

The Role of an Educator Mentor in a Technology-Enabled Community of Practice

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is on the role of an educator mentor in the conduct of a technology-enabled Community of Practice (CoP) in Junior Secondary schools (JSS) in Sierra Leone. The project is supported by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and aims to improve the quality of teaching and learning outcomes in JSS. The educator mentors are lecturers drawn from Freetown Teachers College (FTC). They play an instructional role in guiding and supporting school-based teachers in groups in pilot schools to collaborate around tasks and share responses with colleagues. "Bite-size" tasks are sent by the mentor to the teachers through *WhatsApp*. The tasks or questions are discussed among members in groups of teachers in a cluster until they arrive at a consensus answer to the question. This is then summarized and posted back to the mentor by the school champion in the group. The study explores the nature of support provided by the educator mentors in the Teacher Professional Development process in the CoP, as well as its effectiveness as perceived by the teachers. The design of the study is a mixed method approach using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The study sample comprised 149 JSS teachers from the 12 JSS pilot schools, 12 JSS school Champions, 12 JSS school principals and 12 FTC lecturers (Mentors). The findings of the study will contribute to a better understanding of educator mentor-teacher engagement, as well as an assessment of the level of support needed by teachers to construct knowledge collaboratively in a technology-enabled CoP for quality learning outcomes in their students at school.

1. Introduction

Freetown Teachers College (FTC) is one of the leading teacher training institutions in Sierra Leone. In its strive to contribute to the current teacher reform agenda of the Ministries of Education and the Teaching Service Commission (TSC), aims at improving the quality of teaching and learning outcomes in our colleges and schools. In collaboration with COL, it aims at providing school-based continuing professional development opportunities to teachers in selected Junior Secondary schools in the country.

To do this, FTC in collaboration with COL initiated a technology-enhanced integrated in-service teacher training programme (INSET) for 12 selected JSS pilot Schools in Western area and Kono districts. The goal of this programme is to make sustainable improvements on the quality of teaching and learning outcomes in our schools by improving the pedagogical content knowledge and ICT skills of JSS teachers. The FTC launched a pilot phase of the programme in the 12 JSS pilot schools in Western area and Kono district.

The study questions included the following: what are the role of mentors in a community of practice? What has worked? What are the comments made of the quality of feedbacks from mentors? What are the comments made on the relationship between the mentors and the key actors in the CoPs? What has not worked and why? What are the challenges and opportunities?

2. Context of the study:

2.1 Community of Practice

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a common concern, problems, or passion about a topic/issue. In their bid to find solutions to their concerns/problems, they deepen their knowledge and understanding of something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact on a sustained basis. (Wenger et al, 2002. p. 5). It is a unique combination of elements, namely: a domain which creates a common ground and a sense of common identity which enables members to decide on what is worth sharing, how to present their ideas and which activities to pursue; an element of community of people who care about the domain and fosters interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust; a community that is willing to share ideas, expose one's ignorance, ask questions and listen carefully; and finally an element of a shared practice (Ibid: p.27-30)

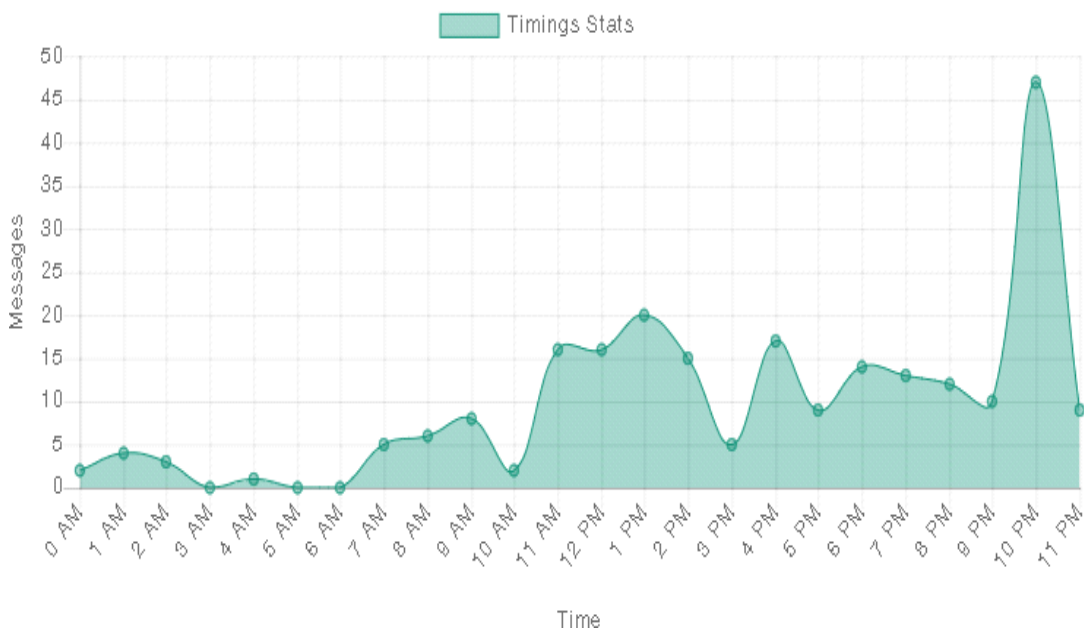
The integrated in-service teacher training programme (INSET) is a Professional Learning Community and each of the pilot JSS schools is expected to establish a school-based CoP for the INSET Programme

