



Identity in the Making: The Relational Impact of Mentor Teachers on the Next Generation of Educators

Lindiwe Jiyane 

University of Mpumalanga, Siyabuswa Campus, Siyabuswa, Republic of South Africa

Corresponding author, email: Lindiwe.jiyane@ump.ac.za

Abstract

Mentoring is a relational process in teacher education that helps preservice teachers develop their professional identities. Nevertheless, research on the active negotiation of identity development within mentorship relationships during school-based teaching practice in South Africa is scarce. Using Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as a guide, this qualitative case study examined how mentoring influences the development of identity in teaching. Thirty participants—mentor lecturers, mentor teachers, and preservice teachers—participated in focus groups and interviews as part of the purposive sample. Thematic analysis revealed that building self-assurance, professionalism, and a sense of community necessitated collaborative lesson planning, emotional support, and ethical modeling. As a transformative method of teacher training, the study suggests identity-sensitive mentorship that incorporates educational, ethical, and emotional assistance. The paper enriches our theoretical and practical understanding of mentorship by emphasizing professional identity as a primary outcome of teaching practice, rather than a byproduct of skill acquisition. The study provides a conceptual framework for teacher education institutions seeking to align mentorship with the imperatives of transformation and professionalization. Emphasizing professional identity formation strengthens inclusive and contextually relevant mentoring practices in South African teacher education.

Keywords: Identity-sensitive mentorship, Mentor teachers, Preservice teachers, Professional identity, Reflective practice, School-based mentoring.

Introduction and Background

It is becoming increasingly acknowledged that teacher education plays a crucial role in determining the quality of educational systems worldwide. In addition to gaining pedagogical knowledge, teacher preparation involves developing a strong professional identity that empowers educators to navigate the challenges of teaching with confidence, flexibility, and a moral compass. A key component of this endeavor has been the emergence of mentoring, particularly in situations where preservice teachers move from academic study in colleges to hands-on experience in classrooms. According to Ulvik and Smith (2018), mentoring has been globally linked to the development of reflective practice, improved classroom preparedness, and professional socialization.

This study positions mentoring as a relational and socially mediated process that contributes to transforming preservice teachers from learners into reflective practitioners. In line with global discourses on inclusive and context-sensitive teacher education, the study highlights how identity formation, emotional support, and pedagogical guidance converge in South African school-based mentoring. By centring identity as an outcome of mentorship, this study aligns with recent scholarship that emphasises the need to prepare teachers who are competent in practice, resilient, ethical, and reflective in disposition (Avalos, 2022).

Key Concepts Related to the Study

Professional Identity

Professional identity refers to how teachers perceive themselves in their role,

including their values and responsibilities. It encompasses beliefs about teaching, professional values, and a sense of belonging to the profession (Beijaard et al., 2020). For preservice teachers, professional identity is fluid and still under construction, shaped through interactions with mentors, peers, and the school environment. According to Mockler (2020), teacher identity is not static but continually negotiated through relationships and contexts, making mentoring a critical space for identity development.

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice refers to the ongoing process through which preservice teachers pause to examine their teaching actions, consider their impact, and make deliberate adjustments to improve future practice. While Schön conceptualized the teacher as a “reflective practitioner,” recent scholars, such as Russell and Martin (2021), emphasize that reflection becomes more meaningful when it occurs through dialogue with a mentor rather than in isolation.

In this study, reflective practice is understood not only as an internal cognitive process but as a relational act, facilitated through mentoring conversations. For example, after teaching a lesson, a preservice teacher might discuss with a mentor what aspects of the lesson engaged learners and which did not, and together they identify strategies for improvement. This illustrates reflection as a co-constructed professional learning moment rather than a private activity.

Mentorship in Teacher Education

Mentorship in teacher education refers to the structured relationship between experienced teachers (mentors) and preservice teachers (mentees) to support professional learning and identity development. Internationally, mentorship is recognised as a key factor in teacher preparation, linked to reduced attrition and improved teacher efficacy (Hudson, 2021). In South Africa, mentorship is integrated into teaching practice programmes, although the quality and consistency of mentorship vary across schools (Mphojane, 2019). This study conceptualises mentorship as technical guidance and a holistic process involving

emotional support, ethical modelling, and pedagogical scaffolding, aligned with Vygotsky’s view of learning as socially mediated.

