

“I am because we are”: novice teacher mentoring support needs from an Ubuntu perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – Scholars have been sounding the alarm of novice teacher turnover crises for decades. South Africa is soon to be facing an educational catastrophe because of a shortage of experienced teachers. Globally and in South Africa, novice teacher attrition is high, and teachers entering the classroom often described feeling isolated and unsupported.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative study was underpinned by an interpretative phenomenology approach. The author reviewed the literature and newly emerged findings of novice teacher mentoring support needs through the theoretical lens of the Ubuntu philosophy “I am because we are” which emphasises the importance of interconnectedness and community. Using semi-structured interviews, this study aimed to explore novice teacher mentoring needs from an Ubuntu perspective.

Findings – Novice teachers report feeling overwhelmed with the complexities of teaching in their early careers and express the desire to be formally mentored by a knowledgeable “elder” teacher. This paper argues that a competent mentor who values Ubuntu in their mentoring could offer collaboration, respect, compassion and support to novices that may keep them in the profession. This paper further explores the potential benefit of a prescribed Ubuntu-orientated mentoring programme to formalise mentoring for novices. In addition, it explores the school micro-community from the Ubuntu principles to support novices.

Originality/value – While there is a plethora of studies about mentoring novice teachers, literature from an Africanised Ubuntu perspective is scarce. Perhaps the time has come to find African solutions to our African problems.

Keywords Mentorship, Novice teacher, Teacher attrition, Ubuntu, Ubuntu mentoring theory

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Beginner teachers are entering the profession as qualified individuals with high expectations of contributing to the teaching profession. Successfully adjusting from a theory-based pre-service teacher to a practice-based classroom teacher is a complex undertaking (Wilcoxon *et al.*, 2020). International work by Ingersoll *et al.* (2018) reports that in the USA, as many as 44% of novices leave the profession in the first five years of teaching and 10% within the first year. Admiraal (2023) echoes these sentiments and warns that the “teaching profession is eating its young” (p. 61). In addition, South Africa is soon to be facing an educational crisis with teacher shortages (Davids and Waghid, 2020; Kean, 2023), largely due to an ageing workforce. A study conducted by Stellenbosch University’s Research on Socio-Economic Policy (RESEP, 2023) concluded that 49% of employed teachers in South Africa are over the age of 50 years and will be retiring in the next decade. On the contrary, the Department of



Higher Education and Training responded to these claims, stating that there are sufficient teachers in the country, and the reported shortage is false and misleading. (DHET, 2021). These major debates point to discrepancies that must be investigated, as the need to attract and retain new teachers in the profession is critical.

Globally, scholars agree that novice teachers face a significant reality shock when first entering the classroom (März and Kelchtermans, 2020; Mpisi and Zoutendijk, 2022). Similarly, Botha and Rens (2018) reflect on the experiences of 100 beginner teachers in South Africa and explain that the expectation of an easy adjustment into the classroom is often met with shock and teachers feeling ill prepared for the challenges of teaching. Dreer-Goethe (2023) urges that a new teacher's sense of professional well-being will greatly impact their professional practice and resilience.

To address high novice teacher attrition, and as an aid to the looming teacher shortage, it is imperative to investigate how South African novice teachers can be supported within an African context. Furthermore, this article aims to respond to Esau and Maarman's (2021) recommendation to investigate the nature of support offered to beginner teachers. In addition, this article aims to explore the nature of mentoring support offered to beginner teachers from an Africanised Ubuntu perspective.

Gade (2012) outlines Ubuntu as an African philosophy or worldview that encompasses interconnectedness and collaboration between people for the betterment of the community. This African worldview is often interpreted as "I am because we are", meaning that we are inextricably bound to each other. Ngubane and Makua (2021) posit that there are five pillars of Ubuntu – namely, solidarity, co-existence, compassion, respect and dignity, and these pillars encapsulate the holistic vision in Ubuntu.

The philosophy of Ubuntu provides us with an opportunity to explore the challenges novice teachers experience from an African perspective. Ubuntu is part of mentoring and collaboration and may be encapsulated in the South African Council for Educators' (SACE, 2020) desired professional teaching standard that "Teachers collaborate with others to support teaching, learning and their professional development" (p. 8). It follows that these professional requirements could be applied to mentor teachers.