comprising teachers from across different subject areas. The size of a CoP will depend on the size of the teaching force of a school, which should be a number that can be managed effectively. In some contexts, the size can be up to 20-25 teachers. The JSS teachers who are the direct beneficiaries of the programme are expected to apply the pedagogical content knowledge and skills they learn from their CoP in their respective teaching environment. The CoP is the bedrock and the nerve centre of the INSET programme; it is where the process of learning together and from one another takes place. It is a forum for exchange of ideas and examples of good classroom practice

Managing CoPs requires strong leadership styles that will ensure continuous instructional improvement in the JSS schools in Sierra Leone. It also involves the provision of resources to support the CoPs and collaborative learning among teachers. The delivery process for the INSET programme is technology enabled that uses mobile phones to convey “bite-size” content knowledge in a form of questions/tasks to teacher-learners. The learning time is flexible; it can take place anytime and anywhere, or at an appointed time within the work day agreed by members of the CoP.

TIMINGS

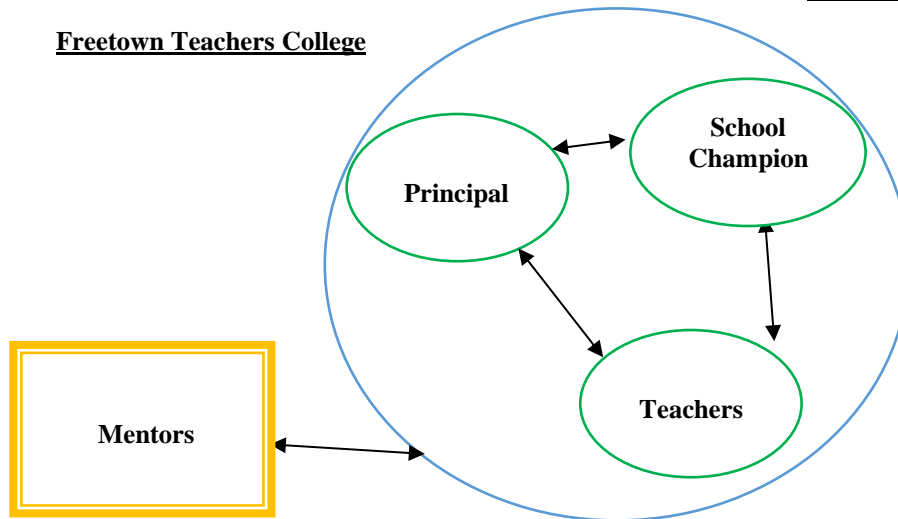
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The Teacher Professional Development processes take place within the project schools in Communities of Practice where the actual learning takes place. The key actors involved in the learning process at the school level are: the school principals, school champions (appointed from among the teachers) and teachers, connected to each other and all connected to the FTC mentors. The principal provides leadership and oversight role over the INSET activities in his or her school. The school champion facilitates the conduct of the INSET activities in the CoP in his or her school. The teachers are connected to each other, to their school champion, principal and the FTC mentors in a collaborative learning process.

