

## **EFFECT OF MENTORING ON THE TEACHERS TEACHING LEARNERS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES IN SOUTH KOREA: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

About one in five children have learning and attention difficulties. Teaching learners with learning difficulties require teachers to differentiate instruction and this can negatively hinder the learning process if they are not adequately equipped and supported. Therefore, teachers mentoring has the potential of improving classroom practices thereby improving the teaching skills of teachers teaching difficult to learn learners. Specifically, this study empirically analysed the effectiveness of teachers' mentoring programme on the teaching skills of teachers teaching pupils with learning disabilities in South Korea. Four teachers participated in this action research over the period of eight weeks. Pre and post data collection methods which include observations and semi-structured interviews were employed to test the validity of the study hypothesis. Purposive sampling technique was used to sample participants for the study. The study employed quantitative and qualitative research methods in addressing the research problem in the study location. The study found significant relationship between teachers' mentoring and the teaching skills of teachers teaching the difficult to learn pupils. Based on the findings from this research, this study recommends the need for school administration to not only implement mentoring programmes but to create and sustain a mentoring culture in order to improve the skills of the special education teachers as well as the learning outcomes of the difficult to learn pupils.

**Keywords:** Mentoring, Teaching, Disability, Inclusiveness & implementation, Teaching Skills

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Inclusive education requires all learners needs to be met in one educational setting (UNESCO, 1994). Teachers as the people who are at the forefront of implementing inclusive education in classrooms ought to be empowered with various skills to ensure this becomes a reality. However, literature reveals that teachers who deal with learners with special needs are not well equipped and supported to fulfil inclusive practices (Kim & Chung, 2012; McLachlan & Davis, 2013). Although various instruments are used to empower teachers, Schulleri (2020) highlights mentoring as professional development tool to enhance teachers' skills to deliver inclusive practices. Schulleri's assertion is supported by Grima-Farrell (2015) who also posits that mentoring helps teachers to feel valued, enhance their skills and confidence which often result in quality education for all. Friedman et al. (2021) state that mentors should ensure that mentees are valued and their abilities recognised in an inclusive setting. While Abetang, Oguma and Abetang (2020) concluded that a good mentoring programme has the ability to improve job satisfaction, teaching skills and reduce attrition, Ward, Thomas and Disch (2014) stress the importance of carefully planning and evaluating the process to ensure the desired outcomes are achieved. Thus, this study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of teacher mentoring programme on the skills of

teachers teaching the difficult to learn pupils. Therefore, in view of the aforementioned problems, this study seeks to provide answer to the research question below:

What is the effect of teachers' mentoring programme on the skills of teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities in South Korea?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework that underpins this research is the self-efficacy theory, because of the nature of the research problem that requires evaluating the effectiveness of teacher mentoring programme on the academic performance of the difficult to learn children. Self-efficacy theory is based on the beliefs of a person's ability to succeed in the mist of challenges (Bandura, 1977). It could be argued that mastering of this skill by teachers can improve their confidence to teach effectively. You, Kim and Shin (2019) support this claim by stating that teachers with a high self-efficacy tend to be more flexible in accommodating learners with diverse needs and create teaching strategies that will accommodate them. Therefore, mentoring has continued to gain attention in the field of special education. Alston and Hansman (2020) defines mentoring as a process where an experienced individual shares experiences and skills with the less experienced. Yet, in this paper mentoring is viewed in the inclusive contexts as a process that requires mentors to acknowledge and value the ideas and skills of mentees so that both are empowered and inclusion is promoted (Friedman et al., 2021; Astrove & Kraimer, 2022) and ensure the culture of learning is promoted (Castanheria, 2016).

The benefits of mentoring have been reported by many researchers. Bowman (2014) demonstrates mentoring as a tool that promotes leadership, job satisfaction, and consistency among teachers, he also stated it promotes learner engagement and academic achievement. Examining the impact mentoring has on teachers' teaching practices, Hudson (2013) found it effective. Similarly, Ullah and Jundran (2014) through the evaluation of the mentoring programme provided to primary school teachers, found that the programme helped teachers to improve their teaching skills and improve interaction between the teachers and the students. According to Lyne (2013) and Chiznik, Chiznik, Close and Gallego (2018) mentoring has the ability to improve teachers' self-efficacy.

