Perceptions of School-Based Teaching Practice Mentoring in Cameroon

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Abstract

Teaching practice (TP) mentoring has been extensively discussed as a central component of initial teacher education. However, limited research has examined the meanings that participants in a TP mentoring relationship attribute to the word "mentoring" and how their interpretations of "mentoring" might influence the distribution of roles within the mentoring relationship. This study addressed the research gap by investigating both cooperating teachers' and student-teachers' perceptions of school-based TP mentoring in the Cameroonian context. Four cooperating teachers' and four student-teachers' perceptions of TP mentoring were explored through analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted individually. Findings of the study revealed alignment in terms of power dynamics but contradictions between cooperating teachers' relatively constructivist views on how student-teachers should be learning and student-teachers' beliefs about cooperating teachers imparting knowledge to them. These different perceptions, the findings also revealed, influenced the distribution and enactment of roles in practice. The study highlights the need for greater clarity around TP mentoring expectations and discusses practical implications for mentoring preparation programmes targeting both cooperating teachers and student-teachers.

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Introduction

Teaching practice (TP) remains a highly valued component of initial teacher education globally (Cohen et al., 2013) as it gets student-teachers off to a good start. The need to provide structured support and ease student-teachers' transition into the profession (Izadinia, 2015) has led to the introduction of mentoring in TP. TP mentoring broadly refers to the pairing of student-teachers with experienced teachers, who act as mentors (Lai, 2006, p.1). Many studies (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Du Plessis et al., 2010) have emphasised the indispensable role that mentoring plays in the preparation of qualified teachers; hence its centrality in initial English language teacher education globally (Sundli, 2007). However, limited research has investigated how cooperating

teachers (CTs) and student-teachers (STs) perceive TP mentoring and how their perceptions might influence distribution of roles within the relationship. This research gap warrants reflections on meanings participants in a TP mentoring relationship attribute to "mentoring" and how their interpretations influence, if at all, the enactment of roles or the relationship itself given the claim made by MacCallum (2007) that "at the heart of the development of a mentoring relationship is how mentoring is conceptualised" (p.135).

In line with the above rationale, this study investigated perceptions of TP mentoring within the Cameroonian context. It explored the views of CTs and STs and examined the extent to which their perceptions aligned or diverged. Furthermore, the study explored how these perceptions influenced the distribution of roles in TP mentoring relationships. By explicating both CTs' and STs' perspectives, this study aims to inform efforts to enhance the quality of TP experiences in Cameroon and support CTs to develop mentoring practices that are responsive to the needs of STs (van Ginkel et al., 2018).

Research Context
In Cameroon, initial teacher education (ITE) for secondary school teachers takes place in teacher training colleges (TTCs) dotted across the nation. Depending on entry levels, STs spend either two (Bachelor holders) or three (General Certificate in Education (GCE) Advanced level or Baccalauréat holders) years to obtain a qualified teacher status certification. While at the TTCs, STs take courses in educational psychology, philosophy of education, general pedagogy and teaching methodologies, which equip them with theoretical knowledge of classroom management, management of public school systems and subject-specific teaching skills. While most of the training in TTCs focuses on theoretical learning about teaching, the last quarter (ten to twelve weeks) of ITE is dedicated to TP in host schools under the supervision of CTs.

TP starts-off with STs observing their respective CTs in action in real classrooms for approximately two weeks. They are expected to document and reflect on their observation. This forms part of their final assessment portfolio. After the observation phase, STs engage in a supervised practicum, preparing and delivering lessons under the day-to-day mentoring of assigned CTs and occasional observation by pedagogic inspectors (PIs). STs are required to prepare and deliver a minimum of twelve lessons during this period. They prepare lesson plans and lesson notes and get these vetted by CTs prior to delivery. CTs are expected to observe the delivery of each lesson and organise a post-observation conference in which they (CTs and STs) reflect on the lesson delivery and overall classroom management. PIs, who are seasoned

pedagogues in charge of in-service teacher professional development, also organise post-observation conferences involving CTs and STs when they observe a lesson. PIs are expected to observe STs at least twice before their final assessment. In the last week of TP, STs are assessed: they prepare and deliver a lesson, which is observed by CTs and PIs – who assess candidates' lesson delivery against a set of pre-determined criteria. There is no post-observation conference for this lesson. STs are required to submit their portfolios (made up of observation notes, reflections, lesson notes and lesson plans) for assessment. This portfolio is considered alongside the harmonised score attributed by a cooperating teacher and an inspector for the lesson delivered. Also, there is a checklist on a student-teacher's overall conduct during TP, which CTs complete. The scores for the portfolio, the lesson delivered and overall student-teacher's conduct are combined to obtain a final grade for their TP. This final grade is sent, following due procedure, to the student-teacher's training college for inclusion on their transcript.

Overall, TP is designed to give STs the opportunity to acquire practical professional knowledge in real classrooms under the mentorship of CTs. These CTs are appointed by pedagogic inspectorates, typically based on their years of service or demonstrated instructional effectiveness, as evidenced by previous in-class observation reports from PIs who conduct regular school visits and identify proficient teachers. Prior to the start of TP, principals of host schools receive letters with the names of appointed CTs and their assigned STs as well as the start and end dates of TP. These letters fail to explain how TP mentoring should be conducted. In rare cases, PIs organise a one-day seminar for STs, CTs and TTCs supervisors, focusing mainly on organisational procedures, which leaves CTs and STs inadequately prepared for TP mentoring.

Literature Review
TP Mentoring Rationale
TP is increasingly becoming school-based (Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021) as a result of the recognition of the value of workplace learning (Parker et al., 2021). The assumption underlying school-based TP is that STs learn best by observing experienced teachers in action; hence the pairing of STs with experienced teachers, referred to as CTs. The latter are expected to guide and support the former, hence the term mentoring.