The available literature provides ample research that postulates the benefits of effective mentorship for novice teacher experiences and retention (e.g. Feiman-Nemser, 1996; Flanigan, 2006; Goldhaber *et al.*, 2022; Hugo, 2018). On the other hand, Wilcoxon *et al.* (2020) troublingly report that Finland is one of only a few countries that prescribe formal mentoring and induction at a national level.

Given the abundance of research on mentoring of novice teachers, it is noted that research on the mentoring needs of novice teachers from an Ubuntu perspective is scarce. Consequently, it is the purpose of this paper to explore novice teachers' mentoring support needs and expectations during their first year of teaching through an Africanised Ubuntu lens.

The main research question that guided data generation for this article is thus: What are novice teachers' experiences and mentoring needs, viewed through an Ubuntu-orientated lens?

Theoretical framework

An Ubuntu ontology underpins the research activities as well as influences the research paradigms and aims for this article. Geber and Keane (2017) state, "Ubuntu is defined in isiZulu as 'Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' – a person is a person through other people" (p. 502). Letseka (2012) further reiterates the common translation of Ubuntu as "I am because we are". The principles of Ubuntu identify humanness, mutual respect, mutual learning and common goals for the upliftment of the community as a whole. This study considers these principles

from a mentoring perspective (Geber and Keane, 2013, 2017; Letseka, 2012; Msila, 2015). The Ubuntu mentoring theory was thus synthesised by the author and framed the lens through which data was obtained and interpreted. By adopting the Ubuntu understanding that collaborative interdependence and mutual respect is key to the growth of society, the collective understanding that “your child is also my child” (Murove, 2012, p. 37), this paper views mentoring novice teachers from an Ubuntu mentoring framework.

Literature review

This review of literature addressed the interrelated concepts that framed the paper, such as the novice teacher, the current problem with novice teacher attrition, mentorship as a solution to novice teacher attrition, the lack of regulation in mentorship for novice teachers and Ubuntu in the mentoring of novice teachers.

The novice teacher

Kim and Roth (2011) and Green and Muñoz (2016) describe a novice teacher as an early career teacher with little experience of classroom teaching. In this research, a novice teacher is defined as a qualified teacher in their first year of teaching. Mentoring has been categorised by numerous authors as the oldest and most effective form of teaching (Ani *et al.*, 2021; Cole, 2004; Stone, 2004). An experienced teacher (mentor) has the potential of being able to better guide new teachers through their challenges by using the ancient practice of mentoring. Radford *et al.* (2018, p. 1) investigated the views of 30 mentor teachers across 12 Australian schools (both primary and secondary) and found that mentors benefited and gained new knowledge and skills in the mentoring process that improved their own teaching abilities as well as the retention of mentees and mentors alike. Kutsyuruba and Godden (2019) describe mentoring as pivotal to the well-being of novices. Moreover, Keese *et al.* (2022) report that mentor teachers can model the desired behaviour that novice teachers may learn from to improve their practice. Dreer-Goethe (2023) adds that mentoring is closely linked to a teacher’s sense of well-being. Huling and Resta (2001) and Admiraal (2023) agree that stakeholders must recognise the mutual benefits of mentoring and be willing to invest time and resources to improve mentoring to reduce the loss of qualified competent teachers in the profession.

Current situation: novice teacher attrition and the theory–practice gap

International scholars report that the high resignation rate of new teachers in the profession is closely linked to their level of job satisfaction (Keese *et al.*, 2022). Wilcoxon *et al.* (2020) stress that teaching is very taxing and note lower self-efficacy as a reason for added stress, especially amongst novice teachers. Ingersoll (2003) analysed data from the U.S. Schools and Staffing Survey and its supplement, the Teacher Follow-up Survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, and found that a large number of new teachers are leaving the profession before their fifth year. Likewise, Zamarro *et al.* (2022) found that the same is still true, indicating that teachers reported wanting to leave the profession within five years due to high stress levels and fears of burnout. As a result, our education system is facing what could soon be an educational disaster due to a lack of qualified teachers to fill our classrooms (Harfitt, 2015). Similarly, Latifoglu (2016) investigated 41 beginning teachers in Australia and stated that “the magnitude of attrition among beginning teachers has been acknowledged as a persistent problem in many countries” (p. 55). A surfeit of research, such as that by Brill and McCartney (2008) and Burghes *et al.* (2009), sounded the alarm of the novice teacher retention crisis years ago. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified this alarm even more, with higher stress levels experienced by new teachers (Zamarro *et al.*, 2022).

