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Collaborative Mentoring for In-service Teachers' Well-being in the Nepalese Context

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Abstract

Teachers experience challenges in their teaching careers these days. The challenges sometimes may affect their personal and professional well-being. Therefore, to address these issues, teachers need to develop collaborative relationships with other teachers and engage in self–reflection activities. This study aims to explore the usefulness of building collaborative relationships through collaborative mentoring for teachers' emotional and mental well-being. A review of selected literature examines collaborative mentoring as beneficial for teachers' well-being as it enables teachers to reflect on their classroom practices and provide and receive support and feedback from their colleagues. I used a qualitative research paradigm to study the impact of collaborative mentoring on the emotional and mental well-being of six private school teachers. The data was collected from teachers' reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. The results seem to indicate collaborative mentoring is useful for teachers' mental and emotional well-being as well as professional development. This study is useful for those who are planning to research mentoring and collaborative mentoring, teachers' well-being, and teacher education.

Keywords: Collaboration, teachers' well-being, reflection, professional development

Introduction

In Nepal, private schools are emerging gradually. Currently, out of 35,055 schools, 6,206 schools are private schools (Pal et al., 2021). Many graduates start their teaching careers in private schools because they can easily find jobs in the private sector in comparison to the public. Private schools hire them even if they are not trained or experienced teachers. Many graduates start their teaching careers with the theoretical knowledge that they learned in universities. They rarely get a chance to participate in teacher training programs (Shrestha, 2018). Therefore, they start facing challenges in the classroom. When they become unable to solve those issues, they criticize their higher education providers. They blame the educational degrees courses are mainly focused on theoretical knowledge. As Erdoğan et al. (2022) argue pre-service training programs in the university are not practice-oriented, and they are inadequate. The teachers who earn university degrees and start teaching in schools face many challenges even after teaching for years. Therefore, they need someone to support, collaborate and mentor them so that they together can implement acquired knowledge into practice and keep themselves updated on their professional development (Erdoğan et al., 2022).

In Nepal up to this point in time, there is no reflection, collaboration or mentoring culture developed among teachers. The mentoring-related program has not been broadly conducted (Khadka, 2021). However, some private schools run this program informally. They recognized the value of mentoring for teachers' professional development. Smith and Lewis (2017) state that mentoring is beneficial for every individual school, mentee, and mentor. Pachler and Redondo (2012) emphasized that mentoring is an important capacity-building relationship that can be easily undertaken using social networking tools like emails, text messaging, phone calls, and video calls. However, there are very few academic articles and research studies have been conducted to address this phenomenon (Ersin & Atay, 2021).

In general, teachers in private schools work hard to prepare lesson plans, develop teaching materials, teach students, assess them, and conduct meetings with parents (Yadav, 2017). Due to the hard work on a regular schedule and no upgrades in their present status, they experience frustration. They become demotivated by looking at themselves in the same position for years with similar classroom issues. Then they start blaming students, parents, and school management. Many of them get anxious and stressed due to the unlimited issues in the classrooms. Before last year, I conducted collaborative mentoring sessions with two teachers and explored the usefulness of the sessions. I found that it was effective for the teachers to reduce their classroom stress and anxiety.

In this research study, I conduct collaborative mentoring sessions with some more teachers to investigate the usefulness and appropriateness of collaborative mentoring from different perspectives. The research study seeks to examine how effective collaborative mentoring is for in-service teachers' well-being. The research questions are:

a) How useful do the teachers feel to attend the collaborative mentoring sessions?

b) In what areas (personal or professional) are collaborative mentoring sessions more useful for the participant teachers? How?

c) How is collaborative mentoring beneficial for teachers' well-being?