Research Question

The following research question guided the study:

How do mentor teachers contribute to the development of preservice teachers’ professional identity during school-based teaching practice in South Africa?

Rationale

Teacher preparation in South Africa is increasingly tasked with responding to local challenges and global educational imperatives. On the one hand, preservice teachers are expected to develop resilience, adaptability, and a sense of professionalism to address systemic challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, diverse learner needs, and unequal school resources. On the other hand, teacher education programmes are expected to align with international standards of inclusivity and reflective practice.

Mentorship offers a unique opportunity to bridge this gap by enabling preservice teachers to develop ethical, reflective, and contextually responsive technical competencies and professional identities. However, existing research in South Africa has often focused on mentorship as supervision or assessment, rather than as a relational process shaping identity (Mphojane, 2019). Therefore, this study contributes to filling this gap by conceptualizing mentorship as identity-sensitive and relational, grounded in the lived experiences of mentor and preservice teachers.

Furthermore, global debates on teacher education emphasize the importance of relational pedagogies and identity formation in producing high-quality teachers (Avalos, 2022; Gravett & Petersen, 2022). This study positions South African experiences within that global discourse, offering insights that can inform both national policy and international understandings of mentorship.

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), emphasizing that learning and development are socially mediated. Key concepts relevant to this study include:

- **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD):** The gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance from a more knowledgeable other. In this study, the ZPD is understood as the relational space where preservice teachers, with the support of mentor teachers, develop professional competencies and identities.

- **Scaffolding:** Mentor teachers provide structured support—emotional, pedagogical, and ethical—which gradually enables preservice teachers to act independently.

- **Identity as Socially Constructed:** Vygotsky's theory situates identity development within social interactions. Teacher identity is therefore not developed in isolation but through dialogues, modelling, and collaborative practices with mentors and peers (Daniels, 2020).

By applying sociocultural theory, this study foregrounds the relational dynamics of mentorship, highlighting how preservice teachers' professional identities emerge through guided participation in authentic teaching practices.

Literature review

International Perspectives

Mentorship is portrayed by academics worldwide as a reflective and dialogic process that facilitates the development of teacher identity (Ulvik & Smith, 2018; Avalos, 2022). However, these arguments frequently assume that mentors have the time and emotional resources necessary to foster the development of a professional identity. This presumption may mask the fact that mentorship is often policy-mandated but poorly executed, carried out through checklists rather than fruitful professional discussion.

Hudson's (2021) five-dimensional model incorporates relational and emotional elements, extending mentorship beyond technical advice. Despite having a wealth of theoretical

underpinnings, this model is primarily based on well-resourced educational systems and does not adequately capture the realities of mentoring in more demanding settings, where mentors operate within strict accountability frameworks. In addition to highlighting the importance of trust, Fransson's (2020) focus on safe spaces for reflection raises an important question: Is it possible for actual reflective practice to occur in hierarchical mentoring relationships where the mentor also serves as an evaluator? This highlights a conflict that is quite pertinent to the South African context: the conflict between mentoring for surveillance and mentoring for progress.

African Perspectives

Mentoring is commonly characterized in the African setting in terms of systemic limitations, including overcrowded classrooms and a lack of institutional support (Akyeampong, 2020). Although it is impossible to overlook these facts, this framing runs the risk of presenting African mentorship systems via a deficit perspective. However, research such as that conducted by Ngatia, Wambugu, and Changeiywo (2021) demonstrates that when reflective discussion is purposefully incorporated into class preparation and practice, meaningful mentorship still occurs. This implies that the quality of mentoring is determined by relational intentionality rather than just the availability of resources.

One important finding from African scholarship is that mentoring needs to be context-responsive, considering both socioemotional and pedagogical factors. In these contexts, developing one's identity involves more than just assuming a professional position; it also entails navigating a sense of belonging in intricate educational ecologies characterized by institutional hierarchy, cultural norms, and inequity. This place serves as a mentoring space for identity negotiation and adaptation, rather than just a support system.