South Africa is dealing with high teacher turnover and a massive shortage of teachers, which has been a pressing issue for over a decade (Gumede, 2017; Mampane, 2012; Mngomezulu *et al.*, 2021). Laurence (2020) expresses his concern that teachers leaving the profession have a demotivating effect on those who are staying and further lessen the perceptions of professionalism in the field which may dissuade potential students to study teaching as a result. The National Treasury (2022) shows that a massive R441.5 billion of the South African budget is allocated to learning and culture. These funds are allocated towards the improvement of education each year, yet there is still a considerable lack of skills and quality education in the country.

Simkins (2015) reported on the shortage of teachers in South Africa and expressed concern that the teaching force is in serious endangerment of being unable to sustain quality education in the country. Likewise, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2015) researched the supply and demand of teachers in South Africa and reported an expected shortage of 19,916 teachers by 2020. Davids and Waghid (2020) inform that there is a vast shortage of qualified competent teachers in our South African classrooms. Furthermore, DHET (2015) divulged the statistics regarding teacher retirement and resignation rates, indicating that an alarming rate of teacher resignations would create a “leaking bucket” system as the supply of newly graduated teachers is barely keeping up with the number of teachers resigning from the system each year. Most recently, despite these earlier warnings, media reports warn that more than half of South Africa’s public-school teachers will retire by 2030 (Monama, 2022), and there is growing concern over how South African classrooms will cope with the impeding teacher shortage and if enough early career teachers are being prepared to adequately take up the torch (and chalk).

This impeding teacher shortage is an alarming statistic that further necessitates the urgent call for improved teacher support to improve teacher retention and protect the school workforce as a whole. When teachers leave the classroom to pursue other careers, it impacts negatively on all stakeholders involved in education and on our educational system. When teachers feel unsupported and leave the profession, it does not give the staff enough time to become more experienced, and many schools end up with inexperienced teachers starting every new school year. Howes and Goodman-Delahunty (2015) agree that having inexperienced teachers making up the majority of staff will likely have negative repercussions for the continuity of the learners at the school, as well as for support of new teachers. For novice teachers especially, support from experienced colleagues is vital for efficient orientation into the profession (Barlin, 2010). In support of these findings, Howes and Goodman-Delahunty (2015) asked former teachers what could have kept them in the teaching profession. One of the factors mentioned was receiving greater support from principals and colleagues. This further promotes the importance of having a mentor, friend and ally in the profession that could lead to a perceived feeling of greater support, emotional well-being and resilience (Zhang *et al.*, 2022). Likewise, Ersin and Atay (2021) note from a social constructivist perspective that teaching is a social phenomenon which necessitates deeper relationships and interaction between a mentor and mentee.

Mentorship as a solution for teacher attrition

New teacher retention has been a hot topic for educational scholars for many years, with Odell and Ferraro (1992) agreeing that mentoring can keep teachers in the classroom and increase new teacher retention. Green and Muñoz (2016) discuss factors of job satisfaction, stating that a teacher’s sense of loyalty towards the school, management and their learners could assist in keeping them in the classroom and working for the school for longer. One of the main methods that can be used to increase retention of qualified teachers is through effective mentoring (Sydnor *et al.*, 2023). Kutsyuruba and Godden (2019) delve deeper and report that

positive mentoring can not only benefit both the mentor and the mentee but also can greatly benefit marginalised novices in a variety of ways, such as creating a safe space and a feeling of belonging, which is closely linked to the Ubuntu principles. Similarly, [Du Plessis \(2013\)](#) emphasises the importance of mentoring for early career teachers, not only its value in assisting novices to cultivate the necessary knowledge and skills in the classroom, but also its benefits for the humanist element brought about by a mentoring relationship.

[Gaikhorst et al. \(2015\)](#) provide an in-depth analysis by which they determine the contribution a professional development programme and sound mentorship makes to the quality and retention of teachers in an urban environment. Newer studies identify the same recommendations – that mentorship professional development programmes for established teachers are mutually beneficial and that teachers would be willing to participate ([Sibanda and Amin, 2021](#)). These programmes would have a positive impact on the mentors' and mentees' competences, self-efficacy and professional orientation ([Sibanda and Amin, 2021](#)). [Hakro and Mathew \(2020\)](#) also acknowledge the benefits of mentoring for staff well-being and recommend that institutions both train mentors and mentees formally, and recognise their mentoring successes formally.