The term mentoring originated from Greek mythology and was initially used to designate the relationship where a senior and more knowledgeable person acted as an adviser, a guide or role model to a less experienced person (Ellis et al, 2020). Over time, perceptions of mentoring evolved, reflecting its diverse applications across different contexts (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2019). While in some contexts mentoring is associated with supervision, in other contexts it is viewed as a developmental

partnership. The varied interpretations of mentoring show that there is no single definition of mentoring (Ambrosetti, 2010) as the practice is grounded in a variety of approaches enacted differently in diverse contexts (Dominguez & Hager, 2013).

The trend towards school-based TP has contributed to the popular use of the term mentoring to signify the pairing of STs with experienced teachers (Lai, 2006) – the latter guiding and supporting the former to enhance their instructional skills and professional growth. The literature on TP mentoring emphasises the indispensable role that mentoring plays in the preparation of qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Ellis et al., 2020). In fact, Du Plessis et al. (2010) contend that "if practice teaching is the most single powerful intervention in teachers' professional preparation, then mentoring is the single most powerful process of such intervention" (p.328). Many studies (e.g., Daly & Milton, 2017; Tanjung et al., 2021) highlight the benefits of TP mentoring for both CTs and STs. However, for these benefits to fully materialise, attention needs to be paid to how mentoring is conceptualised and negotiated.

Conceptual Bases of TP Mentoring

The literature on TP mentoring provides three major theoretical bases underlying pre-service mentoring programmes. The first assumption is that TP mentoring is grounded in apprenticeship (Wang & Odell, 2007). From this perspective, STs learn to teach by observing experienced teachers and practising under their guidance. Mentoring is viewed as a "process of skill acquisition" with CTs passing on a "bag of tricks" to STs (Lai, 2006, p.108). Within this paradigm, CTs' expertise, technical support and guidance are central in helping STs to develop professional knowledge. The understanding here is that TP mentoring focuses on how teaching is planned and carried out (rarely on why it is performed in a certain way) with STs deducing features of good teaching from what they see CTs doing. This could lead to "acclimatisation of prevailing routines" (Franke & Dahlgren, 1996, p.639).

TP mentoring is also grounded in humanistic theory (Wang & Odell, 2007). As such, showing empathy, valuing STs' identities and helping them to develop self-esteem are central. Viewed from this perspective, CTs' role is to provide emotional and psychological support to help STs to deal with the stress resulting from the demands of TP (Izadinia, 2015). A shortcoming of this view is that by focusing mainly on interpersonal relationships, CTs leave the object of TP, which is learning to teach, to chance (Wang & Odell, 2007).

The third theoretical base of TP mentoring is the constructivist perspective (Wang & Odell, 2007), which reflects a collaborative mentoring style. The assumption here is

that STs learn by critically reflecting on the how and why of their teaching in order to deepen their understanding of the teaching-learning process. From this perspective, CTs and STs work as co-inquirers to deconstruct and reconstruct teaching practices via collaborative reflections (Aderibigbe et al., 2014). However, Wang and Odell (2007) note that the reflective model is far-fetched because, in reality, STs most likely want CTs to offer emotional, psychological and technical support.

While these theoretical perspectives provide foundational insights into the understanding of TP mentoring, none fully captures the complexity of the mentoring process (Wang & Odell, 2007). Each theory offers distinct perspectives which, when integrated, present a more holistic approach to TP mentoring – one that enables STs to acquire practical skills through guided experience, engage in personal development and actively construct knowledge, ultimately leading to a deeper and more lasting learning experience.

The following section reviews studies that have explored perceptions of mentoring taking into consideration these theoretical premises.

Research on perceptions of TP mentoring
CTs and STs get into mentoring with different beliefs and perceptions which give rise to complex dynamics that potentially influence mentoring relationships. Franke and Dahlgren (1996) explain that:

> Mentoring, as it is carried out, is very much determined by how it is conceived of in general, and that behind mentors' and student-teachers' specific statements and actions there are different conceptions which, if they are described, could contribute to an understanding of why mentoring during the practical part of teacher training takes the form it does (p.629).

Consequently, exploring how CTs and STs perceive mentoring and enact it, in practice, could provide useful insights for TP mentoring. Few studies have been conducted in this light.

Perhaps the oldest study on perceptions of TP mentoring is that carried out by Franke and Dahlgren (1996), who described mentoring as conceived of by a group of twenty CTs and STs using phenomenographic research approach. Findings revealed differing cognitions and applicability of the theoretical perspectives discussed above. While some participants reported subordination to CTs' expertise, which is in line with apprenticeship postulations, others reported more reflective orientations, embedded in constructivism.

Zanting et al. (2001) investigated thirty STs' beliefs about mentoring and learning to teach. Contrary to the findings in Franke and Dahlgren's (1996) study, findings from this study revealed that no student-teacher expected CTs to transfer knowledge to them; a third of the STs conceived learning to teach as critically reflecting on their lessons, which resonates with the constructivist conception. Also, all the STs expected CTs to be supportive, which echoed humanistic postulations.

In a study on the attitudes and practices of successful New Zealand associate teachers, McDonald (2004) found out that STs' perceptions of mentoring mirrored humanistic and apprenticeship models. STS viewed mentoring as an opportunity for their mentors to identify their learning needs and support them in achieving their goals, while also modelling effective teaching practices. In contrast, associate teachers' perceptions aligned more closely with constructivist principles, as they aimed to provide STs with opportunities to critically reflect on their own teaching practices.

Lai (2006) investigated perceptions of TP mentoring held by ten trainee-teachers in a distance postgraduate diploma in education programme in Hong Kong and found out that their initial views of ideal mentoring differed from their actual field experiences. An interesting insight from this study is that STs' pre-teaching practice perceptions reflected constructivist underpinnings, as they expected CTs to engage them in reflective activities. However, their field experiences reflected more humanistic and apprenticeship models, as CTs acted more as advisors and instructors.