South African Perspectives

Although mentorship during teaching practice placements is widely acknowledged in South Africa, its implementation varies. Instead of having identity-forming talks with preservice teachers, many mentors perform administrative

tasks, such as signing paperwork and monitoring lesson conformity, according to Mphojane (2019). This implies that, rather than being transformative, mentoring is frequently perceived as compliance-driven.

According to Gravett and Petersen (2022) and Gravett (2025), mentoring should prioritize relational involvement, ethical role-modeling, and reflective practice. Their work challenges the performative nature of contemporary mentoring techniques and advocates for a mentorship pedagogy grounded in mutual respect and collaborative creation of one's professional identity. Frameworks have a significant impact on how identities are formed. This picture is further complicated by Zireva's (2020) observations regarding unequal school environments. Preservice teachers internalize resilience, improvisation, and survival techniques in mentorship in under-resourced schools. These are qualities that are not often acknowledged in formal mentoring frameworks but are crucial for identity construction.

A crucial conflict is thus evident in South African literature: the realities of mentorship necessitate relational and contextual sensitivity, while mentorship rules emphasize structure. A more sophisticated mentoring approach is warranted, acknowledging that this disparity necessitates a technical and identity-forming process embedded in broader structural injustices.

International, African, and South African studies agree that mentorship is most effective when it is relational, reflective, and identity-sensitive. While international studies highlight structured models and relational trust, African and South African perspectives underscore the importance of contextual responsiveness, adaptability, and ethical modelling. This synthesis positions the current study as a contribution that bridges global discourses with local realities, advocating for mentorship that supports the holistic development of preservice teachers' identities.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate how mentor teachers

contribute to the professional identity formation of preservice teachers during school-based teaching practices. A case study was appropriate because it allowed for a deep exploration of complex social interactions within authentic educational settings. As Maree (2020) explains, case studies enable researchers to investigate phenomena in their real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are unclear. The exploratory nature of this research further enabled the uncovering of emerging insights that may not have been anticipated, especially since professional identity is relational and constantly negotiated. Given the emphasis on lived experiences and meaning-making, qualitative inquiry was deemed the most suitable approach for this study.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were employed to collect data, capturing diverse perspectives on professional identity and mentoring. Five mentor teachers and five mentor professors participated in the semi-structured interviews. Although the interview schedule included leading questions, participants were free to elaborate further on their experiences, opinions, and methods of mentoring preservice teachers. The interviews specifically examined mentors' perceptions of their role in shaping professional identities, the support they provided, and the challenges they encountered during the mentoring process. Twenty preservice teachers were divided into five groups and participated in four focus groups in addition to the interviews. Preservice teachers were able to engage in peer discussion that prompted deeper thinking and collectively reflect on their experiences in the group setting. The main topics of focus in the groups were the preservice teachers' perceptions of their changing professional identities, the types of assistance they received, and the role mentoring played in this process. Over the course of a six-week teaching practice period, focus groups and interviews were held, and all sessions were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Verbatim transcriptions of the recordings were made, and field notes were preserved to provide contextual observations—such as nonverbal clues and discussion dynamics—to the transcripts (Braun and Clarke,

2021). The dataset was deemed to have sufficiently captured the range and complexity of experiences related to mentorship and professional identity, as no new themes, codes, or insights emerged from subsequent interviews and focus groups. Data collection continued until saturation was reached.