To provide evidence for mentoring teachers who deal with learners with special needs, Schulleri (2020) evaluated the effectiveness of mentoring by interviewing international teachers who were mentoring native Kazakhstan teachers in a school of gifted learners and found to help teachers to improve teaching skills and build stronger relationships between the mentors and the mentees.

Abetang, Oguma and Abetang (2020) recommend all countries to implement mentoring to improve effective learning and teaching after having reviewed literature and established that cohort of teachers who did not participate in mentoring usually exhibit stress and low confidence, whereas those who participated have high confidence and are able to manage the classroom confidently. Ismail, Abdullah, Norshaffika, Ghani and Omar (2015) state that mentoring enhances confidence. Cross et al. (2019) mentions that professional development of teachers can be limited if mentoring is not implemented in schools. Abetang, Oguma and Abetang (2020) also associates high rate of attrition with lack of mentoring. Even though mentoring has been found beneficial, there are possible factors that can result in it being

ineffectual, Starr (2013) mentions lack of clear goals, Cross et al. (2019) states lack of valuing and respecting abilities and ideas of mentees by mentors and Straus, Johnson and Marquez (2013) suggest lack of communication, lack of commitment, competitive mind-set and conflict of interest. This review reveals a gap in literature on mentoring to support teachers who work in inclusive settings, particularly those who deal with learners with learning difficulties. Additionally, a review of literature by Spooner-lane (2017) establishes a gap that exists on mentoring teachers in primary schools. As a result, this project aims to fill in this gap by answering the question, 'How effective is a teacher mentoring programme towards teachers who are dealing with learners with learning difficulties?'

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Four (4) teachers participated in this action research over the period of eight weeks. Pre and post data collection methods which include observations and semi-structured interviews were employed to test the validity of the study hypothesis. Purposive sampling technique was used to sample participants for the study. The study employed quantitative and qualitative research methods in addressing the research problem in the study location. The study used purposeful sampling technique to recruit participants that are appropriate for the purpose of the research (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). During the recruitment stage, five teachers who are South Korean natives were identified and approached regarding the intervention programme but only four agreed to be part of the study. Due to this reason, the study had four participants and all of them have a Bachelor of Education degree. The criteria for selection were not only that they are dealing with learners with learning difficulties. All participants have only experienced mentoring during induction. Participant A is twenty-three-year-old female who newly graduated and has just started working in the teaching profession since the beginning of the academic year in March. She is an English teacher of third to sixth grade students, she is also my co-teacher. Participant B is a twenty-seven-year-old female who is a special needs teacher of first to fifth grade students with four years of experience. Participant C is a twenty-seven-year-old female who is teaching sixth grade students with four years of experience. Participant D is a twenty-seven-year-old male teaching sixth grade and has three years of teaching experience.

The research setting is a small public primary school situated in the eastern part of South Korea. The school has twenty teachers and I have been working for over 3 years as the only foreigner while all other teachers are Koreans. The school has a good support system for learners and traditions that enhance their SEMH needs. However, less support is provided to teachers and there is a high rate of attrition of teaching staff, approximately five teachers a year leave. As stated by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018), action research is not exempt from ethical issues, therefore this research followed ethical procedures. Permission to conduct the project was obtained from the vice principal and from Middlesex University prior to conducting the research. After discussing with participants regarding the project consent letters were signed by them. The study used pseudonyms in place of the participants' names for confidentiality purposes.

### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The hypothesis of this study is to evaluate the effect of teachers' mentoring programme on the teaching skills of teachers teaching pupils with learning disabilities. Data from classroom

observations were analysed through Microsoft excel. Likert scale was used to rate scores, 5 was rated as excellent, 4 good, 3 average, 2 attention needed and 1 much attention needed. To evaluate the differences in the pre and post observations, an average across all participants were calculated.