Relationship among actors of Community of Practice

The School of CoP



The FTC has developed a learning package for the INSET programme consisting of a Blueprint Toolkit for school-Based Teacher Development (SBTD) and the following draft modules:

- Module 1: Teaching and Learning for Sustainable Development
- Module 2: ICT for teachers
- Module 3: Learner-Centered Approaches
- Module 4: Commonwealth Digital Education Leadership

At present, the implementation of the SBTD Toolkit is ongoing in the 12 pilot Junior Secondary schools since January 2019. The programme is being delivered through the use of mobile phones. The mentors at FTC send “bite-size” content knowledge (usually a question/task) through text messaging to the WhatsApp groups in the various project schools. The teachers in the communities of practice (CoP) at the schools then discuss and collaborate among themselves to arrive at a consensus answer which is sent back to the mentors. The mentors on their part will study the responses from the CoPs and send feedback to them. At the end of each task every member of the CoP is required to write a reflection on how each task has improved on their perspectives and practice and upload this to their e-portfolios. The e-portfolio is a record of the teachers’ assignments, examples of good practice, presentations, video clips etc. and it forms the basis of assessment of work done by each teacher.

It is intended that at the end of the training, teachers who successfully complete the programme will be awarded certificates as evidence of their participation in CPD, which is a requirement for all teachers in the Basic and Secondary schools in Sierra Leone. FTC is in consultation with the TSC for partnership in the implementation of the programme so that the programme is aligned with the quality norms and standards enshrined in the national framework for CPD and gets the full accreditation and approval of the TSC.

2.2 Concept of mentoring

Mentors offer guidance and pragmatic advice and continuing support to learn and develop those allocated to them for better performance. They groom them for higher and greater responsibilities in the future. They provide guidance on how to acquire content knowledge and skills to do a job well. They provide advice on drawing up self-development programmes; advice on dealing with administrative, technical or personal problems individuals encounter, especially in the early stages of their careers. They provide trustworthy forum where individuals can discuss their aspirations and concerns. Mentors adopt a non-directive but supportive approach to individuals they deal with. (Armstrong, 2012. p.550-1). It is an ongoing process of capacity building within a professional network focused on improving practice.

Mentoring promotes learning on the job, which could be the best way of acquiring particular skills and knowledge the job requires. Mentoring complements formal training by providing individual guidance from professionally trained and experienced teachers. According to Gjedia & Gardinier (2018), citing Livingston (2016.p.2); Darling-Hammond, (2005); Ingersoll & Smith, (2004) among others, mentoring enables students and experienced teachers to reflect on challenges and develop practice. It increase teacher retention, improve new teacher job satisfaction and self-efficacy, enhances teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, reduce new teachers' feelings of isolation and promote teachers' ongoing professional development and lifelong learning. (Retrieved June 2019). Livingston, 2016.p.229 as cited by Gjedia &Gardinier (2018), agreed that 'there is need for an 'increased attention to be given to providing systematic training and ongoing professional learning for in-school mentors to enable them gain a deeper understanding of their role and be recognized and valued as teacher educators'. Lunenburg & Ornstein (2004. p.557) contend that 'teachers seek help from experienced teachers they perceive as "knowledgeable", "friendly," and supportive,' independent of whether the teachers are formally recognized as their mentors'.

2.3 The FTC Mentors

Among the key actors in the school-based INSET programme are the FTC mentors. They are qualified teacher educators trained on the INSET programme and had taken part in the design and materials development of the learning package for the INSET programme. They are responsible for developing and originating the 'bite size bursts' of pedagogical content knowledge to be used in the micro-learning lessons based on the printed resources of the INSET programme. They are also expected to support the school champions throughout the implementation stage in order to overcome the usual frustration associated with using a new instructional method through effective monitoring of the CoP meetings at the school level. They are responsible for identifying and nominating the school champions in collaboration with the school principals for approval by the Project office at FTC. The mentors are to continually follow-up the training period so that all the time required by the learner to reach a level of performance equal to that of the experienced worker in terms of quality and speed will be fully utilized (Armstrong 2012.p.551). During the follow-up stage, the learner will continue to need help with particular difficult tasks or to overcome temporary setbacks that may result in a reduction in performance. The instructors may have to supervise practice more closely until the mentee trainee regains confidence or master the task. (Ibid .p.551-2).

The Mentees therefore should aspire to learn and must perceive the learning to be relevant and useful to them personally. They should be encouraged to take pride in their job and appreciate the satisfaction that comes from the improved skill performance. According to Lunenburg & Ornstein (2004. p. 557) the success of any mentoring programme hinges on whether the inexperienced teacher is comfortable in seeking help from the experienced counterpart. The decision to seek help is influenced by numerous variables: that is the embarrassment of continued failure versus the embarrassment of asking for help in solving a problem.