Setting and Sampling Strategy

The study was carried out in two urban primary schools in Gauteng Province and one rural school in Mpumalanga. These locations were purposefully chosen to offer contrasting environments that represent the various realities of South African schools: the urban schools had access to structured mentoring arrangements, information and communication technologies, and smaller class sizes, while the rural school had systemic issues like overcrowded classrooms, fewer formal mentoring structures, and limited learning resources. This variation provided a richer context for examining how mentorship and identity formation occur in various educational settings. The interviews and focus groups were conducted over six weeks of teaching practice, and all sessions were audio-recorded with the participants' permission. Preservice teachers were able to engage in peer discussion that prompted deeper thinking and collectively reflect on their experiences in the group setting. The main topics of focus in the groups were the preservice teachers' perceptions of their changing professional identities, the types of assistance they received, and the role mentoring played in this process. Over the course of a six-week teaching practice period, focus groups and interviews were conducted, and all sessions were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Verbatim transcriptions of the recordings were made, and field notes were preserved to provide contextual observations—such as nonverbal clues and discussion dynamics—to the transcripts (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). When no new themes, codes, or insights surfaced from subsequent focus groups and interviews, data collection was considered to have reached saturation. This meant that the dataset accurately reflected the depth and breadth of experiences about professional identity and mentoring.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants directly engaged in the mentoring process. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), purposive sampling is particularly appropriate when the aim is to gather information-rich cases that can illuminate the phenomenon under study. The final sample comprised five mentor lecturers, five teachers, and twenty preservice teachers. This composition ensured that perspectives from all stakeholders in the mentoring process were included, enabling triangulation and enhancing the credibility of the findings.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step approach, which included familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This process facilitated a deeper understanding of how mentor teachers influence the emerging professional identities of preservice teachers. Four key themes emerged from the interviews, focus groups, and reflective accounts: Relational Identity Building, Pedagogical Modeling, Navigating Professional Challenges, and Empowerment through Reflection.

Relational Identity Building emerged as a central theme, highlighting the role of mentor teachers in fostering preservice teachers' sense of belonging within the teaching profession. Preservice teachers frequently emphasized the importance of trust, encouragement, and affirmation from their mentors, contributing to their developing teacher identity. One preservice teacher shared, "*At the beginning, I felt I did not belong in the classroom, but my mentor kept telling me, 'You are capable, and you have something valuable to offer.' That made me believe in myself.*" A mentor teacher reflected, "*We must show them they are part of the profession. It is about giving them confidence to see themselves as real teachers.*" These statements illustrate that professional identity is socially constructed through supportive and authentic mentor-mentee relationships.

The second theme, Pedagogical Modeling, captured how preservice teachers internalized their mentors' teaching practices and professional behaviours. Preservice teachers observed classroom management strategies, lesson delivery techniques, and ethical professional conduct. One participant noted, *"Watching my mentor handle a disruptive class calmly taught me more than any lecture ever could. I am learning how to be patient and fair."* A mentor lecturer added, *"They notice everything we do, not just what we say. Our behaviour becomes a blueprint for them."* This demonstrates how mentors' actions serve as critical models for preservice teachers, extending beyond technical skills to the development of professional values and dispositions.

A third theme, 'Navigating Professional Challenges,' revealed the challenges that preservice teachers encountered and how mentor guidance helped them cope.

Participants reported difficulties, including managing large classes, addressing learner diversity, and handling administrative demands.

One preservice teacher shared, *"Sometimes I felt overwhelmed with the classroom. My mentor would sit with me and say, 'Break it down, step by step, and focus on what you can control.' That helped me manage stress and stay effective."*

A mentor teacher corroborated this perspective: *"Our role is to guide them through reality, not shield them. They learn resilience while knowing support is there."*

This theme highlights the mentor's dual role as a support system and a critical guide in professional development.

The fourth theme, Empowerment through Reflection, illustrated how reflective practices guided by mentor teachers strengthened the professional identity and agency of preservice teachers. Reflection allowed preservice teachers to critically evaluate their teaching, identify areas for improvement, and gain confidence in decision-making.

One preservice teacher remarked, *"After each lesson, my mentor asked, 'What went well, and what would you do differently next time?' It made me think critically and own my learning."*

A mentor lecturer added, *"Reflection is where they become professionals, not just students. We scaffold them to think like teachers."*

These reflections underscore that mentorship extends beyond immediate classroom instruction, fostering self-directed growth and professional self-concept.

Together, these four themes—Relational Identity Building, Pedagogical Modeling, Navigating Professional Challenges, and Empowerment through Reflection—demonstrate the multifaceted role of mentor teachers in shaping the professional identity of preservice teachers. Including participants' voices affirms that mentoring is not merely about skill acquisition but is a relational, reflective, and ethically grounded process that supports holistic teacher development.