Interviews were subjected to themes. A thematic analysis was adopted for interviews due to its flexibility and its capability to excerpt codes and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A deductive approach was used because the researcher had pre-conceived themes that were expected to emerge from the data due to the problem having been identified in the researchers' workplace which is frustration of teachers teaching learners with learning difficulties and also the high attrition rate. The theoretical framework of Self-efficacy theory gives a compelling idea of the possible themes that would emerge from the data (Lyne, 2013). A semantic approach was followed due to an interest in the participants stated opinions, as these opinions will help to formulate the intervention programme and help build up data that will lead to the answering of the research question and subsequently the post interview data will facilitate answering the research question. The study adopted six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to assist in the process of analysing data. During familiarisation stage, these were the notes taken by the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006):

*'The teachers seemed to be stressed due to lack of support, lack of skills to differentiate instructions as a result this sometimes affect their confidence in delivering instructions. The teachers clearly indicated how they would appreciate effective strategies that will enable them to teach effectively.'*

Codes were generated after and this was done by hand, working through the hard copies with pens and highlighters and thereafter codes were collated into themes (See Appendix 9 for some of the data).

At pre-intervention stage, the themes identified were lack of confidence, lack of teaching skills to differentiate instructions and lack of support. Some of the evidence of remarks made by participants is also provided

*'I have not been looking much into that, I just prepare my lesson following the curriculum generally.'* (A)

The participant acknowledges that she has not been differentiating instructions to be able to ensure learning takes place for learners in her classroom including those with learning difficulties.

*'I really need support with managing discipline in my class. Trying effective strategies would go a long way.'* (B)

The participant has expressed the need for support with different strategies to manage learners with special needs in her classroom.

At post-intervention stage themes generated were increased confidence, improved wellbeing, improved teaching skills and improved job satisfaction. Evidence is some of the extracts from participants below.

*'The programme was effective because even though I am a special needs teacher I realised that there are strategies I overlooked which were very helpful during the classroom.'* (B)

Participant B states that the mentoring programme helped her to evaluate her teaching strategies that she may have taken lightly but quite effective.

*‘.....I have also realised that the way I relate with other teachers has improved I feel more confident in expressing myself now. ‘(C)*

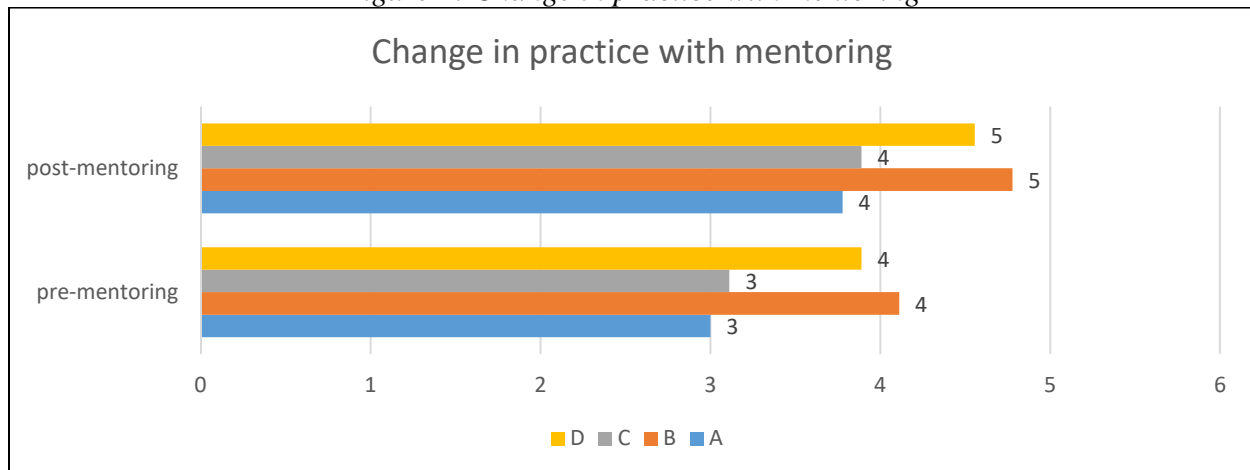
The participant makes interesting remarks about the intervention programme, that not only has it helped her to improve relationships with her colleagues but she also confident to express herself.