The question now is what are the quality of an educator mentor? A Mentor is an experienced teachers regarded as a career professional, who facilitates the development and education of a new teacher and willing to share his or her skills, knowledge and expertise with the inexperienced teacher or mentee. The mentor demonstrates positive attitude and acts as a positive role model; takes personal interest in the mentoring relationship; exhibits enthusiasm in the field; values ongoing learning and growth in the field; provides guidance and constructive feedback; respected by colleagues, values the opinion and initiatives of others and motivates others.

2.4 The role of Technology

The capacity to support SBTD has been significantly enhanced by developments in communications technology. COL has been at the forefront of demonstrating how online processes of all kinds can be used for educational purposes. The B&T and the INSET modules draw from this rich experience in determining how the structures and processes of teacher education can be enhanced by all aspects of online and e-learning.

There have been many analyses of how to improve the effectiveness of school systems. This is now a major concern among politicians and policy makers in most countries. There is a particular urgency in countries often defined economically as low or middle income, where the results and outcomes of

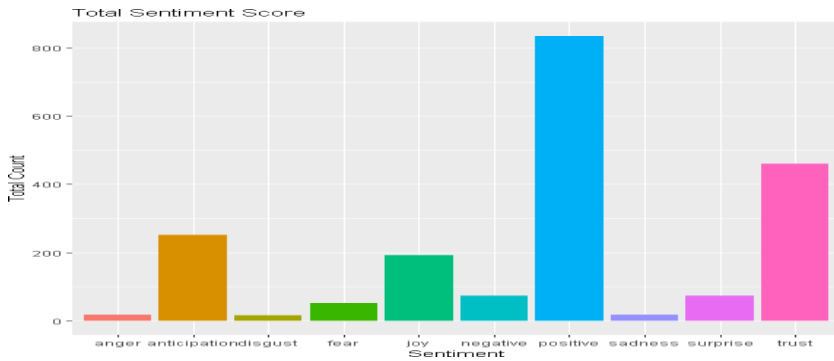
schooling are poor and nowhere near the standards being reported by international assessment organizations.

Given the high political priority given to school improvements, it is inevitable that governments want to be seen to be taking action. There is nothing wrong with this. There are many ways governments or regional authorities can intervene successfully. But, for many years, analysts of change have maintained that “top down” strategies need to be allied with more on-the-ground, “bottom up” strategies if change is to be successful. The combination of policy development from the top and teacher development at the school level have the potential to improve teacher performance and the achievements of young people in school significantly. The school-based INSET programme is one of Sierra Leone’s school improvement initiatives aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning in the junior secondary schools.

Tables showing the use of Mobile technology by the project schools:

A. Koidu JSS - WhatsApp log

Sunday, June 9, 2019 10:13 PM

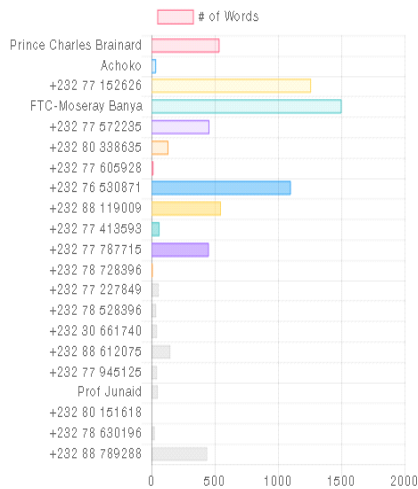
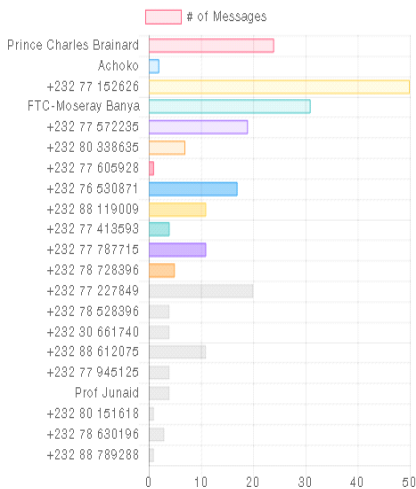