Ethical considerations

Ethical integrity was a central aspect of the study. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university's research ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, and their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequences. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before the commencement of interviews and focus groups.

Confidentiality was ensured by using pseudonyms for participants and schools, thereby preventing the disclosure of any identifiable details in the reporting of findings. Participation was voluntary, and no incentives were offered to avoid undue influence or coercion. Preservice teachers were reassured that their contributions would not impact their academic evaluations. In contrast, mentor teachers and lecturers were assured that their input would remain confidential and would not be considered in professional appraisals. To safeguard data, all audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher. These ethical considerations reinforced respect for

participants' autonomy and dignity while strengthening the credibility of the study's outcomes.

Results

This study examined the role of mentor teachers in shaping preservice teachers' professional identity formation during school-based teaching practices in South Africa. The analysis of interviews and focus group discussions revealed that mentor teachers influence professional identity through relational support, pedagogical guidance, ethical modelling, and reflective practices. These findings are discussed below according to the four sub-research questions.

How do mentor teachers provide relational support that influences preservice teachers' sense of belonging and confidence in the teaching profession?

Mentor teachers played a crucial role in fostering preservice teachers' sense of belonging and confidence, particularly during the initial stages of teaching practice when many preservice teachers experienced anxiety and self-doubt. Participants emphasized that mentors who provided encouragement, reassurance, and recognition enabled them to see themselves as legitimate members of the teaching profession.

One preservice teacher shared, *"At the beginning, I felt I did not belong in the classroom, but my mentor kept telling me, 'You are capable, and you have something valuable to offer.' That made me believe in myself."*

Similarly, a mentor teacher reflected, *"We must show them they are part of the profession. It is about giving them confidence to see themselves as real teachers."* These accounts demonstrate that relational support is central to identity development, confirming that professional identity is socially constructed through interactions that foster trust, a sense of belonging, and validation.

In what ways do mentor teachers guide the pedagogical practices of preservice teachers to bridge theory and practice?

The findings indicate that mentor teachers played a crucial role in guiding preservice teachers' pedagogical practices, helping them apply theoretical knowledge in practical classroom settings. Through collaborative lesson planning, demonstration of teaching strategies, and real-time feedback, preservice teachers developed instructional competence and classroom management skills.

One participant noted, *"When I planned lessons alone, I often missed important things. However, when I planned with my mentor, she asked, 'Why are you using this activity?' That made me think critically about my choices."*

Another preservice teacher emphasized, *"Watching my mentor handle a disruptive class calmly taught me more than any lecture ever could. I am learning how to be patient and fair."*

These reflections underscore the significance of guided participation in bridging theory and practice, aligning with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development, where learning takes place through interaction with a more knowledgeable other.

How do mentor teachers model ethical and professional conduct, and how does this influence preservice teachers' understanding of professionalism?

Ethical and professional modelling emerged as a critical mechanism through which mentor teachers influenced their mentees' professional development and, consequently, their professional identities. Participants described observing mentors' behaviour, attitudes, and interactions with learners and colleagues as highly instructive.

One preservice teacher explained, *"Watching my mentor treat every learner with respect, even when they misbehaved, made me realise that being a teacher is more than delivering lessons—it is about values."*

A mentor lecturer added, *“They notice everything we do, not just what we say. Our behaviour becomes a blueprint for them.”*

These insights illustrate that professional identity extends beyond skill acquisition, encompassing ethical awareness and relational conduct. Mentors’ demonstration of professional standards and values guided preservice teachers in internalizing ethical and professional norms.

How do mentor teachers facilitate reflective practices that empower preservice teachers to develop professional agency and self-directed growth?

Ultimately, the study revealed that mentor teachers fostered reflective practice, enabling preservice teachers to critically evaluate their teaching and assume ownership of their professional development. Reflection sessions enabled preservice teachers to analyze their successes and identify areas for improvement, fostering a sense of agency and self-directed growth.