#### 4.1 Quantitative Analysis

##### Pre and post observations

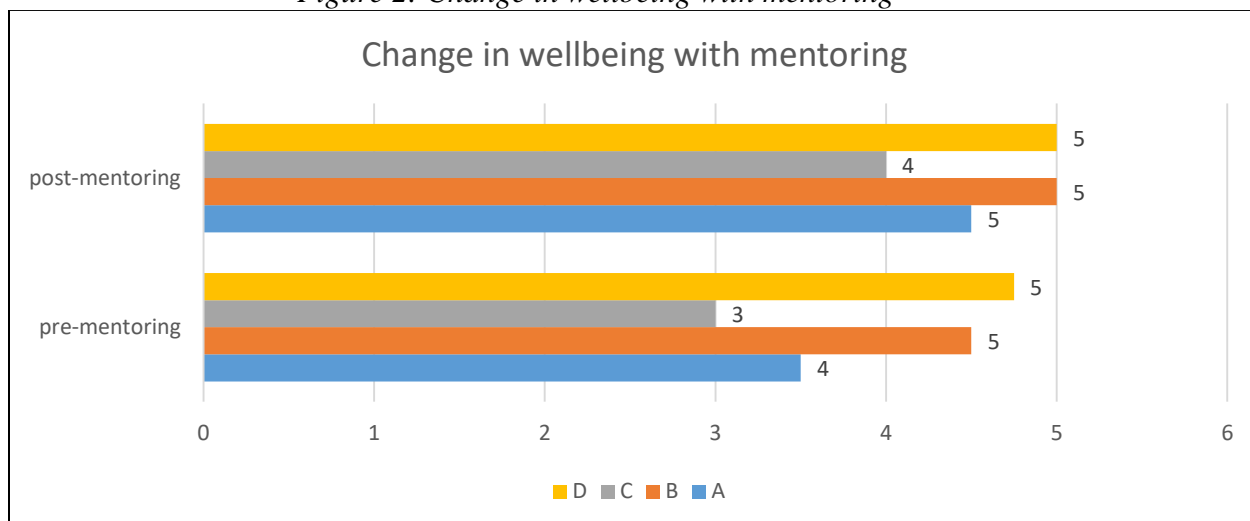
Pre and post-observations helped in determining the differences that occurred through the implementation of the mentoring programme. As previously mentioned, observations were classified into two categories, the curriculum dimension and psychosocial dimension. The curriculum dimension focused on the teaching skills, while the psychosocial dimension looked into the wellbeing of teachers.

Figure 1: Change in practice with mentoring



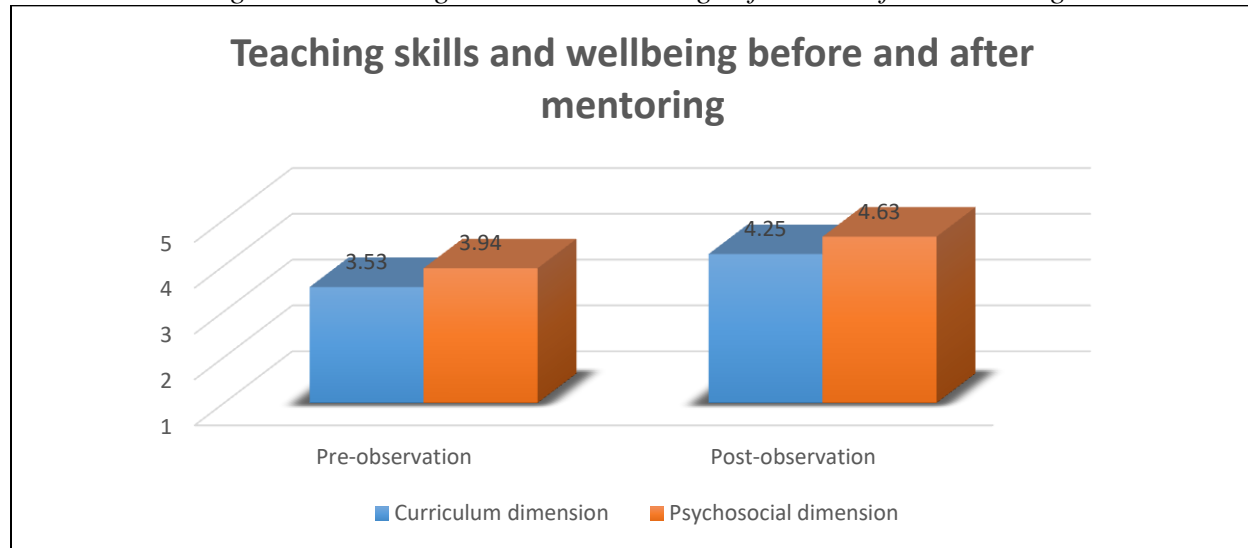
Source: Author's Computation ()