Kourieos (2012) conducted an inquiry into pre-service teachers' experiences and expectations of their mentors during practicum in Cyprus. Similar to the findings in Lai's (2006) study, the research revealed that although pre-service teachers perceived practicum as an opportunity to experience authentic teaching by being granted a reasonable degree of autonomy over what and how to teach, their field experiences were rather characterised by prescriptive practices dictated by TP supervisors, reflecting "traditional knowledge-transmission model of teacher learning which treats STs as passive receivers of knowledge rather than active sense makers" (Kourieos, 2012, p.60).

Mackie (2018) investigated the mentoring perceptions of six CTs and their STs using an instrumental collective case study research design. Findings indicated that participants perceived mentoring as a multidimensional process involving both personal (humanistic) and professional (apprenticeship and constructivist) dimensions. An interesting insight from this study is how the perceptions overlap.

Similarly, in a recent qualitative phenomenological study examining mentors' perspectives of mentoring practices for new teachers, Smith-Norman (2023) found that participants perceived TP mentoring as nurturing an environment of trust through attentiveness to teacher-mentees' needs and the provision of supportive guidance – reflecting humanistic principles. Mentors also emphasised the importance of providing guidance on instructional strategies and classroom management techniques, aligning with the apprenticeship model, as well as promoting professional growth through self-reflection, consistent with constructivism. These findings, just like Mackie's (2018), support Kemmis et al.'s (2014) assertion that multiple perceptions of mentoring are experienced "even within single jurisdictions" (p.163).

A review of the literature on TP mentoring shows that the bulk of studies have focused primarily on the roles, practices and qualities of CTs. While there is some research on perceptions of TP mentoring, most studies (e.g., Kourieos, 2012; McDonald, 2004; Smith-Norman, 2023) have examined these perceptions in relation to the mentoring practices adopted by CTs within specific contexts. Perhaps more attention needs to be paid to the meanings CTs and STs in diverse settings attribute to "mentoring", as this could enhance understanding of the complex dynamics of TP mentoring in different contexts. This study addresses this research need by investigating perceptions of TP mentoring in the Cameroonian context and thus enriches the sparse research on TP mentoring perceptions.

Research Questions
This study was guided by the following research questions (RQs):
RQ$_1$: What are CTs' and STs' perceptions of TP mentoring in Cameroon?
    RQ$_{1.1}$: How do CTs perceive TP mentoring?
    RQ$_{1.2}$: How do STs perceive TP mentoring?
RQ$_2$: How do CTs' and STs' perceptions of TP mentoring reflect distribution of roles?
RQ$_3$: Do CTs' and STs' perceptions align or diverge?

Understanding how CTs and STs perceive TP mentoring provides valuable insights into the effectiveness and/or challenges of mentoring relationships as well as areas for improvement, enabling institutions to design TP mentoring programs that align with participants' needs and expectations. In the specific context of Cameroon, this investigation would help uncover power dynamics and mismatched expectations, providing evidence-based insights for improving institutional practices and enhancing the quality of TP mentoring.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study adopted a qualitative approach because it aimed at exploring participants' perceptions of a given practice, in this case TP mentoring, rather than providing statistical data. Consequently, non-numerical data was collected and analysed in an interpretative manner to understand how CTs and STs viewed TP mentoring. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain, a qualitative approach is suitable when exploring "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds" (p.24).

Research Participants

RQs for this study were explored within the context of TP mentoring in Cameroon, which is school-based. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants, targeting essentially those involved in TP mentoring. Participants for this study were CTs and STs in four mentoring dyads (a total of eight participants), involved in the 2023 TP mentoring work in four different schools in two cities in Cameroon. The limitation to eight participants was enough to achieve data saturation while allowing for detailed analysis.

The study accounted for variability in CTs' and STs' experience, gender, school and city, enhancing the study's ability to draw transferable conclusions. STs were voluntarily recruited (alongside their CTs – four pairs in total) from three different TTCs in two cities in Cameroon. All four CTs were teachers of English in different public secondary schools in two cities in Cameroon with varying levels of experience. By incorporating relatively new and experienced CTs, the study aimed to capture a broad spectrum of mentoring perspectives, assuming experience might influence mentoring practices.

Table 1

Cooperating Teachers' Profile

Cooperating Teachers	Teaching Experience	Mentoring Experience	Approximate Number of Student—Teachers Mentored to Date
CT1	23 years	16 years	80+
CT2	17 years	09 years	25+
CT3	12 years	03 years	05
CT4	09 years	02 years	03

All four STs had no prior teaching experience. However, they had spent a year and a half (Bachelor holders) or two and a half years (GCE Advanced Level holder) at their respective TTCs acquiring theoretical knowledge prior to TP.

Table 2

Student-Teachers' Profile

Student-Teachers	Qualifications	Specialisations
ST1	Bachelor of Arts	Bilingual Letters – English and French
ST2	Bachelor of Arts	Bilingual Letters – English and French
ST3	Bachelor of Arts	English Modern Letters
ST4	GCE Advanced Level	English Modern Letters

Data Collection

Data was collected through individual audio-recorded semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. Semi-structured interviews were adopted as a data collection method because they enable researchers to gain in-depth data as respondents voice their thoughts (Dörnyei, 2007).

Two sets of interview guides were developed – one for CTs and another for STs. The guides, designed based on relevant mentoring literature and the research questions guiding the study, were mainly made up of open-ended questions to give participants the opportunity to develop their responses, enriching the data. For CTs, questions focused mainly on how they define/describe TP mentoring, factors that accounted for less or more successful TP mentoring and their expectations of STs during TP mentoring. For STs, questions focused on definitions of TP mentoring, descriptions of their TP mentoring experiences and factors that accounted for positive or negative TP mentoring experiences.

Ethical issues such as voluntary participation, anonymity and permission to withdraw from the study were fully considered during the recruitment of participants and data collection.