[Ingersoll \(2001\)](#) highlights that high teacher turnover is a particular challenge in high-poverty schools and urban settings. [Goldhaber et al. \(2020\)](#) suggest that a workplace mentorship programme could decrease turnover, especially in the many high-poverty and/or urban schools in South Africa. Formal induction programmes and mentoring can assist novice teachers in overcoming the challenges faced in their early years of teaching and potentially keep them in the teaching profession ([März and Kelchtermans, 2020](#)). [Morettini \(2016\)](#) proposes that well-trained mentors can be an efficient method for schools at district and national level and may assist in prioritising mental and emotional well-being of staff to create more satisfactory working conditions. A mentor teacher understands the context and scope of a novice teacher's challenges and gives advice, guidance, support and friendship that increase novice teacher job satisfaction if implemented appropriately ([Green and Muñoz, 2016](#)). Moreover, [Howes and Goodman-Delahunty \(2015\)](#) implore educators to nurture constructive and supportive relationships within school societies and between all stakeholders. In doing this, we can provide support for novice teachers facing a magnitude of old and new challenges ([März and Kelchtermans, 2020](#)). [Du Plessis \(2013\)](#) articulates the value of having an encouraging and supportive mentor who can have a positive impact on how new teachers view themselves as teachers. [Goldhaber et al. \(2020\)](#) encapsulate mentoring as an essential component of teacher preparation and induction that can influence the career trajectory of a teacher for years to come.

[Beltman et al. \(2016\)](#) studied the resilience of early career teachers and identified formal mentorship programmes and support from colleagues as playing a pivotal role in encouraging higher teacher resilience. [Greenfield \(2015\)](#) goes on to express that teachers from the same school can share practical advice, resources and experiences. Mentorship can thus improve first-year teacher persistence and their ability to face the challenges of their new classroom ([Morettini, 2016](#)). A mentor can instil a sense of hope and renewed motivation in a teacher, and the mentor and mentee can share ideas and lived experiences with one another ([Huisman et al., 2010](#)).

A lack of mentorship training as a formal requirement in South Africa

[SACE \(2010\)](#) prescribes a compulsory Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) and Continual Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) programme that schools must conduct as part of their professional development programme. These development programmes are currently still a requirement in schools in 2024. In light of this, it is disappointing that during a review of the literature, this researcher could find no evidence of any formal compulsory

mentor teacher training framework or incentives for mentor teachers in South African schools. Moreover, a scholarly review did not reveal evidence of a compulsory formal mentorship programme or framework being prescribed by the DBE as part of new staff orientation or of novice teacher induction. This could result in many schools losing focus of such a programme, especially if no specific guidelines are prescribed or if no such programme is made compulsory by government in public schools. [Burger et al. \(2021\)](#) maintain that while school-based mentoring is a crucial form of support to a novice teacher, different approaches to mentoring deviate in effectiveness within different contexts. A one-size-fits-all mentoring approach cannot be used in South Africa and must instead be adapted to particular contexts and even the specific needs of individual novice teachers. Such a prescribed framework could not be found in the context of South African novice teachers from an Africanised perspective. This paper may begin to address this perceived gap in the literature as it aims to establish the mentoring needs and expectations of novice teachers from an Africanised Ubuntu perspective.

Ubuntu and Ubuntu mentoring

Ubuntu is the African philosophy derived from the Bantu people who inhabit almost a third of Sub-Saharan Africa ([Muwanga-Zake, 2009](#)). The term Ubuntu is deeply rooted in African indigenous knowledge systems and African heritage. [Mangena \(2012\)](#) explores Ubuntu as a learning concept where elderly wisdom is taught through a mutually beneficial and respectful relationship.