Figure 2: Change in wellbeing with mentoring



Source: Author's Computation ()

Figure 3: Teaching skills and wellbeing before and after mentoring



Source: Author's Computation ()

Full score is 5, if mentoring helped to improve teachers teaching skills and wellbeing, post-observation scores will be higher than pre-observation scores. Figure 1 and 2 show changes that occurred in teaching skills and wellbeing of teachers as a result of mentoring. Whilst, the average from the four participants is seen in Figure 3, revealing that teaching skills scores increased from 3.53 to 4.25, this is approximately an increase of 20,5%, whereas, the wellbeing scores increased from 3.94 to 4.63 with an increase of approximately 17.5%. This implies that the intervention programme resulted in a significant change in teachers' skills and wellbeing. Implementing teacher mentoring programme has the ability to enhance teaching skills and wellbeing of teachers, was the hypothesis for this study.

#### 4.2 Qualitative Data Analysis (Pre and post interviews)

In this section, each theme included data from pre intervention and subsequently from post intervention. For an example, the theme Increased confidence will first provide information prior intervention and after intervention respectively. Final themes concluded upon are show in figure 4 below.

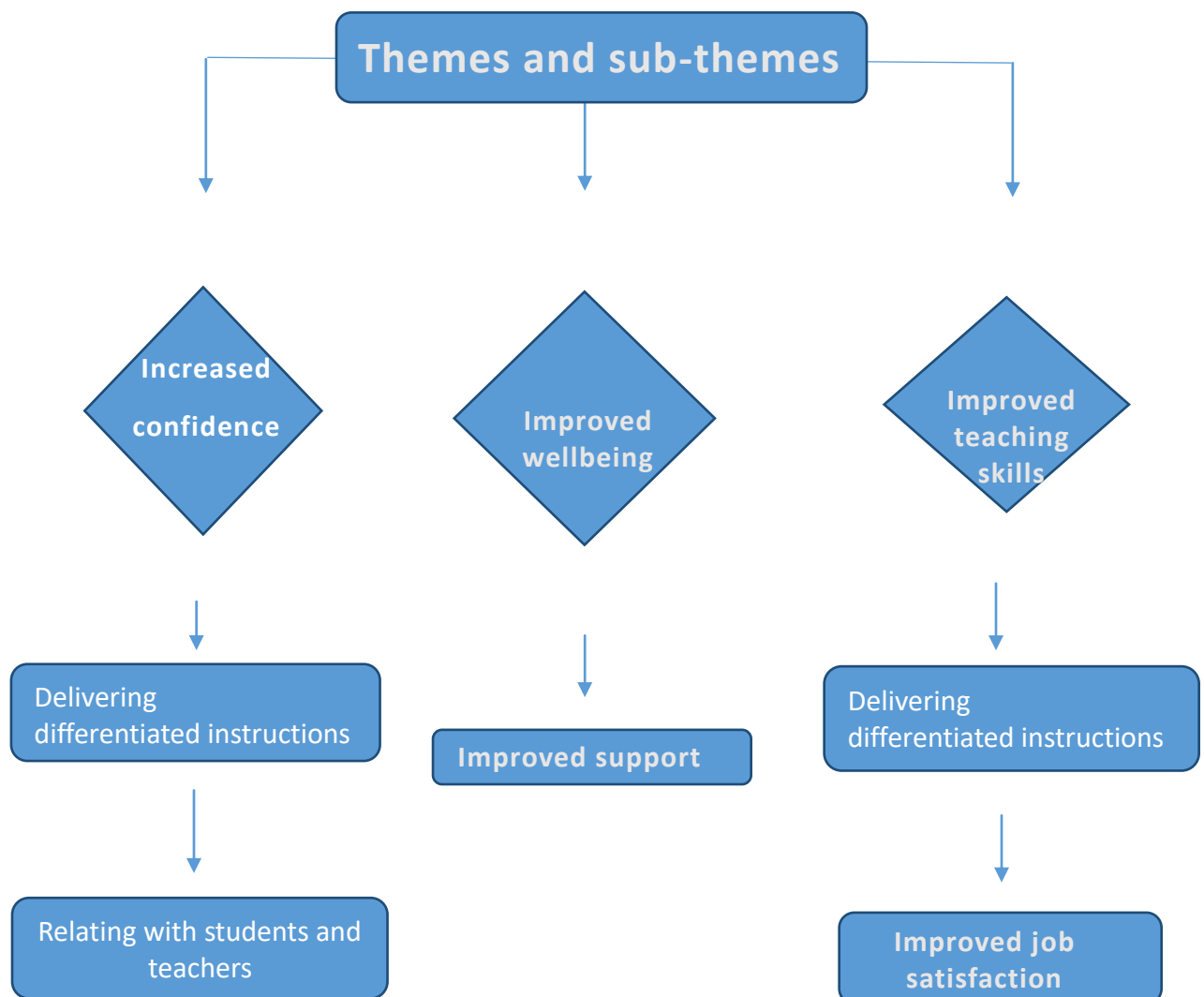


Figure 4: Themes and sub-themes

### Theme 1: Increased Confidence

The theme confidence refers to the participants' ability confidently deliver differentiated instructions and relate with learners.

#### *Subtheme 1: Delivering differentiated instructions*

*'I have not been applying curriculum differentiation because it is difficult to implement and to be honest, I do not know how to do this well, so I feel shy in doing so.'* (A)

The participant states she lacks confidence to deliver differentiated instruction due to her inability to implement this approach. Her lack of skills in ensuring that all learners are able to learn effectively regardless of their learning differences have put the learning of learners with learning difficulties at stake. Reddy and Anuradha (2013) explains that lack of mentoring is prevalent in schools and unfortunately, this translates to lack of confidence as participant A has

indicated. Additionally, when teachers lack the confidence to implement curriculum differentiation, the learners will continue to experience difficulty in the classroom (Reddy & Anuradha, 2013).

*'I found it useful to my career and my life in general as I am now happier and slowly falling in love with the teaching profession.'* (A)

The strong statement made by the participant of falling in love with the profession due to her ability to differentiate instruction is a clear indication of how mentoring has helped to improve her skills and confidence. This is supported by the study of Lyne (2013), Aslan and Ocal (2012) and Abetang, Oguma and Abetang (2020).