Data Analysis

An intelligent verbatim transcription of interviews was made as the focus was the content of the interactions; not the form. Consequently, elements such as pauses, repetitions and stutters were omitted. However, in reporting findings, some information was added in square brackets, where necessary, to clarify who or what interviewees were referring to. Codes were assigned to participants for identification purpose – CT1, CT2, CT3, CT4 (for CTs) and ST1, ST2, ST3, ST4 (for STs). The transcripts were analysed manually following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework to allow for identification and reporting of patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using an inductive approach to generate themes. The researcher read the transcripts multiple times and proceeded from pre-coding to open coding (dropping less prevalent codes after cross-case analysis for each category – STs and CTs), then moved to axial coding, which involved grouping open

codes into clusters (see figures 1 and 2 below for samples of analysis). Finally, themes were generated by combining groups of axial codes to form broader meaningful statements as shown in the thematic maps presented in the findings.

Figure 1

Sample Open Coded Transcript

Sample of open coded transcript

Transcript code   *R= Researcher*   *CT4 = Cooperating teacher 4*

R: Thank you so much for accepting to take part in this interview. My first question is: How many student-teachers have you, did you mentor this year?

CT4: One

R: And how many have you mentored so far in your career as a cooperating teacher?

CT4: Three

R: When did you start mentoring?

CT4: Hmmm! 2021? Yeah!

R: Great! So you've got some experience. We are happy to learn from your experience. I'd like to begin by asking you how you perceive teaching practice mentoring. What does it mean to you?

CT4: Well, to me it is a learning process. It is the transfer of knowledge. It is the transfer of methods or teaching techniques from a mentor to a mentee. That's the way I see teaching practice.

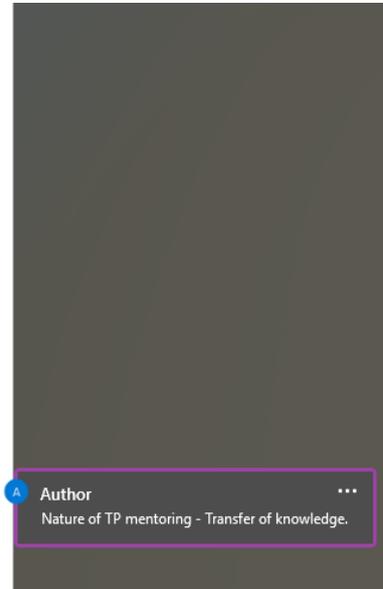**R**: Ok! You talked about the transfer of knowledge from mentor to mentee and I'm wondering if

Author   ...
Nature of TP mentoring - Transfer of knowledge.

Figure 2

Samples of Open and Axial Codes Derived from the Data

Samples of open codes derived from interviews with cooperating teachers

Sample phrases from data	Open codes
To me, it is a learning process.	Learning process
It's a transfer of methods or teaching techniques from a mentor to a mentee.	Transfer of methodology
The mentor is the main person to dish out, to give out knowledge or to give student-teachers directives.	Mentor directs
The trainer has a cardinal role to play in terms of directing.	Mentor's cardinal role
They come in like a blank sheet that you just fill-in.	Mentor imparts knowledge
Process involves the trainer and the trainee working together to build the skills and competences of the novice teacher.	Work together

Samples of axial codes derived from open codes - cooperating teachers' interviews

| Open codes	Axial codes
Transfer of methodology Mentor directs Mentor's cardinal role Mentor imparts knowledge	Mentor imparts
Guide trainee Guidance Support/help trainee	Mentor offers support/guidance
Learning process Work together Harmony/collaboration Give and take process	Parties work together
Availability Assiduity Passion Commitment Collaboration Respect	Positive attributes: assiduity, commitment, respect

Findings

The key findings that emerged from the data analysis are presented in three sections: first, CTs' perceptions, then STs' perceptions and finally constructions of roles within the mentoring relationship as echoed in particpants' accounts. Each section begins

with a thematic map developed by exploring possible relationships between categories to show how themes were generated.

Cooperating Teachers' Perceptions of TP Mentoring
Figure 3
Thematic Map of Cooperating Teachers' Perceptions of TP Mentoring
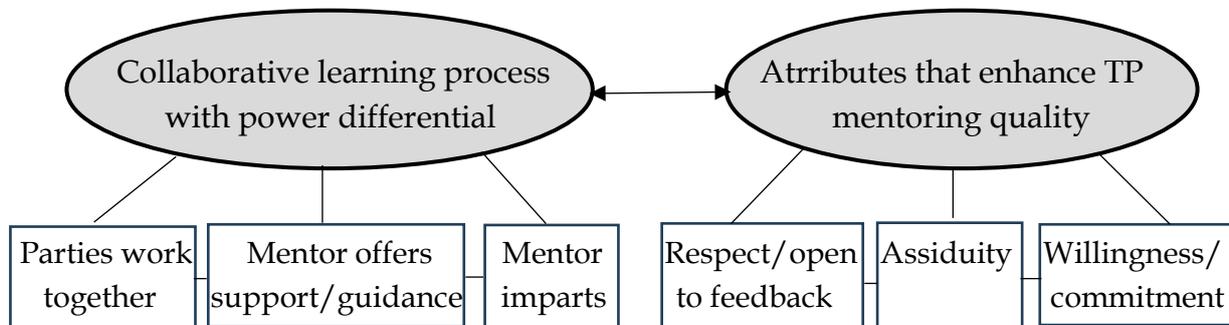
A collaborative learning process with power differential
All four CTs explained that they perceive TP mentoring as a relationship involving CTs and STs working together using different expressions: For CT1, it "involves trainer [cooperating teacher] and trainee [student-teacher] working together to build the skills and competences of the novice teacher", who "gets an opportunity to be guided; not to be indoctrinated … or spoon-fed" (CT3). CT2 noted that TP mentoring entails offering support as CTs "are there to guide and help trainees [STs] through the necessary steps to evolve for the rest of their career". For CT3, it is a "collaborative venture wherein mentor and mentee work together to foster the growth of the mentee". This is why CTs "always stimulate STs to reflect on their practice during post-teaching conferences instead of just telling them what they should or shouldn't do". The use of expressions such as "work together", which appeared repetitively in CTs' data, "collaborative venture" and the need "not to indoctrinate or spoon feed" connote CTs' desire to co-construct knowledge with STs through joint reflection "instead of just having STs following [them] as if CTs are demi-gods, who know everything about teaching" (CT3).

