Exploring Student-Teachers' Perceptions on the Online Mentoring of School-Based Mentors

Jasper Vincent Alontaga[1*] and Anne Marie Ramos[1]

[1] De La Salle University - Manila

*Corresponding Author: jasper.alontaga@dlsu.edu.ph

Abstract: Mentorship is an essential component of pre-service teachers for their teaching internship (practicum) and action research project in a university that was selected for this study. The global Covid -19 pandemic triggered an urgent shift of educational processes to a fully online mode. Hence, this research explored the perceptions of pre-service early childhood education teachers on the mentoring competencies of their mentor. A total of 36 respondents (N=36) enrolled during the pandemic answered the Mentoring Competency Assessment (MCA). Results on pre-service teachers' perceptions of the online mentoring competencies in terms of Assessing Understanding, Addressing Diversity, and Promoting Professional Development yielded a rating "more than skilled". While, online mentoring competencies in terms of Maintaining Effective Communication, Aligning Expectations, and Fostering Independence yielded a rating "highly skilled". Qualitative responses point to the schedule of mentors as considerations, and establishment of trusting relationships and boosting confidence between their mentors as success factors for their growth. The implications to improve online mentoring are discussed.

Key Words: teaching internship, pre-service teachers, online mentoring, mentoring competencies

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching internship is a culminating course requirement for pre-service teachers. This study was focused on the student teachers of the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education in a University located in Manila. Student teachers are required to do practice teaching in a selected preschool or early-grade classroom. Their participation in a community-based outreach project is an essential component of the teaching internship (practicum) program. Moreover, integral to the practicum program is the students' conceptualization and implementation of action research. The assigned practicum supervisor from the University usually serves as the mentor for the student teachers' action research project.

The face-to-face mode of communication is the traditional mode of communication for supervision and mentoring.

However, in the mid academic year of 2019, the global Covid-19 pandemic struck. This triggered the University to urgently shift the educational processes to a fully online mode, including, practice teaching and research. Real-time consultations were conducted via Google and Zoom meeting rooms by student teachers and mentors. While for non-real time mode of communication, the email, Google chat, Messenger, or viber text messaging were used for sending and receiving relevant information.

1.1 What is Mentoring?

Mentoring has been defined as "a nurturing process where mentoring functions are carried out within the context of an ongoing, caring relationship between the mentor and mentee." (Anderson, 1987 cited in Kerry & Mayes, 1995, p. 29, cited in Sinclair, 2003, p. 89). Furthermore, in the context of higher education,

Lev, Kolossa, & Bakken (2010) defined, "Mentoring occurs when a senior person or mentor provides information, advice, and emotional support to a junior person or student over a period of time" (p. 1 as cited in Andersen & West, 2020, p.2). Traditionally, mentoring is done in-person with an individual or a group of individuals. Notably, the advancement of online technology has created opportunities for people to engage in mentoring online. Moreso when COVID 19 pandemic struck globally, online mentoring has become a global phenomenon.

Online mentoring or e-mentoring is technology-mediated. It is a "process in which electronic media is used as the main communication channel between the mentor and the mentee." (Sadiq & Usman, 2022, p. 2273).

1.2 Mentoring Competencies

There are certain qualities and skills possessed by a mentor, such as the following: (1) being committed to the mentoring role; (2) believing in the potential of the mentee, (3) being supportive but also challenging, (4) have a willingness to share, (5) have good interpersonal and communication skills, (Daloz, 1999; Hawkey, 1998; Stanulis & Russell, 2000 in Sinclair, 2003, p. 86), (6) provide information and assistance, (7) model appropriate practice and (8) provide positive, sensitive feedback regarding mentee development and progress (Daloz, 1999; Elliott & Calderhead, 1994; Fairbankset al., 2000; Murray, 1991; Stanulis & Russell, 2000 in Sinclair, 2003, p.89). Studies reveal the benefits of online mentoring in the education setting, such as a sense of community, student motivation, flexibility, ICT provides multiple methods and modalities in mentoring, as well use of technology applications as resource supports (Usman & Sadiq, 2022). Competencies of the mentors can be assessed through a validated tool such as the Mentoring Competency Assessment (MCA) that assesses the six competencies of a mentor: 1) maintaining 2) effective communication, 3) aligning expectations, 4) assessing understanding,

fostering independence, 5) addressing diversity, and 6) promoting professional development.

1.3 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework for the study. Characteristics of effective mentoring are associated under six (6) competencies. Likewise, each competency identifies expectations and behaviours that mentors should demonstrate. Mentor-mentee interactions can be affected by the shift to online mode of communication, contributing to student-teacher perceptions of the mentoring experience.
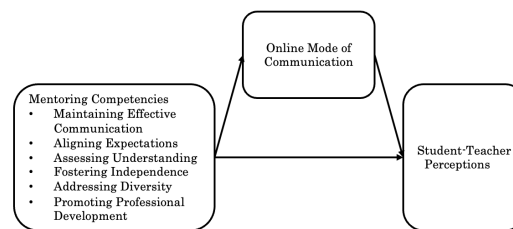

Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework for Exploring Student-Teachers' Perceptions on the Online Mentoring of School-Based Mentors

1.4 Research Questions:

The purpose of the study was to find out the perceptions of the pre-service teachers on the mentoring competencies of mentors during their practice teaching and action research project. Thus, the researchers sought to answer *what are the perceptions of pre-service teachers on the mentoring competencies of their mentor via online mode of communication?*

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This is a descriptive mixed research design that utilized the online survey in gathering the data.

2.2. Participants

The respondents who participated in the study came from different batches of pre-service teachers who were enrolled in the Bachelors of

Early Childhood Education. Thirty six pre-service teachers (N=36) who were enrolled during pandemic were mentored via online mode. The consent of the respondents was sought prior to their participation in the study.