MESSAGES SENT

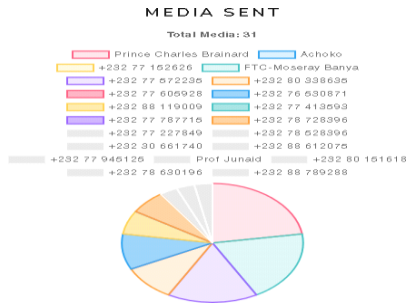
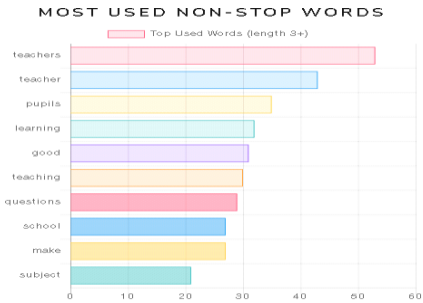
WORDS USED

Accounts for media and deleted messages too | Total Messages: 234

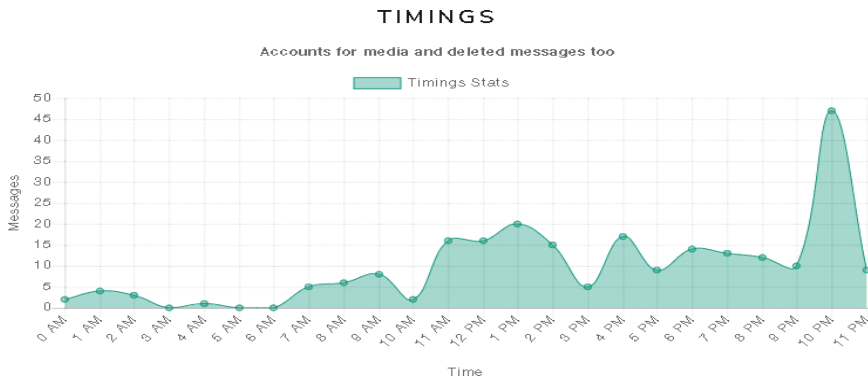
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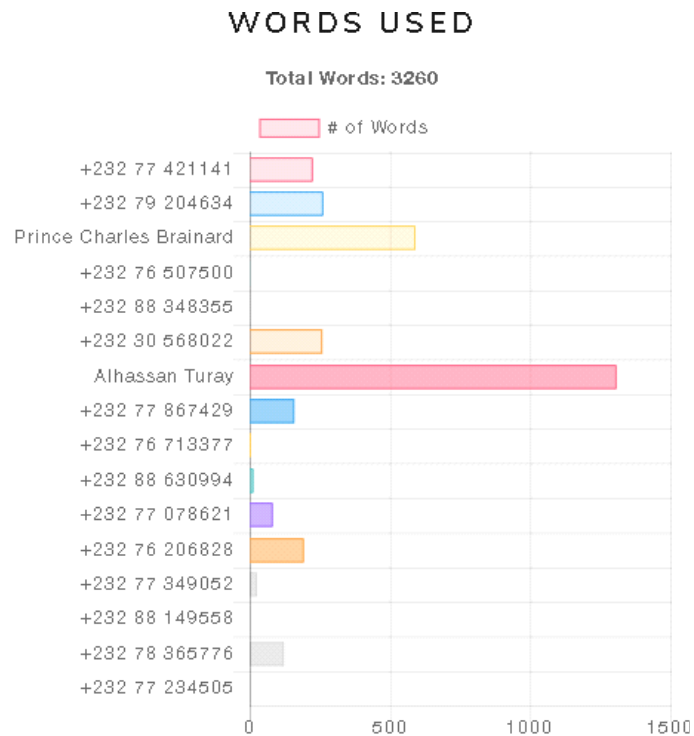
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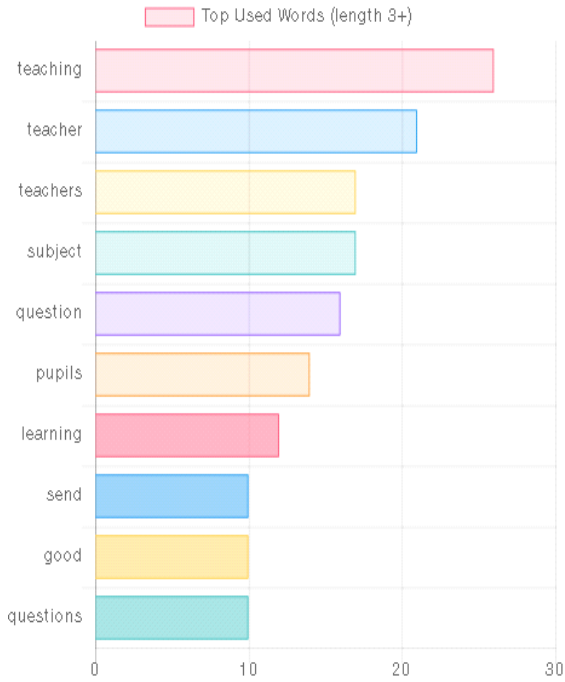