### **Subtheme 2: Relating with students and teachers**

*'Surprisingly, I did not believe that it would help me but I was willing to give it a try, however, it was quite helpful because among other things I has improved my confidence I can relate with other teachers better. So, I can say it was useful.'* (C)

The participant expresses how hesitant she was about the program but found it very beneficial. The participant further states that through mentoring her ability to relate to other teachers increased.

Similarly, Ullah and Jundran (2014) found that mentoring help teachers to relate better with their colleagues.

### **Theme 2: Improved wellbeing**

The theme wellbeing refers to how participants' wellbeing is affected by their work.

*'I enjoy most things about the job except for the workload. Lack of support to develop my skills in my profession is one of my concerns because the workload is much and it gives me stress.'* (C)

In the extract above, the participant explains that due of lack of support she is often overwhelmed and has a lot of stress and this impacts her work negatively.

*'Over the years I have been working on improving resilience so that I see challenges in a more positive way. It has not been easy as working with learners with special needs is stressful.'* (B)

Participant B explains that she has resorted to improving resilience in order to help her cope and develop her skills. The participant further explains that learners with special needs have posed as a great challenge and the experience has been filled with stress.

*'I try to maintain a balance between work and social life work has been so stressful that it affects my happiness.....'* (D)

Similar to other participants, participant D expresses how stressful work has been because he finds it difficult to balance his personal life and work duties so, his happiness his affected. Delivering teaching instructions to learners with diverse learning needs can be challenging and daunting (Dixon, Yssel, McConnell & Hardin, 2014). Learners with diverse learner needs require specialised attention and accommodations, when teachers are overwhelmed with workload, these needs go unmet (Dixon, Yssel, McConnell & Hardin, 2014). As the participants have expressed, these challenges lead to difficulty in performing at their best level and consequently lead to decreased confidence and increased stress levels. Reddy and Anuradha (2013) stressed the



importance of supporting teachers who teach learners with special needs and additionally pointed out that teachers who do not receive support may become frustrated, anxious and less confident. The participants in this study have shown that lack of support and mentoring leads to negative emotions that affect job performance and the overall wellbeing of teachers.