Literature Review

Teaching seems exciting and interesting job, however, it is challenging for many teachers in their early careers (Hudson, 2013). They feel pressurized during this time. Because they need to cope with the new environment of the schools and deal with new students and their parents (Yadav, 2017; Spanorriga et al., 2018). Teaching is stressful not only for novice teachers, but it is also the same for in-service teachers sometimes because of its dynamic nature (Smith & Lewis, 2017; Spanorriga et al., 2018). Teachers, after some years, start experiencing frustration due to the issues that occur in the classrooms. They feel demotivated, undervalued, and overloaded (Yadav, 2017). Sometimes they even experience burnout due to unmanageable workloads and dealing with difficult students and parents (Bhattrai, 2012; Smith, 2021). They need someone in such a situation who provides emotional and technical support. During mentoring, a mentor offers emotional support, technical support, and support with reflection to a mentee (Gakonga, 2019) which helps in-service teachers address those obstacles.

Traditional Mentoring

Traditionally, mentoring is based on classification and levelling. It is a one-to-one relationship in which an experienced person guides and supports a less experienced one. For example, Ehrich et al. (2004, p. 519) suggest in mentoring, a mentor is a "father figure who sponsors, guides and develops a younger person". Similarly, Nguyen (2017) argues, that more capable teachers provide professional and emotional support to the less capable in mentoring. Gradually, mentoring is taken as an interactive process happening between individuals of different levels of experience and expertise for interpersonal, psychological and career development (Spanorriga et al., 2018). In addition, Hobson (2016) mentions

mentoring is "a one-to-one relationship" between an inexperienced and an experienced teacher to support the less experienced one in their learning and career development (p.4).

To sum up, traditional mentoring involves a hierarchical relationship between a senior (mentor) and a subordinate (mentee) as highlighted by Mullen (2016). Traditional mentoring is one-way learning where mentees learn from mentors (Mullen, 2016). There is no value in reciprocal learning and growth of both mentor and mentees. It seems close to judgementoring (Hobson & Malderez, 2013). It can be directive and evaluative where the mentor provides direct advice and solutions to the mentees' issues. The mentor regularly observes the mentees' teaching and provides feedback on their performance. Mentoring is mainly focused on improving mentees' performance. There is a hierarchy so there is a lack of safe and trusting relationships between mentors and mentees. Therefore, mentees seem reluctant to openly engage in conversation with mentors.

Collaborative Mentoring

In contrast, collaborative mentoring starts as peer mentoring to unite individuals in a mutually beneficial and trustworthy relationship replacing hierarchy in the sense of equality (Nguyen, 2017, p.36). Mentors and mentees have equal-status relationships (Hobson, 2022) in the collaborative mentoring process. They both support each other in their professional learning and development goals. While mentoring, they find solutions to the issues on their own. Collaborative mentoring benefits both parties (mentor and mentees) in the relationship (Hudson, 2013). The setting of collaborative mentoring is a social place where conversation between mentor and mentees takes place. Collaborative mentoring is non-judgmental and non-directive. It is used to promote mutually beneficial relationships between mentors and mentees through reflective practice (Mann & Walsh, 2017). It enhances the collegial learning culture within the school. Mentoring is a means of facilitating the professional learning and development, well-being, and retention of educators (Hobson, 2022). Collaborative mentoring is for both the mentees' and mentors' professional learning, development, and well-being (Hudson, 2013).

Likewise, collaborative mentoring focuses on mutual growth and collective self-development of both mentor and mentees. There is a supportive and encouraging relationship between teachers which is essential for teachers' well-being. Tisdell and Shekhawat (2019) mention effective mentoring can bring positive personal and career outcomes for both mentees and mentors. For example, mentees start performing better after being involved in mentoring and they observe career satisfaction with decreased job stress in addition mentors experience personal satisfaction, career renewal, and new recognition (Hudson, 2013). Adding reflection on mentoring, MacCallum (2007) suggests mentoring focuses on reflection on the participants' work, questioning their practices and challenges that underpin their mindsets. It improves mentees' self-reflection and problem-solving capacities which leads them to be confident and have job satisfaction (Hobson & Malderez, 2013).