Ubuntu is translated as “humanism” or “I am because we are” and is grounded in the collective experiences and growth of societies ([Letseka, 2012](#)). [Nzimakwe \(2014\)](#) describes Ubuntu as a call to participate in the community and be of service in a practical way. Being at the service of fellow human beings connects us with each other and binds us to each other according to Ubuntu. Ubuntu focusses on the interconnectedness of people in a society and mutual respect and interdependence of people to uplift society and not just an individual ([Padayachee et al., 2023](#)). Notwithstanding, [Maphalala \(2017\)](#) reports that these African values of Ubuntu have not been fully unified into South Africa’s basic education or higher education systems. Furthermore, [Maphalala \(2017\)](#) describes three pillars of Ubuntu – namely, “interpersonal values, intrapersonal values and environmental values. These pillars signify regard for others, the self and the environment” (p. 1). Within the Ubuntu philosophy, where society views “your child is also my child” ([Murove, 2012](#), p. 37), an Ubuntu pedagogy has the potential to transform educational practices in South Africa ([Ngubane and Makua, 2021](#)).

Ubuntu mentoring ([Geber and Keane, 2013, 2017](#); [Letseka, 2012](#); [Msila, 2015](#)) is a framework by which a mentor and mentee pursue the virtues of communalism, mutual respect and care. By viewing mentoring from the principles of Ubuntu, the novice teacher is empowered through a sense of community and shared values and success that is not based on the identities of race or colour of the past ([Msila, 2015](#)). [Rwelamila et al. \(1999\)](#) designate that Ubuntu is prominent in its application in almost all Africa and, as such, has become part of an African way of living. For centuries, Ubuntu has been a traditional way of life that has guided positive collaborations, relationships and well-being between African people ([Ramose, 2021](#)).

Research methodology

This qualitative research followed an interpretative phenomenology approach ([Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014](#); [Smith, 1996](#)). The study aimed to explore the individual needs, experiences and emotions of novice teachers and to identify their personal expectations of their mentor teacher and a mentoring programme. Making use of a descriptive case study design and

using semi-structured interviews (Creswell *et al.*, 2007), this study explored the needs and expectations of six novice teachers from an Ubuntu perspective (Ngubane and Makua, 2021).

Qualified (four-year Bachelor of Education) novice teachers in their first year of teaching at a secondary school in Gauteng, South Africa, were selected using a non-probability sampling method, called homogeneous purposive sampling (Etikan *et al.*, 2016), to ensure that all participants had the same characteristics of a novice teacher. These teachers were approached via email to participate voluntarily in this study.

A semi-structured interview schedule (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006) was used to conduct the interviews at the school on days that the participants were available immediately after school. On average, each interview lasted 60 min. The interviews were audio recorded and field notes taken during the interview by hand and then transcribed. Manual coding was used to find emerging themes and subthemes in the data using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Participants shared their personal experiences in the classroom, and one of the biggest themes that emerged from the data was how participant challenges seemed to have the biggest impact on their mentoring expectations and needs.

For research to meet the criterion of trustworthiness, Guba and Lincoln (1994) prescribed that credibility, confirmability, dependability and transferability be used as measures of trustworthiness. It is important for research of this nature to offer authentic and unbiased representations of participants' views (Korstjens and Moser, 2018), and verbatim accounts are therefore presented under the Results section of this paper to enhance credibility and confirmability. Dependability and transferability are enhanced through the detailed description of the methodological and data gathering process.

Precautions have been taken to ensure that the study remains ethical in all aspects. The names of participants have been omitted, with codes NT (novice teacher) 1 to 6 given, and their schools are not mentioned. Full confidentiality and non-disclosure were guaranteed during the recorded interviews to all participants in this study. Since this study involves human participants, ethical clearance was approved before data collection commenced (No. 2017/08/16/50836500/23/MC).

Results

This study aimed to investigate the experiences and mentoring needs of novice teachers in their first year of teaching. Interview data generated from this research were recorded and transcribed. Codes and categories that emerged were coded by means of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Two main themes and related subthemes arose from the data, which are discussed below. A discussion of these findings is presented in the subsequent section.

Theme 1: novice teachers' perceived challenges

Theme 1 emerged from Research Question 1 that explored the challenges of novice teachers in their first year of teaching. Two main categories were most evident: (1) classroom discipline and (2) feeling isolated and overwhelmed. Reflections from the novices exemplify each category.