2.3. Instrumentation

The study used the Mentoring Competency Assessment (MCA) through an online survey. They were asked to rate their mentor's mentoring competencies under the six categories using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 - "Not at all Skilled", to 4 - "Moderately Skilled", to 7 - "Extremely Skilled". The items in the instrument were adapted from Fleming et al. (2013). Open-ended questions were asked to find out their mentors' strengths and weaknesses.

2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

The Mentoring Competency Assessment (MCA) was sent out via Google Form at the end of the practicum. Quantitative data was described using mean using table 1 to interpret the results. Responses to open-ended questions were used to support the quantitative data.

Table 1. Interpretation of Scores

Min	Max	Skill Level
1.00	1.86	Not at all Skilled
1.87	2.71	Slightly Skilled
2.72	3.57	Somewhat Skilled
3.58	4.43	Moderately Skilled
4.44	5.29	More than Skilled
5.30	6.14	Highly Skilled
6.15	7.00	Extremely Skilled

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 presents the assessment of student mentees online mentoring competencies. Three categories yielded "highly skilled," namely Maintaining Effective Communication, Aligning Expectations and Fostering Independence.

Table 2. Online Mentoring Competencies

Category	Mean	Skill Level
Maintaining Effective Communication	5.60	Highly Skilled
Aligning Expectations	5.56	Highly Skilled
Assessing Understanding	5.19	More than Skilled
Fostering Independence	5.41	Highly Skilled
Addressing Diversity	5.22	More than Skilled
Promoting Professional Development	5.18	More than Skilled

Under Maintaining Effective Communication, ratings for two out of six statements were rated as "Highly Skilled," namely:

- Identifying and accommodating different communication styles
- Employing strategies to improve communication

As expressed by a respondent:

"He consistently replies to us, his mentees, whenever we have questions or clarifications within the day which really helps us work more efficiently."

"She regularly checked on us through chat and video calls."

These results are similar to Sinclair (2003) which suggests the benefit of utilizing technology for student mentoring as a support and enhancement to direct personal interaction, not as a replacement. Kang, Yoo, & Park (2012) noted that, "Online mentoring is efficient in that it facilitates communication and enhances social networks". (p. 5162).

Under Aligning Expectations, five out of six statements yielded "Highly Skilled" rating namely:

- Setting clear expectations of the mentoring relationship
- Aligning mentee's expectations with mentor's
- Considering how personal and professional differences may impact expectations
- Working to set clinical, educational or leadership goals
- Helping to develop strategies to meet clinical, educational or leadership goals

As stated by the respondents:

"There are times that we feel pressure, but I think this is really part of our training or experience as aspiring educators. We have to learn how to work under pressure. We have to accept constructive feedback."

"[she] was truly a mentor we needed for the past 2 terms. She is very capable, analytical, and never shoots down any of our ideas. She is hardworking and passionate and I will never forget the times where she truly believed in our potential as teachers and researchers."

Moreover, similar to Ersin & Atay (2021), the pre-service teachers expected their mentors to allocate more time as they mentioned the schedule of mentors as a consideration:

"Our mentor makes time for us despite his busy schedule. He would always remind me to stop overthinking and take things one at a time."

"Does not reply to some questions via Messenger before. But at the same time, this is understandable due to her busy schedule."

Under Fostering Independence, ratings for four out of five statements yielded "Highly Skilled" rating namely:

- Motivating mentee
- Building mentee's confidence
- Acknowledging mentee's professional contributions
- Negotiating a path to professional independence for mentee

Mentees cited a trusting relationship between their mentors as a success factor for their growth. This was exemplified by the respondents stating that:

"It really does help when your mentor is encouraging and that she continues to show how much faith she has in you. It also makes us feel much better when she would always ask us how we are. It shows us that she genuinely cares. We've adopted a strong bond with her, which is crucial and necessary when working with a mentor."

"He provides a lot of feedback and he would always make sure that we do our paper in a pace where we are more comfortable with. He wouldn't ask us to do a whole section of the paper immediately because he wanted to see how we weave through the information with our own writing, meaning he wants us to really own our paper and not interfere with how we actually write it, which we very much appreciated… I think the trust he had in us really had a part in making us better teachers and researchers."

On the other hand, all statements under the categories of (1) Assessing Understanding, (2) Addressing Diversity, and (3) Promoting Professional Development were rated as "More than skilled". Overall, the results suggest that pre-service teachers had a positive online mentoring experience because of how the mentors create a conducive online e-mentoring environment. Notably, "The mentor's role is to support and moderate discussions and interactions" (Butterworth et al., 2011; Griffiths & Miller, 2005; Hunter et al., 2008; Jaffer et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2013; Perlman et al., 2014; Pillon & Osmun, 2013; Schichtel, 2010 as cited inChong JY,

Ching AH, Renganathan Y, Lim WQ, Toh YP, Mason S, Krishna LKR., 2019)

4. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results, it can be concluded that online mentoring is a viable mentoring delivery mode based on the perceived positive experiences of the mentees. It promotes a sense of community and a trusting relationship between the mentor and the mentee. Also, it enables mentors to show their support to the mentee through encouragement and boosting confidence. Furthermore, online mentoring enhances communication between the mentor and mentee through the use of media applications. A nurturing environment being fostered by the mentor is important for the mentee.

As online mentoring was rated more *than highly skilled*, it is recommended to further embark a research study on e-mentoring in the undergraduate program. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of what is an effective e-mentoring in the undergraduate program. Since e-mentoring in education is a developing field, an effective online mentoring program for early childhood education undergraduate student-researchers can be created.

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