Teachers' Well-being

Research highlights that teachers' well-being is an important factor in teachers' effective performance, retention, and the well-being of the students they teach (Hobson & Maxwell, 2017). However, the topic of teachers' well-being is underdeveloped and seems neglected to be researched. Hobson and Maxwell (2017) further reported that before the second decade of the 21st century, very few studies focused on teachers' well-being. They defined teachers' well-being as a positive emotional state in which positive affect and satisfaction are associated with the experience of teaching. Collaborative mentoring can provide cost-effective professional development and well-being opportunities for teachers. The collaborative mentoring role is professionally and personally rewarding for both mentor and mentees (Hodson, 2013). He further highlights that collaboration among teachers advances their teaching skills by sharing teaching strategies, approaches, and content.

Hobson (2021) mentions that mentoring develops professional learning for both mentor and mentees, enhances critical reflection on their practice (Mann & Walsh, 2017), enriches their active listening skills. When teachers work together, they exchange information about their teaching jobs, school policies, and students and that impoves their knowledge and understanding of their organization (Nguyen, 2017, p. 37). That improvement and understanding certainly affect their professional development and well-being. Additionally, researchers report that teachers' well-being is linked to students' achievement as Schleicher (2018) highlights mental health and well-being of teachers are important not only for the teachers themselves but also for the students and the wider school. Effective mentoring can bring positive personal and professional outcomes for both mentors and mentees (Hudson, 2013; Tisdell & Shekhawat, 2019). It also helps them with career development, enhances competency, increases career satisfaction, and decreases job stress (Johnson & Ridley, 2004, as cited in Tisdell & Shekhawat, 2019). Similarly, Ensher and Murphy (2007) define mentoring as a mutual relationship between a mentor and mentee for new learning, career, and mental and emotional support.

Theoretical Framework

Mentoring practices are grounded in Vygotskian sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), as it argues that human learning is embedded in social interaction. According to the Vygotskian approach, learning is a socially constructed and socially mediated process that develops through interaction (2012). The Vygotskian approach further describes that a person develops knowledge and skills as per his/ her learning context and social environment. Like the Vygotskian perspective, in collaborative mentoring practice, mentors and mentees interact and learn from each other. They develop their understanding and skills through interaction in collaborative mentoring sessions (Hobson, 2021). In these interactive sessions, Langdon and Ward (2014) advocate that "mentors and mentees should have a reciprocal relationship and both should benefit from the exchange of ideas" (p.39).

Methodology

This research study is envisaged within a qualitative research paradigm to allow researchers to understand the usefulness of collaborative mentoring for mentee teachers from the perceptions of the participants (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). I used the qualitative case study method to explore or describe an experience in context using a variety of data sources. A case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a project in a real-life context and it is an evidence-led research method (Simons, 2014).

In this research study, the research participants were six teachers from different private schools in Nepal. The teachers were selected based on their availability and interest in collaborative mentoring. The proposed six mentee teachers were collaboratively mentored three times in one and a half months. After each collaborative mentoring session, the mentee teachers wrote their reflective journals mentioning how they felt during collaborative mentoring sessions. They also mentioned how they found the process of collaborative mentoring. After a week of the third collaborative mentoring session, I conducted an interview individually with each mentee teacher. The interview was semi-structured therefore I prepared some questions and had the flexibility to follow the lines of inquiry that emerged from the interaction (Mann, 2016).

To investigate the effectiveness of collaborative mentoring for in-service teachers, various data were collected. The data were collected through individual teachers' interviews and teachers' reflective journals. I used a thematic analysis technique to analyze the collected data. Boyatzis (1998) defines thematic analysis, as a way of seeing and making sense of the collected data. Therefore, thematic analysis helped me to identify and analyze the theme of the data. It facilitated me to develop a story based on the theme. All the collected data have been grouped into different thematic grounds and some of them are

analyzed and interpreted in detail to meet the objectives of the study. The collected data were thematically analyzed and interpreted mainly to explore how applicable collaborative mentoring is for mentee teachers' well-being. Therefore, I only focused on the themes which were close to my research questions.

Results and Discussion

The primary aim of this research was to conduct collaborative mentoring sessions with teachers three times and investigate how effective those sessions were for teacher participants' well-being.