*'I have also realised that the way I relate with other teachers has improved I feel more confident.....' (C)*

The participant states that she feels more confident because of mentoring. Nwankwo, Okechi and Nweke (2015) state mentoring increases good working relationships and contributes positively towards teachers' wellbeing. The researchers also claim that a positive relationship exists between self-esteem and psychological wellbeing, implying that people with high self-esteem often perform well and are overall happy in their work environment (Nwankwo, Okechi & Nweke, 2015).

### **Subtheme 1: Improved support**

Support refers to how the support participants receive at school affect them.

*'I would like to be assisted with new ideas of becoming happier with my job and also teaching learners with learning difficulties.' (A)*

The participant expresses her desire to be equipped to teach learners with learning difficulties as this seems to be affecting her wellbeing.

*'I enjoyed exploring different ways to help learners with learning difficulties, I really felt like I am making a difference no matter how little it is. I also realised that this tends to make me feel relieved and less anxiety even though, you had been motivating that made a difference but helping learners with learning difficulties makes me happier.' (A)*

The participant shared that she now finds fulfilment in teaching and helping learners with difficulties. The participant has reported that her emotional wellbeing has been enhanced due to the support she acquired during the intervention programme. Mentoring has increased the participants' self-confidence and overall professional image.

Delivering differentiated instructions to students with varying learning needs can be difficult and intimidating (Dixon, Yssel, McConnell & Hardin, 2014). If there is a lack of support, this may lead to teachers being frustrated, which can have a detrimental impact on their self-confidence (Reddy & Anuradha, 2013). In order for teachers to effectively instruct all students, it is necessary to expand their knowledge and abilities, this increases their sense of self-efficacy (Versland & Erickson, 2017). It is evident in the above extract that receiving support can lead to positive outcomes of self-confidence and a positive impact on learners with different learning needs.

### **Theme 3: Improved teaching skills**

The theme teaching skills refers to the teachers' ability to implement different strategies to ensure learners with learning difficulties learn, such as differentiated activities and assessments.

**Subtheme 1: Differentiating instructions**

Before the mentoring programme participants reported different challenges with regards to implementing curriculum differentiation.

*'I have not been applying curriculum differentiation because it is difficult to do.'* (A)

*'The afternoon remedial class has been the main one I have been using as I found it better because differentiating the curriculum during the normal class can be time consuming.'* (C)

Participant A reported that applying curriculum differentiation to suit the diverse needs of the learners in her classroom is a great challenge and poses great difficulty, similarly, participant C explains that she is only able to apply curriculum differentiation adequately in their afternoon remedial class because in the main classrooms, because time becomes a constraint that prohibits her from having a specialised method of delivering the curriculum to learners with learning difficulties (Tomlinson, 2014).

Kim (2013) suggests that teachers often feel overwhelmed with responsibilities of their professions and in that, they neglect areas such as curriculum differentiation. It is similarly observed in the above extracts that the overwhelming demand of the profession lead teachers to neglect the needs of learners with challenges. Similarly, Schulleri (2020) indicates that teachers are unwilling to learn new methods and processes because they are too busy with other aspects of teaching, in the above extract, the teacher had not been applying differentiation because she felt it was too difficult. Reddy and Anuradha (2013) and Schulleri (2020) indicate that mentoring can benefit teachers by enhancing their confidence in their abilities. Mentoring can also increase awareness of the importance of issues in the classroom and contribute to teachers implementing curriculum differentiation (Schuller, 2020).

*'As I have mentioned other things before, it has also helped me to relate better with the students especially those with learning difficulties and also helped me to be able to be creative and think of ways to differentiate the curriculum.'* (A)

In the extract above, the participant has reported that the mentoring programme has helped her to differentiate instruction and improved her level of creativity.

Lyne (2013) reported that mentoring helped to improve teachers' skills, also McLachlan and Davis (2013) emphasised the importance of implementing development programmes in order to improve teachers' skills.

**Sub-theme 2: Improved job satisfaction**

The theme job satisfaction refers to how participants feel about their jobs.