Category A: classroom discipline. The biggest challenge reported by novices was related to managing classroom discipline. Novices revealed feeling like they did not have the knowledge and skills to deal with challenging learner behaviour in the classroom and expressed concern that it hindered the progress of a lesson. Participants NT1 and N3 expressed the following sentiments:

I am worried that I am not going to get through the curriculum because of them and poor discipline. (NT1)

I am exhausted at the end of the day from constant “battles” with kids. (NT3)

While sharing what they perceived to be their biggest challenges, some of the participants appeared tense as they articulated the troublesome encounters with learner discipline that had disrupted their classrooms. In discussing these challenges, participants explained how they felt “alone” in these challenging situations, which led to the next category that emerged from the data.

Category B: a feeling of isolation while being overwhelmed. Novices described feeling isolated and like they were the only ones struggling with challenges in the classroom. NT1, NT2 and NT4 shared their experiences and stated,

I feel like I can't just go to them [experienced teachers] whenever. (NT1)

There is so much to do. This is a lot. I am stressed. (NT2)

They already have their classrooms sorted, you know, so they might not understand what I am going through. (NT4)

As the interviewer probed participants for ideas on whether a mentor teacher could have helped them better manage their challenges, Theme 2 arose in which the participants explored their mentoring needs.

Theme 2: mentoring needs

Research Question 2 probed novices about their needs from a mentor teacher to aid their induction into the profession. The novices listed the areas in which they wanted their mentor teacher to guide them to help them better cope in their new classrooms.

Category A: assistance with classroom discipline. One of the main desires of the novice teachers was to have a mentor teacher that could assist them in knowing how to discipline disruptive learners without wasting important teaching time. The accounts of NT3 and NT4 are reflected in their statements:

I want someone who knows the difficult kids to be willing to give me advice on how to manage their behavior in my class. (NT3)

I don't want the mentor teacher to come discipline my class for me because then the learners think I can't handle it, but they can tell me how they deal with it. (NT4)

Category B: assistance with administrative and extracurricular workload. Novice teachers felt overwhelmed with the administrative workload that they faced. They specifically discussed keeping several files for the Department of Education, large amounts of marking, and keeping records of learner misdemeanours as a challenge (including homework not done and disruptive classroom behaviour). In addition, NTs reported that designing extra worksheets and lessons for learners who needed specialised learning support was an added administrative responsibility. The schools also expected the teachers to send regular email updates to parents if learners were struggling and/or failing, and this also took up a lot of time. Added to administrative work, new teachers felt further pressure from extracurricular activities they had to manage. This is expressed below, as NT1 and NT2 said,

To plan, keep files, mark tests and books, set exams and I am still expected to coach after school, I feel like I am drowning in other tasks and not focussing in teaching. (NT1)

I wasn't even settled with my class yet and I must help plan a gala day but I weren't sure how to do it. (NT2)

Category C: formal mentoring to provide a friend and ally. Novices mentioned that at times, they felt embarrassed to approach a mentor on their own. It may take several months for new staff to

form bonds with the experienced and well-versed teachers. One participant expressed the desire for a formal assigned mentor who would always offer support without the novice having to approach the mentor to let them know they were struggling. NT1 shared a heartfelt statement and expressed, "I'm scared to just go up to an experienced teacher and ask for help. Maybe if the school assigned someone to help me and mentor me, they would come to me on their own."

Discussion of findings

The key results of this study depict the themes and subsequent categories that emerged from the data gathered through interviews with the participants. Within this discussion, the findings are reported from the perspective of the theoretical frame of Ubuntu and debated within the current body of knowledge shown in the Literature Review section above.

Micro-community of a school governed by the Ubuntu principles

To support this discussion, the author presents a micro-community (Figure 1) in which the stakeholders of an educational system are inter-connected by the principles of the theory of Ubuntu. The school should become a micro-community in which all stakeholders value and respect each other. "A person is a person through other people" (Gerber and Keane, 2017, p. 502). Each member of the community realises their place as part of the group and works towards uplifting the group as a whole, with a strong emphasis on the Ubuntu principles of mutual respect, mutual learning and common goals to uplift the community (Geber and Keane, 2013, 2017; Letseka, 2012; Msila, 2015).

Within an Ubuntu-orientated school micro-community (Figure 1), novices are supported by experienced teachers who, in turn, learn and grow through sharing their valuable expertise through mentoring novices. Each of the stakeholders (including learners) works together as part of the same "team" towards the common goal of improved classroom learning and improved novice teacher attrition. This discussion thus argues that these goals are achieved (in part) by improving the experiences of novices through effective mentoring within a micro-community.