Collaborative Mentoring Experience of the Teachers

Teacher participants believed collaboration among colleagues is very useful for them. Collaborative mentoring is the same. They mentioned while and after collaborative mentoring sessions, they felt refreshed and energized, therefore it worked like a remedy for them (Gakonga & Mann, 2021). They thought collaborative mentoring was for moral support for teachers to uplift their depressed moods and to take their frustration away. Teacher A said, "It was a relaxation session for me, it lightened my heart and mind, and it uplifted my sulky mood." They thought it was a really good experience when the mentor guided them to look at the other side of the coin in polite words. Teacher C stated, "My mentors' positive feedback gave me new hope for my career."

The participant teachers were highly experienced, even if they shared collaborative mentoring was effective for them. Teacher B said:

> I knew mentoring was effective for novice teachers a lot, but I found it is equally effective and important for in-service teachers like me. We teachers need to deal with new things every day because of changing teaching topics, curriculum, courses, and students' mindsets, so we teachers need to be professionally updated and developed if not we will feel burned out soon.

The mentee teachers shared that they found themselves novices in some areas of teaching-learning activities even after years of teaching experience. They mentioned that collaborative mentoring sessions could help them to cope with those novice areas. They said that collaborative mentoring allowed them to analyze and solve their classroom challenges themselves even if they were new challenges for them. They perceived their mentors in collaborative mentoring as their friends, who can guide and encourage them to address their classroom challenges. They considered that mentors could support them to develop professionally and personally. So, after each mentoring session, they felt accomplished and satisfied. Teacher F revealed, "I never felt dissatisfied after mentoring sessions, I felt the sessions were based on Win-Win scenarios for both mentor and me".

The participant teachers believed that mentoring brought positive changes to them. They felt happy and they commented that happy teachers can bring positive changes to the school too. As Bhattrai (2012) mentions effective mentoring helps teachers nurture personally and professionally. They declared that mentoring supported them to grow personally and professionally. Teachers C and E explained:

> During mentoring sessions my mentor made me reflect on my classroom issue which helped me deeply remember everything and I could see solutions myself, I have attended many TPD programs they never made me reflect in this way.

> …. I found someone (a mentor) to hear me wholeheartedly and share her experience on the same issue as mine then I felt joyful. I was so happy as I could see the issue in another way as well, I have never shared or reflected on my issues and heard the same from others in different contexts.

The research participants believed that mentoring was very effective for their professional development and well-being. After one mentoring session, they could reflect on their classroom issues without hesitation as their mentor acted as a good listener. They noticed that their mentor provided space for them to construct their thoughts and never dominated the conversation. Teacher A shared in the interview "I experienced that reflecting and sharing culture is very useful for teachers' development and well-being". Teachers shared that collaborative mentoring was a nice experience for them as they found themselves very comfortable sharing things with their mentor and when they shared their classroom scenarios with their mentor, they reflected on everything and many times they found the solutions to their issues themselves. They announced that the mentoring session built their sense of self-esteem and confidence (Hascher et al., 2004).

The participants expressed that collaborative mentoring was a good opportunity for them for their self-evaluation as well. They felt it helped them to shape their capacity. They got inspired, encouraged, and motivated and also, and they learned many things about classroom management through mentoring sessions. Teacher F answered the interview question by saying:

> I had an issue with teaching a large class effectively, I shared that issue with my mentor, we discussed different options and then I implemented them in the classroom and found differences. I was happy because the issue was bothering me for a long. I was sad for not getting the chance to attend TPD training but now I feel happy as I could learn something even in this short period.

The participants realized as Yadav (2017) states mentoring relationships are personal and reciprocal, so it is done with the mentee, not to the mentee. Almost all the teacher participants seemed happy and satisfied with the opportunities enabled during the mentoring sessions. They documented in their reflective journals, "Collaborative mentoring is relevant to all of us at any stage of our teaching career because it builds our confidence and self-esteem, and it reduces the feeling of isolation."