However, CTs' descriptions of how STs should be learning contrast their descriptions of how both parties should relate. Although STs should "actively participate" and "work together" with CTs, they should do so "under the direction of CTs" (CT2) – a view which shows that power relations are top-down. Asymmetrical power relations in TP mentoring were captured in various expressions used by CTs. CT4 stated that TP mentoring entails the "transfer of methodology, transfer of teaching techniques from the mentor to the mentee" and "CTs have a cardinal role to play in terms of directing" (CT1) the learning process as they "dish-out knowledge or give directives"

to STs (CT1) who "come in like a blank sheet that you [cooperating teacher] just fill-in" (CT2). This hierarchical positioning, perhaps, explains why "STs did not really engage in professional conversations and felt more comfortable learning by imitating or being told what to do" (CT3); hence falling short of the expectation to be co-constructors of knowledge on how to teach.

Attributes that enhance TP mentoring quality
CTs outlined factors that enhance the quality of TP mentoring relationships. These factors, presented as desirable attributes which STs must portray for TP mentoring to be successful, included STs' openness to feedback, assiduity, willingness and commitment to learn.

All CTs identified *respect and openness to feedback* as important qualities. CT3 explained that for STs to successfully "dig from the trainers' well of experience", they "should be respectful and accept corrections with a smile" (CT2). CT1 talked of "being humble, being able to listen, accept corrections" while CT4 talked of "having a teachable spirit".

Also, STs need to be *willing to learn and committed to the process*. Demonstrating passion to learn was emphasised by all four CTs. While recounting an anecdote of a successful mentoring relationship she had with a student-teacher, CT4 highlighted the fact that the student-teacher's passion was determinant in making the relationship successful:

> The student-teacher wanting to learn has this passion. I remember this particular student-teacher, the one I said I admired a lot. She will call me on phone and say, madam, which lesson am I supposed to prepare in two weeks? I mean, when we are in Week 1. She wants to prepare ahead. You see that zeal in her, that willingness to learn, the willingness to do what she knows she's supposed to do.

However, CTs noted with dismay that for most STs, TP is "a mere formality" (CT1); "they just want to have a pass mark since it is compulsory; they are doing it for formality" (CT4); "they just want to wind time, finish their training and go" (CT3). Consequently, they are not committed to the process. CT1 cited the case of her most recent student-teacher mentee who "didn't want to work. She just came and was just monitoring. She would lazy around and at the end of the day, she would go. It took an inspector's visit to make her [to] sit up".

In addition to being respectful, open to feedback and demonstrating passion, CTs explained that STs must also be *assiduous* for a successful "transfer of methods or

teaching techniques" (CT4). However, they noted with regret that because some STs consider TP as "mere formality", they are not usually assiduous. "They come to school when they want" (CT1); "they are not really assiduous, they are not even punctual, and they will never tell you when they are coming or not coming" (CT3). CT3 mentioned that at times, CTs have to "run behind STs and that discourages many trainers".

Student-teachers' perceptions of TP mentoring
Figure 4
Thematic Map of Student-Teachers' Perceptions of TP Mentoring
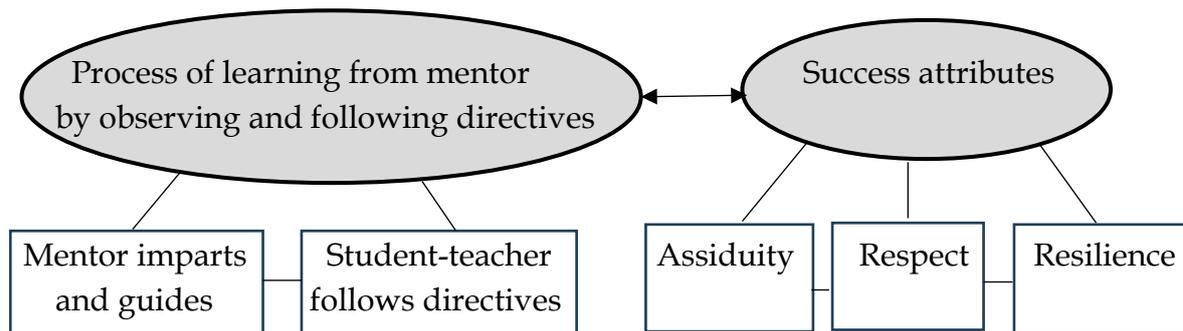
A process of learning from mentor by observing and following directives
STs expressed their beliefs about TP mentoring and the attributes required for them to sail through the process successfully. For all four STs, TP mentoring entails learning by observing, imitating and following CTs' directives. ST1 said:

> I perceive TP mentoring as a process where a cooperating teacher guides and monitors a student-teacher through observation and practice. So, it entails that the mentee should first observe his mentor doing and then put into practice.

In expressing their perceptions of TP mentoring, STs laid emphasis on the roles of CTs who, according to them, are at the centre of the process as they "educate" (ST4) and "provide support" (ST2). ST4 explained that:

> TP mentoring entails the pairing of student-teachers with experienced teachers who educate them on procedures, teaching methods, and provide resources that can help them to become effective teachers.

While CTs "provide personal and professional support to guide the growth of the new teacher" (ST2), STs simply "listen to everything CTs tell them to do" (ST1). ST4 commented that if STs fail to follow directives, they risk leaving TP without having learnt anything:

> If the cooperating teacher gives you instructions and you don't follow, it will make the whole practicum session a waste of time because at the end of the day you will not be able to acquire the skills you were supposed to acquire.