One preservice teacher remarked, *“After each lesson, my mentor asked, ‘What went well, and what would you do differently next time?’ It made me think critically and own my learning.”*

A mentor lecturer highlighted, *“Reflection is where they become professionals, not just students. We scaffold them to think like teachers.”*

This process of guided reflection significantly contributed to the formation of a professional identity by combining skill development with self-awareness, critical thinking, and confidence in decision-making.

The findings suggest that mentor teachers play a crucial role in shaping preservice teachers’ professional identity through relational support, pedagogical guidance, ethical modelling, and reflective practices. Preservice teachers transition from novice learners to reflective, confident, and ethically aware practitioners through these interconnected processes. Participant quotes reinforce the relational and interactive nature of identity development, demonstrating that

mentorship is a social and pedagogical process that shapes the professional self.

Discussion

The discussion examines how mentor teachers impact the professional identity formation of preservice teachers during school-based teaching practices. Drawing on the sub-research questions, the findings are analysed through relational, pedagogical, ethical, and reflective lenses, integrating local and international literature.

Relational Support and Belonging

The findings indicate that mentor teachers have a significant impact on preservice teachers’ sense of belonging and confidence through relational support. Preservice teachers who experienced consistent encouragement, recognition, and empathy developed stronger professional identities. This aligns with Mphojane (2019), who argues that relational mentoring fosters emotional security and a sense of belonging, enabling preservice teachers to navigate the challenges of teaching practice. International studies echo this view; Fransson (2020) highlights that emotionally supportive mentoring environments empower novices to take pedagogical risks and develop resilience. In South Africa, where preservice teachers often face under-resourced classrooms and high learner-to-teacher ratios, relational support from mentors is particularly crucial for the formation of their identity (Gravett & Petersen, 2022). The study demonstrates that professional identity is not solely skill-based but relationally constructed, emphasizing the importance of interpersonal connections in teacher preparation.

Pedagogical Guidance and Skill Development

Mentor teachers played a crucial role in bridging the gap between theory and practice by guiding lesson planning, demonstrating effective classroom management strategies, and providing real-time feedback. This finding aligns with Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, particularly the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where learning occurs through interaction with a more knowledgeable other. Ngatia, Wambugu, and Changeiywo (2021) argue that collaborative planning and guided participation enhance preservice teachers’

pedagogical reasoning and instructional competence. South African research (Gravett, 2025) similarly highlights that mentorship helps preservice teachers apply theoretical knowledge in dynamic classroom contexts. The study extends these insights by showing that pedagogical guidance also strengthens confidence, enabling preservice teachers to internalize professional practices and develop a reflective approach to teaching.

Ethical Role Modelling

Observing mentors' ethical and professional conduct was central to preservice teachers' identity formation. Participants noted that mentors' respectful treatment of learners and colleagues influenced their understanding of professionalism and values. This supports Mockler's (2020) assertion that professional identity is negotiated within relational contexts and that ethical modelling by experienced teachers profoundly shapes novices' sense of responsibility and ethical awareness. African studies (Mphojane, 2019; Ngatia, Wambugu, and Changeiywo, 2021) further indicate that role modelling is a culturally embedded process, where ethical behaviour, respect for learners, and professional etiquette are transmitted through social interaction. In the South African context, where teachers are often required to navigate complex social and cultural dynamics in classrooms, ethical mentorship is critical for shaping adaptable and morally grounded educators.

Reflective Practice and Professional Agency

Reflection emerged as a transformative tool that enabled preservice teachers to critically examine their practice, recognize areas for growth, and assert agency over their professional development. Preservice teachers emphasized that guided reflection fostered self-directed learning and professional confidence. This aligns with Braun and Clarke (2021), who argue that reflection is essential for meaning making and identity development in professional contexts. International literature, such as Fransson (2020), also emphasizes reflective mentorship as a catalyst for adaptive expertise and lifelong learning. In South Africa, where teacher education programs increasingly emphasize competency-based and

reflective approaches, structured reflection facilitated by mentors allows preservice teachers to integrate emotional, pedagogical, and ethical dimensions of teaching into their professional self-concept (Gravett and Petersen, 2022).