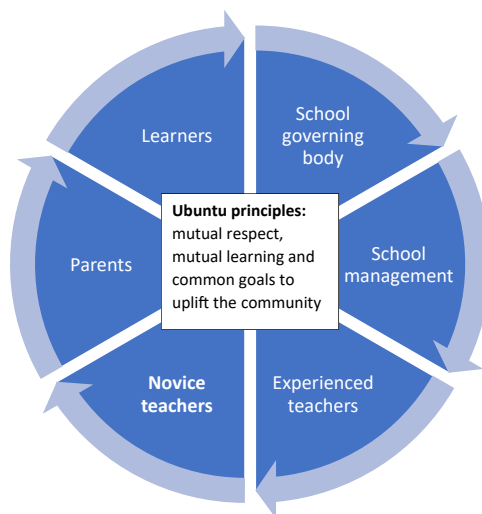


Figure 1.
School micro-community guided by Ubuntu principles

Source(s): Created by author

Novice teachers' perceived challenges

Classroom discipline. It must be highlighted that managing learner discipline in the classroom was mentioned as the biggest challenge by all the participants. Participants expressed a concern that effective learning was being hindered in their classrooms as a result of classroom management issues. NT3 conveyed physical exhaustion and referred to their encounter with challenging learners as a “battle”. This “battle” is in contrast with the principles of an Ubuntu school micro-community in which there is no “us” vs “them” but instead the ideal of interconnectedness and community. Likewise, NT1 referred to the learners as “them”; however, this participant embodied Ubuntu when they showed a concern for the negative impact that a lack of learner discipline had on teaching and learning for other learners in the class who deserved to learn in a conducive environment.

From the theoretical frame of Ubuntu, novices may not feel that “your child is my child” and a true sense of mutual respect in their classroom when some learners are disrespectful. Moreover, in contrast with the philosophy of Ubuntu that places the best interests of the community first, in these novices’ classrooms, a few learners may have a negative impact on the teaching and learning of the whole group. The sense of mutually working towards a common goal within a micro-community is thus lost.

The scholarly work of [Du Plessis \(2013\)](#) supports this discussion, as she emphasises that early career teachers may not yet have the knowledge and skills for classroom management (learner discipline) and explores the importance of the “human” element that mentoring can bring to guide novices. This focus on a “team” approach to mentoring novices to improve classroom management is accentuated by the Ubuntu perspective that emphasises “humanness” and collective growth ([Letseka, 2012](#)). The literature thus supports this finding and encourages members of society to work collaboratively and recognise the importance of humanness and the collective benefit that will be realised in mentoring novices. The next major challenge that emerged from the findings was novices feeling isolated and overwhelmed.

A feeling of isolation while being overwhelmed. Once again, the us vs them mentality emerged when the participants referred to the mentor teachers as “them”. This could indicate a sense of disunity between novice teachers and experienced teachers. This division may result from novices feeling like they cannot approach a more experienced teacher for fear of being judged or seeming incompetent. The potential lacking foundation of Ubuntu, “I am because we are” leaves novices feeling isolated, even though there are many experienced teachers within a school micro-community who all work towards a common good of quality education.

The discussions of [Green and Muñoz \(2016\)](#) reverberate this finding and encourage mentor teachers to guide and support novices as colleagues and friends to increase their feelings of mental and emotional well-being. While an Ubuntu philosophy wants to see entire communities working together for the common good, novices feel overwhelmed and unprepared to manage a busy classroom timetable, heavy administrative loads, lesson and assessment planning and extracurricular activities. Moreover, framed within the Ubuntu lens, [Mangena \(2012\)](#) supports the concept of learning from a mentor and “elder” in a mutually beneficial and respectful relationship to improve not only learning, but also feelings of belonging and openness between the mentee and mentor.

Mentoring needs

The data revealed that novices’ expectations of mentors were directly linked to the challenges they faced in their classrooms. It must be highlighted that novices really wanted to feel a sense of collegiality and belonging within their schools. In true Ubuntu spirit that framed this study, their mentoring needs encapsulated the principles of “I am because we are.” Novices thus reported the following major mentoring needs.