Collaborative Mentoring for Teachers' Well-being

Teacher participants marked in their reflective journals that mentoring helped their mental and emotional well-being. They stated that teaching is very challenging these days because every day there appears a new issue sometimes due to students, sometimes parents and sometimes curriculum and syllabus (Yadav, 2017). The mentee teachers revealed that they experience tiredness, frustration, and disappointment many times during school hours. They sometimes feel isolated and lonely. They suffer thinking they have no one to understand their situation and their problems. When they participated in the collaborative mentoring sessions, they felt enriched. Teacher C stated the following extract during the interview session:

> I can say collaborative mentoring worked for my mental well-being as I was mentally faded up, disturbed, and frustrated looking at my students' attitudes and behaviour. But later talking to you in collaborative mentoring, I felt relieved and better. Your feedback uplifted my sulky mood, next day I went to class happily hopeful and with peace of mind, I surely can say that it can be helpful for all well-being mental, emotional, and professional, I am sure it worked for me, so it works with others too.

The teacher participants had different views. Some of them declared mentoring functioned for their emotional well-being and some of them stated it worked for their professional well-being. However, all of them agreed with the fact that collaborative mentoring is equally effective for in-service teachers for their emotional, mental, and professional well-being as for novice teachers.

In the Nepalese context, private school teachers are mostly temporary workers in schools. They are not trained but are regularly observed and evaluated for their teaching skills by the school management. Similarly, they face various challenges in the classroom. However, they have no trustworthy friends in school with whom they can share their stress, frustration, and dissatisfaction. Thus, they mostly feel lonely and isolated. The respondent teachers reported in their reflective journals, "They hesitate to share their problems with other teachers because they think they will be judged as disqualified teachers by colleagues and school management". They considered not being able to solve their classroom issues as their weakness and if they disclosed that to others then they would be taken as disqualified teachers (Panday, 2014; Smith, 2021). The other reason for not discussing their issues among colleagues is that there is no sharing culture and they do not believe in learning from each other through reflection (Panday, 2014).

The mentee teachers disclosed that they used to worry while sharing their classroom issues with others assuming that the listener would judge them. However, after attending the collaborative mentoring sessions three times and discussing their classroom issues with their mentor, they realized that their mentor never judged them (Nguyen, 2017). The mentee teachers reported in their reflective journals, " They shared their classroom issues with their mentor without a second thought". They quoted that they became very happy when they found a trustworthy person (the mentor) to share their issues (Yadav, 2017). They wished for a mentor in their schools with whom "They can share everything without worrying about being judged". They reported that they experienced a positive emotional and mental impact on them during mentoring.

The research participants stated that before participating in the collaborative mentoring sessions, they experienced poor mental and emotional conditions for different reasons but during and after mentoring sessions, they felt good. They found themselves 'patients' while being with their mentor and their mentor acted as 'a therapist' (Orland-Barak & Klein, 2005). They perceived their mentor as a critical friend (Gakonga & Mann, 2022; Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010) who listened to them patiently and facilitated them to reflect. They had some classroom issues which were pressurizing them but while sharing the issues with their mentor they identified the solution to those issues themselves. They noticed that listening to the mentor's experience shed light on them. They identified suitable solutions to their issues for their students and their classroom context with the help of their mentor which made them feel relieved. They approved that proper mentoring practice could solve their issues and challenges and now they feel motivated and encouraged (Baral, 2015).

Conclusion and Implications

Almost all the participants agreed that the need for mentoring is high in Nepal for teachers' well-being (Schleicher, 2018) and professional development (Bhattrai, 2012; Pahadi, 2016; Yadav, 2017). The result shows that teachers in the private sector face different issues, so they experience poor mental and emotional conditions many times during their teaching career. It was found that there is no sharing culture among colleagues in school. They worried about sharing their concerns because of being judged as a poor teacher. In collaborative mentoring sessions, the teacher never experiences being judged. Therefore, collaborative mentoring is useful for teachers' mental, emotional, and professional well-being. Furthermore, collaborative mentoring is cost and time-effective for teachers because it does not demand a formal setting. It can be conducted in a social environment in informal settings. In addition, it would be worth using collaborative mentoring programs in every educational institution. The institution should create a collaborative and reflective culture for the teachers' personal and professional well-being.

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