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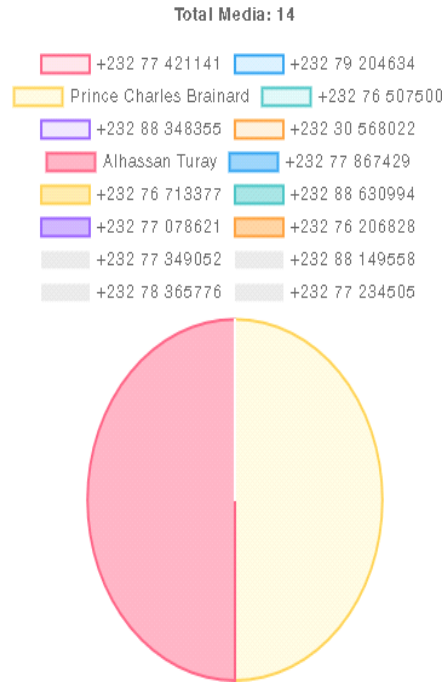
B. Baptiste - WhatsApp Log

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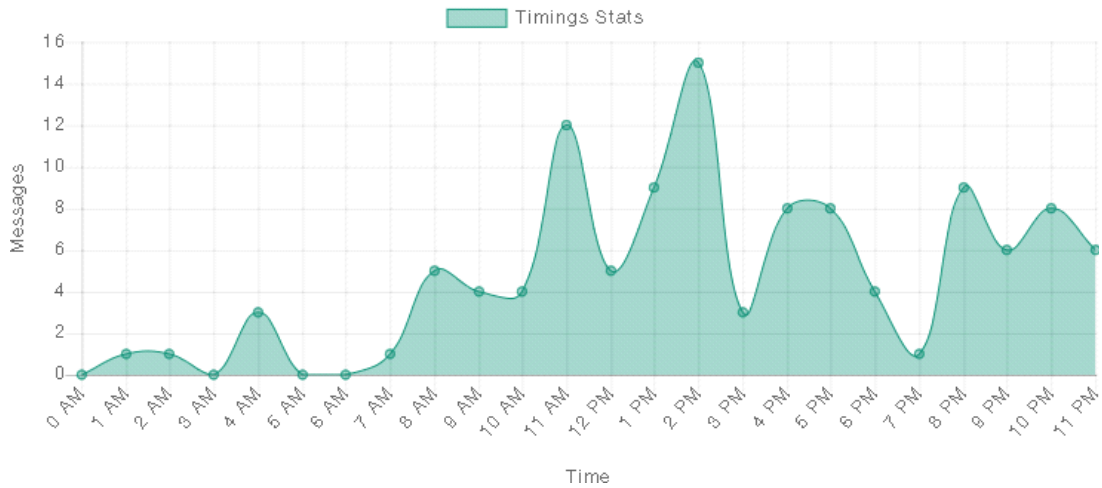


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3. Methodology

3.0 Introduction:

The purpose of the paper was to establish the role of educator mentors in a technology enabled community of practice

3.1 Study Design

The study was conducted using a mixed method approach of both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The two method approaches were used to increase participants' participation, so as to achieve efficiency in the data collection. In addition the study used focused group discussions method as another source of data collection.

3.2 Population and Sample

The target population of the study included: the mentors from FTC, the Principals of the selected Junior Secondary Schools; School Champions and the Teachers. The study sample comprised 185 participants drawn from the targeted population as indicated in the table below:

Category	Number of participants
Mentors (FTC Lecturers)	12
Principals (JSS schools)	12
Champions (JSS schools)	12
Teacher (JSS communities of practice)	149

The FTC lecturers were selected based on their mentorship training in the INSET programme, who were directly responsible in the delivery of the programme. The principals of the intervention schools were chosen based on their leadership and supportive roles in the implementation of the programme and finally the teacher as direct beneficiaries of the programme

3.3 Study Instrument

The main research instruments used in the study were questionnaires; an instrument that enabled the researcher to gather study data over a large sample of the targeted population, and focus group discussion forum.