Assistance with classroom discipline. From an Ubuntu perspective, a mentor teacher's experience in classroom management can be shared in a caring and respectful manner. The participants expressed that they wanted to learn how to best manage their classrooms, and they wanted to be a part of the teaching micro-community; likewise, they just wanted someone to support them and share best practice with them. Novices seemed to greatly value experienced teachers and believed that they could learn a lot from mentor teachers.

Radford *et al.*'s (2018) study of mentoring new teachers supports this finding, stating that novices can greatly benefit from the knowledge and skills of a competent mentor teacher. In the same way, observing a mentor modelling effective classroom management strategies, novices can learn how to improve their own practice (Keese *et al.*, 2022). This finding stands harmoniously next to the Ubuntu mentoring framework that states that learning from a "knowledgeable elder" benefits the practice of new teachers (Mangena, 2012). Wilcoxon *et al.* (2020) agree that teaching is a taxing profession, for which novices are often not fully prepared and must be guided in. The results highlight the following mentoring need, as reported by novices.

Assistance with administrative and extracurricular workload. Improving learner support, knowing how to best manage extracurricular expectations and understanding administrative workload by the clear and patient guidance of an experienced mentor teacher will work towards the Ubuntu goal of co-existence (Letseka, 2012) and towards uplifting the school as a whole. If these tasks are viewed from the "your child is my child" and "co-existence" principles of Ubuntu in the school micro-community, it is expected that teachers will share additional resources such as extra worksheets, files and best methods of parental communication. Furthermore, seeing the learners as "my child" allows a teacher to invest the time more willingly into assisting learners outside the classroom when necessary. As supported by Huisman *et al.* (2010), when a mentee can share lived experiences and advice with their mentor, they can experience a renewed sense of hope and motivation for the challenging and hefty responsibilities and tasks that accompany teaching.

In a response to their feelings of isolation, the participants conveyed feeling uncomfortable and even reported being "scared" to approach any experienced teacher for advice. They therefore expressed a desire for formal mentoring to be established by the school, as explained in the next mentoring need discussed below.

Formal mentoring to provide a friend and ally. Having a formally allotted mentor teacher could build the confidence of the novice teacher so that they may regularly approach their mentor with challenges they are facing. When the school allocates a mentee to a mentor, and advises on regular mentoring meetings and activities, it may be beneficial to the mentee as they are placed in a mentoring environment without having to seek it out. The novice's place within a school micro-community is established. A formal mentoring relationship can thus strengthen the sense of belonging and collegiality that Ubuntu highly values within the school micro-community. Similarly, Zhang *et al.* (2022) advocate for formal mentoring programmes that allow a mentor to become a friend and ally in the profession, to provide support and improve the experiences and emotional well-being of novice teachers in those early days.

Implications and recommendations

This paper intends to offer insights into South African novice teacher mentoring by exploring the challenges and mentoring needs from the perspectives of experts in novice teacher needs (the novices themselves). It is envisioned that this paper may highlight the paucity of literature in the field of Ubuntu mentoring of novice teachers in South Africa and call for

stakeholders and scholars to fill this gap with context-specific research and knowledge. This paper echoes the sentiments of Huling and Resta (2001) and Esau and Maarman (2021) who advise stakeholders to invest time and resources into improving mentoring to uplift both the mentee and the mentor. Moreover, the author calls on stakeholders to establish micro-communities and develop formal effective Ubuntu-orientated mentoring. A formalised mentorship programme could be developed at school level within a national framework of specific minimum criteria grounded in the philosophy of Ubuntu. Formalising and regulating mentorship activities at national and regional level, from an Africanised perspective, could bring about great improvement in novice teacher mentoring.

Conclusion

This paper established that novice teachers are facing challenges and are feeling overwhelmed in their first year of teaching. Novices feel they are not yet equipped to effectively manage discipline issues, keep up with a heavy workload, including administrative and extracurricular tasks, and they feel isolated and overwhelmed. Novice teachers desire mentors who can guide them through these challenges and offer moral support based on the principles of Ubuntu – namely, mutual respect, mutual learning and common goals to uplift the community. By promoting a formal mentoring programme in which mentor teachers are trained in Ubuntu mentoring, and paired with a suitable mentee, schools can ensure more effective formal mentoring takes place for novices within a school micro-community.

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