Overall, STs' perceptions revealed a strong inclination toward a directive learning model, positioning CTs as authoritative guides who impart knowledge, model effective teaching, and provide personal and professional support. STs' perceptions are closely aligned with traditional, apprenticeship-based mentoring, characterised by hierarchical, mentor-driven learning in which mentees' success depends heavily on receptiveness and compliance with mentors' direction. This contrasts with dialogic mentoring theories that emphasise co-constructed learning.

Success attributes

ST4 explained that for TP mentoring to be successful, "student-teachers have to demonstrate some positive attributes". All four STs pointed out respect, openness to feedback, assiduity and resilience as necessary qualities STs must demonstrate in order to make the mentoring relationship a success. While describing her TP mentoring experience, ST2 said:

> The role I played in making it a success was mostly being respectful. I understand that I have a lot to learn from this person. Even if they correct my mistakes, I try to understand that I'm here to learn. So, I just sit quiet, accept my mistakes and try to learn from what they tell me.

ST3 noted that *respect* is imperative because CTs are "role models" for STs. Consequently, "anything that the trainer says, you [student-teacher] have to listen first before you give your own suggestions; you have to be respectful" (ST3) and "listen more than you talk" (ST2). ST1 asserted that STs need to respect CTs because the latter "know more" while STs are "still learning".

STs identified *resilience* as another important quality that STs need to demonstrate. ST2 emphasised that "student-teachers have to be patient to learn anything new" and keep "trying until they get it right". ST3 explained that patience is very important in TP mentoring because "some CTs are actually tough; some CTs are not cooperative at all".

Besides being respectful and resilient, STs reported that they needed to be *assiduous* in order to benefit from the mentoring process. ST2 advised against being absent: "Be present no matter what and avoid having unjustified absences. Even if the absences are justified, reduce the absences as much as possible". All four STs noted that CTs

required them to be assiduous and were unhappy with those who were not assiduous. This concurs with CTs' views who also identified assiduity as a determinant factor in TP mentoring relationships.

Construction of TP mentoring roles
Figure 5
Thematic Map of Constructed Teaching Practice Mentoring Roles
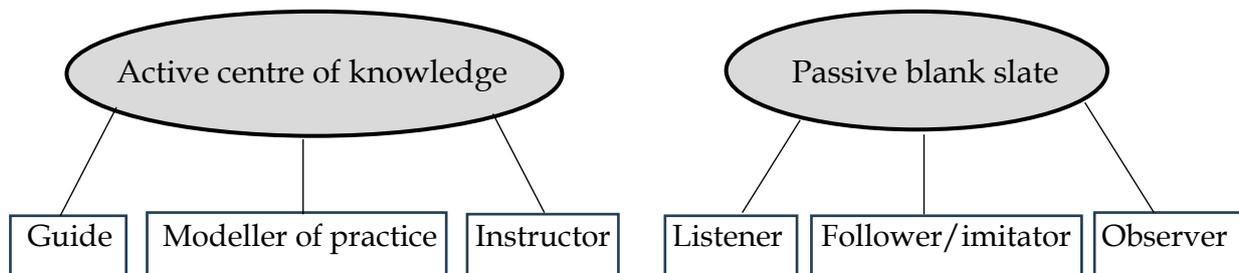
Participants' conceptions of TP mentoring revealed constructed roles for CTs and STs. Participants' beliefs of what TP mentoring is connoted proactive roles for CTs and reactive roles for STs.

Both CTs and STs perceived CTs as *active centres of knowledge* who deserve to be respected "because they know more" (ST1) and have a "well of experience" (CT3). Consequently, they can "transfer teaching techniques" (CT4) and "dish-out knowledge or give directives" to STs (CT1). This privileged position, which CTs enjoy, endows them with the responsibilities of serving as guides, instructors and modellers of practice.

As *guides*, CTs "provide personal or professional support to guide the growth of the new teacher" (ST2). CT2 explained that CTs "guide and help the trainees" during TP.

Besides "guiding and monitoring the student-teacher" (ST1), CTs are perceived as *instructors* who "educate" (ST4) by virtue of their "well of experience" (CT2), "dish out knowledge, give directives" (CT1) and "instructions" (ST4) to STs who "must follow" and "accept corrections with a smile [perhaps without questioning]" (CT2). CT4 clearly states that "CTs have a cardinal role to play in terms of directing" the TP process.

In addition to instructing and directing, CTs are perceived as *modellers of practice*, who are able to "transfer methods or teaching techniques" (CT4) and whom STs should "copy" (ST4), "observe and imitate" (ST1). For ST3, CTs are simply "role models".

Contrary to the proactive roles assigned to CTs, STs are perceived to assume more reactive roles. Both STs and CTs perceived STs as passive blank slates who get into TP mentoring "like a blank sheet that you [cooperating teacher] just fill-in" (CT2). Consequently, STs should "simply listen" (ST1), "be humble, accept corrections" (CT2) and "have a teachable spirit" (CT4). This seemingly disadvantaged position makes STs mere listeners, followers and observers.

Participants' perceptions indicated that STs should be more of *listeners* during TP mentoring. ST2 said they should "listen more than talk" and "accept corrections" (CT1). ST2 explained that because STs are on TP "to learn", they should "just sit quiet and listen to everything CTs tell them to do".

As good listeners, STs should also be *followers and imitators*. Because STs "get the opportunity to be guided" (CT3), they should "follow directives" (ST4) and "do only what CTs tell [them] to do and not otherwise" (ST4).

In order to be good followers and imitators, STs will need to first be good *observers*. They need to "first observe" CTs in action and "then put into practice" (ST1) what they have learnt from the latter. As observers, STs "learn from and copy CTs' teaching techniques" (ST2).