3.4 Data Collection

The study data was collected through the administered questionnaires, interviews and focused group discussions. The researchers personally visited the selected institutions and attended the focused group discussions. The reason for this was to render assistance to the respondents of the study if they needed clarifications relating to the questionnaires.

3.5 Ethical consideration

The aim of the study was clearly explained to the participants before the answering of the questionnaires, interviews and forum group discussions. The researchers assured the participants of maximum confidentiality in their engagement in the study process. The participants in turn fully consented to participate in the study.

4. The findings

The findings of the study have contributed to enhance a better understanding of educator mentor and teacher engagement, as well as the level of support needed by teachers to construct knowledge collaboratively in a technology-enabled CoP.

4.1 Mentors' role in technology-enabled community of practice

At a recent workshop on leadership in Teacher Professional Development, held at FTC in March 2018, it emerged that many mentors were aware of their role in the inset programme. However, a number of them still needed further training to be able to effectively share resources and also access and monitor the e-portfolio.

What worked was that 79 % of the teachers enrolled in the 12 schools have been active participants in the technology enabled communities of practice. The findings established that these teachers had passion for their continuous professional development as it has been a policy by the TSC that teachers should be engaged in CPD whenever there are opportunities for such trainings, as it is now a criteria set by TSC for promotions. The use of WhatsApp messaging in the CoP by members was recorded as a platform the micro E/learning, for which teachers don't have to leave their school environment for CPD.

What did not work was that 21% of the teachers were not active participants due to some financial constraints due to low/poor teaching conditions of service (especially in terms of teacher salaries, which is less than 150 USD per month), therefore they cannot afford to pay for internet connectivity or megabytes, let alone to purchase a smart phone that cost 100 USD. The teachers also in this category had the assumption that the programme was examinable and because of that they had the fear of failure, which may impact on their status in the schools as they will be considered not qualified to teach; and more over not eligible for promotion despite their length of experience in the classroom. It was also reported that, the expectations of sending one question at a time by the mentors were not adhered to as some were posting 2-3 questions at one given time, which was not the "bite-size" approach. This approached discouraged these teachers to opt out of the programme, as they have little time for reflection and posting of their answers to the discussion forum.

The challenges posed according to the findings included: the school champions spending a lot of time collating the various responses to the question before posting to the mentors. In addition, it took some time for the mentors to give feedback to the responses of the teachers (mentees). Another challenge encountered during the pilot implementation phase, was the inadequate internet connectivity and lack of smartphone by some teachers due to low monthly salaries or remunerations which is less than 150 USD for a man or woman with a family to care for.

The focused group discussions forum highlighted some opportunities of the programme. It was made clear by the respondents that huge opportunities exist outside the school for teachers (mentees) to professionally develop themselves by creating e-portfolio of all activities undertaken in CPD, research and contributions to the field of education. There is tendency for teachers to learn new pedagogical skills and adopt good practices in other schools as a way of developing their lesson deliveries and general classroom interaction.

It was also reported that, the feedback from mentors are mostly motivational, using words like " A very good attempt"; "Thank you"; "keep it up"; " review or modify your answers". Some mentors did not give the mentees substantial feedbacks that would add to their content knowledge. This was demotivating for teachers who were participating and needed positive feedback what will improve their knowledge and practice in the classroom.

5. Recommendations:

- There is need to further train the mentors, school principals, and the teachers on the use of technology enable community of practice, especially on how to access the e-portfolio to record the teachers' assignments; examples of good practices, presentations, video clips etc. It is on the basis of assessment of work done by each teacher that this would be made possible
- There is need to assist the key actors in the CoP and some schools with internet connectivity, especially those in the remote areas.
- There should be constant sensitization and monitoring of the programme to ensure the achievements of the expected objectives.
- That a policy framework be produced the Teaching Service Commission.
- There is need for FTC to collaborate with TSC in the formulation and production of policy framework for the programme that would add value to all activities undertaken.

6. Conclusion:

The following conclusions are drawn from this study:

- That in improving the quality of teaching and learning outcomes in junior secondary schools, there is need to provide school-based continuing professional development opportunities for teachers.
- That mentorship is essential for the continuous teacher professional development in school and mentors must be aware of their roles in the use of technology enable community of practice.
- That a number of teachers still needed further training in technology-enabled CoP to be able to effectively share resources and also access and monitor the e-portfolio.

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