The discussion illustrates that mentor teachers contribute to professional identity formation through relational support, pedagogical guidance, ethical modelling, and reflective practice. These interconnected processes reveal mentorship as a multidimensional mechanism that combines social, cognitive, and ethical scaffolding. By situating these findings within Vygotsky's sociocultural framework, it becomes evident that identity develops through interaction, observation, and reflection in authentic teaching contexts. The study underscores that effective mentorship in South Africa must address both the emotional and professional needs of preservice teachers to cultivate confident, ethical, and reflective educators.

Limitations of the study

While this study provides valuable insights into the relational impact of mentor teachers on preservice teachers' professional identity, several limitations should be acknowledged, along with suggestions for addressing them in future research.

Firstly, the study employed a qualitative exploratory case study design with a purposive sample of 30 participants, including five mentor lecturers, five mentor teachers, and twenty preservice teachers. While this allowed for in-depth exploration of experiences, the findings may not be generalizable to all preservice teachers or mentor teachers across South Africa. Future research could address this limitation by including a larger and more diverse sample across multiple provinces, school types, and teacher education institutions to capture a broader range of mentoring practices and contextual influences.

Secondly, the data relied on self-reported experiences through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Although these methods capture rich, subjective experiences, they are susceptible to social desirability bias, where participants may provide responses perceived as favourable or acceptable. Subsequent studies

could incorporate additional data sources, such as classroom observations, reflective journals, mentoring artefacts, or peer evaluations, to triangulate findings and provide a more objective and nuanced understanding of mentoring interactions.

Thirdly, the study focused exclusively on school-based teaching practice, one component of teacher education. Preservice teachers' professional identity is also shaped by university coursework, peer interactions, and prior personal experiences, which were not systematically examined. Future research could adopt a longitudinal, multi-contextual approach that integrates both university-based and school-based experiences to capture the holistic process of professional identity formation.

Finally, time constraints and the scope of the study limited longitudinal observations. Professional identity develops over time, and a longer-term study tracking preservice teachers throughout their training and into their early teaching careers could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how mentorship influences sustained identity formation. Longitudinal research designs, which follow participants across multiple teaching practice cycles and early career stages, would enable researchers to examine the evolution and consolidation of professional identity over time.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into the relational, pedagogical, ethical, and reflective dimensions of mentorship, providing practical recommendations for teacher education programs and informing future research in diverse educational contexts. By addressing these limitations, future studies can build a more robust and generalizable evidence base on how mentorship contributes to the development of professional identity in preservice teachers.

Conclusion

This study examined how mentor teachers influence the professional identity development of preservice teachers during school-based teaching practices in South Africa. Findings indicate that mentors play a multidimensional role, providing relational support, pedagogical guidance, ethical modelling, and opportunities for reflective

practice. These interactions foster confidence, professional competence, ethical awareness, and reflective capacity, highlighting that mentorship is both a skills-based and identity-sensitive process. Grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective, the study demonstrates that professional identity emerges through socially mediated interactions, observation, and guided reflection. By centering identity formation, the study underscores that effective teacher preparation goes beyond technical training, cultivating adaptive, reflective, and ethically grounded educators capable of navigating diverse classroom contexts. The findings contribute to both national and global discussions on inclusive, relational, and transformative approaches to teacher education.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends implementing mentorship practices that integrate relational, pedagogical, ethical, and reflective elements. In the short term, teacher education programs should formalize relational support structures, train mentor teachers to provide constructive feedback and emotional scaffolding, emphasize collaborative lesson planning and observation, and integrate structured reflective practices such as guided reflection sessions and self-assessment to foster professional agency and instructional competence. In the long term, mentor teachers should receive ongoing training in ethical role modelling, encompassing professional conduct and collaborative interaction. Meanwhile, higher education institutions and schools should strengthen partnerships through regular workshops, feedback mechanisms, and formal recognition of mentoring as a professional responsibility. Together, these measures can create consistent, high-quality, identity-sensitive mentorship experiences that cultivate confident, reflective, and ethically grounded teachers, prepared to navigate the complex realities of South African classrooms and meet national and global standards for inclusive education.

Disclosure of Interests.

The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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