Discussion

In line with the RQs in 2.4 above, this section discusses CTs' and STs' perceptions of TP mentoring (5.1) in relation to previous studies, highlights how these perceptions connote distribution of roles in TP mentoring in Cameroon (5.2) and examines alignment/misalignment of the perceptions (5.3) in a bid to uncover power dynamics and mismatched expectations.

Cooperating Teachers' and Student-Teachers' Perceptions of TP Mentoring

At surface level, findings from this study suggested that CTs perceived TP mentoring both as a "collaborative" learning process and a hierarchical relationship. However, a critical discourse analysis of the data revealed that STs were perceived as needing to cooperate; not really collaborate per se. Collaboration means working in a partnership to co-create; not someone doing something at the direction of another. Although CTs expressed willingness to work together with STs, they felt that the latter had to do so in line with their directives – a view which echoed more of cooperation in being led than actual collaboration. An interesting insight in this study is the fact that CTs were aware (even if they failed to apply this) of the need to adopt a collaborative approach to mentoring, which is consistent with recent definitions (e.g., Ellis et al., 2020; Le Cornu, 2010) that associate mentoring with collegiality. By refuting

that CTs hold absolute knowledge about teaching, CTs indicated their openness to learn from STs. The fact that they also gave STs the opportunity to reflect on their lessons during post-observation conferences, even if the latter did not take full advantage of these as they felt more comfortable just listening to CTs critique their lessons, shows that CTs were willing to co-construct knowledge with STs, guide and support them – a view that echoed both constructivist (Aderibigbe et al., 2014) and humanistic (Wang & Odell, 2007) postulations in the literature.

On the other hand, descriptions of CTs' roles suggested asymmetrical power relations. CTs viewed themselves as central to the process in terms of directing, dishing-out knowledge or giving directives to STs whom they compare to blank sheets. These descriptions are consistent with traditional definitions of mentoring as a "relationship where one person invests time, know-how and effort in enhancing another person's growth, knowledge and skills" (Shea, 1999, p.3). The descriptions also reflect the apprenticeship postulation (Wang & Odell, 2007) that STs learn best by observing experienced teachers who pass on a "bag of tricks" to them (Lai, 2006, p.108); hence the emphasis on CTs' expertise.

Like CTs, STs perceived TP mentoring as a process of learning through observation, imitation and adherence to directives. They regarded observing, copying CTs' teaching techniques and replicating these, and following CTs' instructions are essential steps in acquiring knowledge about teaching. These findings are consistent with the assumption in the literature that mentoring is grounded in apprenticeship (Maynard & Furlong, 2014; Wang & Odell, 2007). As predicted by the literature (e.g., Franke & Dahlgren, 1996; Lai, 2006; Mkhomi et al., 2025), the STs in this study considered CTs' expertise and technical support as central in helping them to develop professional knowledge. While they recognised the value of emotional and psychological support in line with previous studies (e.g., Izadinia, 2015; Zanting et al., 2001), their limited emphasis on initiative and critical engagement suggests a divergence from progressive theories that view mentees as active agents of their professional development. Perhaps their alignment with more traditional views reflects institutional expectations or cultural norms surrounding authority and learning.

Quite interesting, in this study, are the multiple views in CTs' perceptions of TP mentoring as a cooperative venture with a seeming touch of collaboration, on the one hand, and a reflection of leadership and followership dynamics, on the other hand. This dual view of TP mentoring is consistent with previous findings that "mentoring as supervision co-exists with mentoring as support and with weak forms of mentoring as collaborative self-development" (Kemmis et al., 2014, p.163) and that mentoring

may be experienced or enacted in multiple forms within a single jurisdiction and even by the same persons (Ibid.). As indicated by this study's data, STs' personal attributes impact the nature of the mentoring relationship as CTs are likely to adopt a more collaborative/constructivist approach with a student-teacher who is proactive, willing to learn and committed to the TP mentoring process, and a more directive approach with a student-teacher who is reactive and just waiting to be indoctrinated or spoon-fed – a finding also reported by Merket (2022).

Distribution of Roles as Reflected in Perceptions of TP Mentoring
Findings from this study revealed that perceptions of TP mentoring give rise to dynamics that potentially shape power relations with CTs enjoying the privileged position of centres of knowledge imparting STs, who are at the receiving end.

In addition to shaping power relations, participants' perceptions of TP mentoring revealed constructed roles for CTs and STs. It seems roles are first constructed in the minds of the parties via their perceptions of TP mentoring before being enacted in practice. Participants' beliefs of what TP mentoring is connoted proactive roles for CTs and reactive roles for STs.

Accounts of CTs' and STs' perceptions of TP mentoring revealed that as a central piece of the TP mentoring puzzle, CTs have a cardinal role to play in terms of directing the TP process. By virtue of their wealth of experience, CTs were assigned the roles of guide, provider of psychosocial support, modeller of practice, instructors and assessors of STs' competencies – roles which have previously been outlined in the literature (e.g., Ambrosetti, 2010; Hall et al., 2008; Izadinia, 2015). An interesting theme emerging from the findings of this study is the extent to which respondents' perceptions of roles in TP mentoring align with the huge responsibilities assigned to CTs in previous literature (e.g., Forster et al., 2021; Hall et al., 2008; Lofthouse, 2018; Phang et al., 2020; Trevethan, 2017) and perhaps explains the interest in CTs' agency in TP mentoring.

While participants assigned proactive roles to CTs, the reverse was the case for STs. CTs' and STs' perceptions of TP mentoring revealed passive roles for STs described as blank sheets that need to be filled-in. Consequently, STs were assigned reactive roles such as listeners, followers, imitators and observers – roles consistent with findings of the scoping review previously presented by Ambrosetti and Dekkers (2010), which underscore STs' passive engagement and dependence on CTs, as also reported by Mkhomi et al. (2025). Perhaps, the rather unimportant roles assigned to STs in this study explain why little attention has been paid to STs' agency in the literature.