During the pre-intervention interviews, participants voiced out different concerns regarding lack of support.

*'Honestly, I am not enjoying teaching yet. I have moments where I do enjoy it but those have been far less than the ones I do not enjoy. I have a lot of stress with adapting to the profession and it is affecting my wellbeing as often times I have no zeal of coming to work.'* (A)

The participant has expressed that she does not find enjoyment in her occupation. She expresses that the negative emotions outweigh the positive ones. The participant explain that the emotional turmoil of the profession affects her wellbeing and she is unhappy.

Novice teachers often find the demand of teaching overwhelming and are often met with new challenges they did not expect.

The prospects of teacher mentoring are a manner in which novice teachers can be ushered into the new profession, Bressman, Winter and Efron (2018) agree and further recommend that schools to implement mentoring programmes even after induction to ensure teachers are retained and kept motivated. The emotional wellbeing of novice teachers is important as their wellbeing will be the element that ensures that they remain motivated, resilient to negative factors and enjoy their work (Wilcoxon, Bell & Steiner, 2020).

*'The most important thing I have also noted is I seem to be looking forward to going to work rather than before....' (A)*

The participant has made a statement about the remarkable change regarding her job contentment.

As stated by Abetang, Oguma and Abetang (2020) mentoring has the ability to improve job satisfaction. Due to mentoring, the participant's job contentment seems to have improved (Wilcoxon, Bell & Steiner, 2020).

## DISCUSSIONS

Overall results indicate that teacher mentoring programme is an effective tool to enhance teaching skills and wellbeing of teachers. Results from observations showed an increase in the teaching skills and wellbeing and results from interviews showed improvement on teaching skills and wellbeing. It is quite hard to conclude if the mentoring programme has helped to reduce the attrition rate at this stage.

As previously mentioned, at pre intervention stage lack of confidence, lack of teaching skills and lack of support were identified as the main themes. At post intervention stage, increased confidence, improved teaching skills and improved wellbeing were the main themes identified. Subsequently to report these results, themes from pre and post intervention interviews was consolidated.

I reported the theme 'Increased confidence' as a first theme because of all participants gave account of it and because it is closely related to the theoretical framework guiding this study, self-efficacy theory. As stated by Bandura (1977), self-efficacy enables people to see difficulties as challenges not as threats. This implies that people with a high self-efficacy do not lack confidence (Dixon, McConnell & Hardin, 2014). It seemed proper to report 'Improved emotional wellbeing' secondly, this theme supports all other themes because as stated by Bandura (1977) our emotional wellbeing determines our level of confidence and how we carry out our tasks. Additionally, a teacher who is happy and feels supported is able to teach effectively is able to be creative to ensure that all learners in the classroom teach (Jones et al., 2015). The last theme that

reported is 'Improved teaching skills'. Reporting this as the last theme, sums up to a conclusion that a teacher who is confident, emotionally well and has the necessary teaching skills to fulfil his or her functions effectively is mostly likely to be content with their job (Lyne, 2013).

Changes discovered from participant C are quite laudable, this participant has always been shy, appeared less enthusiastic and was usually by herself, she also never attended school gatherings. She was not very keen to be part of the project because she expressed, she does not believe it will make any difference. During the intervention it was challenging to arrange our discussion times because she always stated she is busy, but a few weeks to the end of the project surprisingly, she would be the one reminding me of our meeting time. Also, towards the end of the project she seemed confident. She usually strikes random conversations with enthusiasm and even started attending school gatherings. These findings are in line with those of Abetang, Oguma and Abetang (2020).

## 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Ensuring that inclusive education is implemented is the responsible of the school and teachers have the responsibility to effective strategies are in place to promote learning for all learners. This study investigated the effectiveness of teacher mentoring programme. Overall results from observations and interviews suggest that mentoring helped to improve teaching skills and wellbeing of teachers. Future research should consider undertaking studies in a culturally diverse schools and conducting the project for a longer period. Based on the findings of this study, implementing mentoring is recommended to all schools (Abetang, Oguma & Abetang, 2020) in order to continually support teachers, improve teachers' wellbeing and to ensure learning is improved. In addition to this the implementation of a mentoring culture is also recommended to promote a culture of learning.

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