider community—in a collaborative pedagogical partnership, as suggested by Murphy and Ní Dhuinn (2022). This partnership could extend to developing a similar programme for school-based mentors.

This study demonstrates that Western models of mentoring and PTOF can be adapted to the UAE context but highlights the need for ongoing developmental support to ensure their success.

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