Alignment/Misalignment of Cooperating Teachers' and Student-Teachers' Perceptions of TP Mentoring

Perceptions of TP mentoring were deduced by looking at the meaning participants assigned to mentoring, on the one hand, and descriptions of how STs acquire knowledge about teaching, on the other hand.

Findings from this study revealed alignment of perceptions in terms of asymmetrical power relations and desirable STs' attributes. In relaying their perceptions, CTs and STs laid emphasis on the role of CTs, whom they acknowledged have a cardinal role to play in guiding, directing, educating and giving directives. These descriptions suggest that CTs are at the giving end, dishing out knowledge, while STs are at the receiving end – listening to everything CTs tell them and doing only what they are told. This finding corroborates previous findings in the literature (e.g., Mena et al., 2017) that although recent definitions of mentoring emphasise collaboration, TP mentoring remains directive in practice as a result of the hierarchical privileging of CTs' experience (Clarke et al., 2014).

Also, CTs and STs identified attributes that can enhance mentoring relationships such as assiduity, commitment to learn, openness to feedback, respect and resilience, in keeping with the literature that personal attributes contribute to relationship building (Pianta et al., 2012), which is "crucial to the success of mentoring" (Galamay-Cachola et al., 2018, p.9). These attributes have been identified in previous research (e.g., Hudson, 2013; van Ginkel et al., 2018) as having the potential to "upturn negative mentoring experiences" (Hudson, 2013, p.116). Linked to this and consistent with Hagenauer et al. (2023), respondents emphasised that the quality of the relationship between CTs and STs is crucial to a successful mentoring experience, a reason why STs should display positive attributes and develop strong bonds with CTs.

Contrary to previous research suggesting that negative mentoring experiences often stem from CTs' inability to align their mentoring style to STs' capacities (Mukeredzi & Manwa, 2019), an interesting finding from this study, which perhaps has not been sufficiently echoed in the literature, is that STs' personal attributes can significantly influence the quality of TP mentoring relationships. Negative mentoring experiences may also arise from STs' display of undesirable attributes such as absenteeism and lack of commitment. CTs and STs reported that some STs considered TP as a mere formality. Consequently, they were not committed to the process and sometimes CTs had to run behind them. These findings corroborate emerging views in the literature that "enactments of non-collaborative mentoring may not be due to factors peculiar to mentors alone" (Aderibigbe et al., 2018, p.66). Sad experiences of difficult mentoring relationships recounted by the CTs in this study support the view that some STs lack

the passion for teaching and become a burden to CTs (Hoben, 2021; Mkhomi et al., 2025). It is therefore important for STs to understand how personal attributes can affect mentoring relationships so that they can consciously engage in positive interactions with CTs.

Misalignment was deduced in terms of how respondents perceived STs' learning. For STs, learning to teach entailed getting CTs to point out their 'rights' or 'wrongs'. For example, they considered post-teaching conferences as sessions where they were just to be criticized or told what to do. For STs, CTs have an idea about how teaching should be done and should simply tell them. This perception is consistent with the hierarchical apprenticeship model, which frames mentoring as a one-way learning relationship, where CTs pass on a "bag of tricks" to STs (Lai, 2006, p.108).

Inversely, for CTs, the starting point of learning to teach is STs' own reflections. They acknowledged that they were not demi-gods possessing absolute knowledge about teaching and, therefore, expected to learn from STs as well. Consequently, they leveraged post-teaching conferences to co-construct knowledge by always stimulating STs to reflect on their practice. Contrary to CTs' expectations, STs did not really engage in these professional conversations, as they felt more comfortable learning through imitation or direct instruction, limiting their professional growth.

These differing perceptions are consistent with previous findings highlighting the idiosyncratic nature of mentoring arising from the different sets of beliefs CTs and STs bring into TP mentoring. Interestingly, these contrasting views of TP mentoring connote distribution of roles.

Overall, the findings of this study revealed an interesting dynamic between CTs' relatively constructivist views on how STs should learn and STs' expectations that CTs would impart knowledge to them through direct instruction and knowledge transfer. This discrepancy highlights the complexity of TP mentoring, where power relations are asymmetrical and expectations regarding learning and guidance differ between the two groups. The study also suggests that the effectiveness of TP mentoring does not depend solely on CTs' abilities but, perhaps more critically, on STs' commitment, as reflected in the desirable attributes participants identified for STs.

Conclusion and Implications

This qualitative study explored CTs' and STs' perceptions of school-based TP mentoring in Cameroon drawing on data collected via semi-structured interviews in a bid to inform efforts to improve TP mentoring practices in Cameroon, specifically with regard to how CTs and STs can better align their needs and expectations.

The focus on CTs' and STs' perceptions offers a broader understanding of TP mentoring beliefs and expectations with practical implications for mentoring preparation programmes targeting STs and CTs. The findings from this study support the notion that mentoring serves as a catalyst in STs' process of learning to teach. However, STs must pull their weight by being proactive, sharing their ideas and experimenting with new methods and ideas and not just copying and replicating CTs' approaches. Also, they need to be mindful of the attributes they display during TP as these determine the quality of the mentorship they receive as well as their overall TP experience. Structured pre-placement trainings and orientation sessions targeting STs would be helpful in creating awareness of these.

On the other hand, CTs might need to shift from their prescriptive role and adopt a more collaborative stance in order to create an enabling environment for STs to express themselves and become co-constructors of knowledge as they learn to teach. Structured professional trainings focused on feedback strategies, developmental support and reflective practice could prepare CTs for the specific pedagogical and relational demands of mentoring, strengthening the quality of mentoring and ultimately leading to a more cohesive and supportive learning environment that benefits both parties.

Although insights from this study are useful for raising awareness of aspects of TP mentoring that need to be improved on to foster positive TP experiences in Cameroon and in similar contexts, its main limitation is its scope. Perhaps future studies could investigate TP mentoring perceptions on a larger scale to allow for generalisation of findings.

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