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The management of the labor component through the accompaniment of students in training

La gestión del componente laboral a través del acompañamiento a estudiantes en formación

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ABSTRACT

Mentorship and student support are critical elements in learning management and have become a focus in higher education. However, persistent issues have been identified in these processes that could affect student performance. This article focuses on examining the management of the labor component through the mentorship and support of students in the Bachelor's degree in Education, Foreign Languages, English, at the University of Ciego de Ávila, Cuba. Methods such as document analysis, participant observation, interviews, and surveys were applied. The preliminary findings revealed limitations in the support of students during their practice period, which affected the effectiveness in the management of the labor component and impacted the comprehensive training of future English teachers in the region. Likewise, the study emphasizes the importance of finding strategies to improve the management of the labor component through better support of students in training in this career. The goal is to strengthen the educational process and ensure a more effective and complete education for future English teachers.

Keywords: management, holistic education, labor skills, methods of advancement, guidance.

JEL Classification: I20; J24; M53

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RESUMEN

La tutoría y el acompañamiento estudiantil son elementos críticos en la gestión del aprendizaje y se han convertido en un foco de atención en la educación superior. Sin embargo, se han identificado problemas persistentes en estos procesos que podrían afectar el rendimiento de los estudiantes. Este artículo se centra en examinar la gestión del componente laboral a través de la tutoría y el acompañamiento de estudiantes de la Licenciatura en Educación, Lenguas Extranjeras, Inglés, en la Universidad de Ciego de Ávila, Cuba. Se aplicaron métodos como análisis documental, observación participante, entrevistas y encuestas. Los hallazgos preliminares revelaron limitaciones en el acompañamiento de los estudiantes durante su periodo de práctica, que afectaron la eficacia en la gestión del componente laboral e impactaron en la formación integral de los futuros profesores de inglés en la región. Asimismo, el estudio subraya la importancia de encontrar estrategias para mejorar la gestión del componente laboral a través de un mejor acompañamiento de los estudiantes en formación en esta carrera. El objetivo es fortalecer el proceso educativo y garantizar una formación más efectiva y completa para los futuros docentes de inglés.

Palabras clave: dirección, educación holística, habilidades laborales, métodos de avance, orientación.

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INTRODUCTION

The English language is the main link between different cultures; it fosters international relations, enables the development of trade and foreign policy, and is the primary language of art and science. Due to its relevance, its teaching and learning have expanded in the global community, so speaking English is considered a prevailing skill in these times, as is using technologies, information, and communications (Echeverry & Vargas, 2019).



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In Cuba, the teaching and learning of this lingua franca has been integrated as part of its academic culture; several historical personalities, such as Félix Varela and José de la Luz y Caballero, emphasized the knowledge of it and other foreign languages by the Cuban people (Enríquez et al., 2021). Today, the English language is taught at different educational levels (Mendive et al., 2022; An & Shan, 2023; Bray, 2023), specifically, the Cuban case starting from the third grade in primary education. In addition, language schools throughout the archipelago promote communicative competence, mainly in English.

On the other hand, in Cuban higher education, it is a graduation requirement to reach at least a B1+ level in English. For this task, the language centers inserted in each Cuban university are an essential component (Gutiérrez et al., 2019). The Bachelor's Degree in Education, Foreign Languages, English fully prepares English teachers responsible for continuing the policy of teaching English in the country.

Once graduated, they join the different educational levels: primary, secondary, pre-university, technical-professional, adult, middle-level pedagogical training, and, exceptionally, higher education. In each of these spheres of action, foreign language teachers in the specialty of English have the function of directing the pedagogical and teaching-learning process of the English language, making use of learning strategies that promote the critical reflection of students, as well as the use of research methods and techniques, in order to solve academic and professional problems (Olazábal & Águila, 2020).

In this regard, Howard et al. (2020), Alonso et al. (2020), Sanahuja-Gavaldà et al. (2020), Fernández et al. (2021), Vidal-Alabró et al. (2021), González and Colmenero (2021) and García-Martínez et al. (2022), agree that the integral formation of university students is conceived in the unification of the components that are generated towards the academic and research spheres, as well as extension and labor. It is important to emphasize that it is at the latter that the students of the career come into direct contact with the previously mentioned spheres of action. At this educational level, integrative exercises are of paramount importance.

During the four years of the degree, future teachers in training go through their potential professional development scenarios, which varies according to the academic year. First, second and third-year students are placed in schools corresponding to elementary, middle school (secondary), and high school (pre-university), respectively. Students in their fourth year must complete their internships in the pre-professional placements granted to them by the career ladder, where, upon graduation, they can perform their social service.

In each of the scenarios of action, a network of social relations is established between the university institution and the work centers, in which the tutors and mentors of the work component, students in training, directors and non-teaching workers of the entities, students, family members, and the community intervene mainly. When addressing the term "tutor teacher," García et al. (2019), Valverde (2020), Fuertes et al. (2022), and Asún-Dieste et al. (2023) state that it is a teacher who performs an activity in the pedagogical field; such activity aims to guide and support students during their training process.

As for the term "mentor" or "mentor teacher," Orland-Barak and Wang (2020) define it as the teacher who has the function of accompanying students in training, especially those who are preparing to lead the teaching-educational process. On the other hand, Medina et al. (2017) distinguish between both terms. This author establishes that the tutor teacher is the university professor who coordinates the work activity and guides the practice students. Conversely, the mentor or mentors are those teachers who accompany the students during the practice period in each work entity.

In this framework, tutoring and mentoring as integral accompaniment strategies have been addressed by members of the scientific community, including Moreno-Crespo et al. (2021), Garbizo et al. (2021), and Pérez et al. (2023). Both strategies contribute to the professional training of university students and, from the labor component, lead to the achievement of the objectives set out in the model of the professional in this specialty.

In this way, students, with the orientation and guidance of the tutors and the experience and accompaniment of the mentors, can apply the acquired knowledge system, form pedagogical skills, and perfect and consolidate traits, values, methods, and techniques. However, the work component must achieve the expected Bachelor's Degree in Education, Foreign Languages, and English objectives at the University of Ciego de Avila. Therefore, this article aims to explore the management of the labor component through the accompaniment of students in training for careers.

METHODS

A qualitative approach was followed for the development of the research. The motives were supported by evidence that sought to be focused on the deep description of the phenomenon in question. All this is to achieve a greater understanding and explanation of the same, taking into account, in turn, various models such as humanistic, hermeneutic, phenomenological, and inductive (Sanchez, 2019). Based on the previously mentioned models, methods and techniques such as documentary analysis, participant observation, interviews with students and tutor teachers, as well as the survey to mentors were used in the exploration of the management of the labor component, in the accompaniment of the 27 students from 2nd to 4th year of the day course of the career, by three tutor teachers and 11 mentors.

First, an analysis was made of the primary documents, resolutions, and regulations, such as Resolution No. 47 of 2022, the Study Plan for the Bachelor's Degree in Education, Foreign Languages, and the plans and reports of the Investigative Work Practice (PLI). The following indicators were taken into account: the role of the PLI in the integral formation of the student of the Bachelor's Degree in Education, Foreign Languages, and English, the PLI plans, and the actions to be carried out by the students in the PLI. It was possible to observe the development of the practice through the visit to the work practice centers and the PLI defense workshops. During the development of both, the following indicators were analyzed:

- 1. The characteristic elements of the PLI tasks.
- 2. The role of tutoring and mentoring teachers in training students in PLI.
- 3. The link between tutors and mentors
- 4. The student's use of the PLI period.
- 5. The commitment of the mentors to the students in the development of the PLI.
- 6. The scientific rigor in the instruments to be applied by the PLI students.
- 7. Mentors' knowledge of the PLI plan, of the actions and tasks to be developed by the students.

Fifteen students were randomly interviewed, divided into groups of five students for each group from 2nd to 4th year, the three tutor teachers and a specialist. On the other hand, a survey was conducted on the mentors because they were dispersed in each of the labor entities of the province. Finally, the survey was structured to consider the professional trajectory and the accompaniment of internship students.

RESULTS

The analysis of the normative documents made it possible to identify the main functions of the tutor as an educator, advisor, and academic and research guide in the integral formation of university students. However, it was found that the term tutor is used with another connotation, and that concerns the teachers of the Ministry of Education (MINED) who accompany the students in the work entities; however, the functions of these teachers still need to be deepened. In addition, the distinction between the roles of university tutors and tutors in labor entities needs to be clarified. Therefore, when referring to both teachers, it is decided to assume the position of Medina et al. (2017), who distinguish work entity teachers from tutor teachers, using the term "mentor."

The joint work of tutors and mentors in accompanying students in training should facilitate the insertion into the spheres of action and moderate the path toward developing personal and professional competencies. It is precisely in the accompaniment throughout the internship period that both parties' roles and prevailing work in successfully training students become apparent, especially given the characteristics and challenges currently presented. Therefore, the tutor, teacher, and mentor must be role models in all senses and have scientific-professional and psycho-pedagogical preparation.

Likewise, Vicent (2021), Arrue and Zarandona (2021), and Salazar et al. (2022) state that tutoring and mentoring as accompaniment strategies constitute higher forms of education and, in order to offer them, teachers must have vast experience and meet certain qualities and skills. Therefore, continuous professional development is decisive in preparing future tutors and mentors. Several researchers at the international, national and territorial levels, such as García et al. (2018), Mayet-Wilson et al. (2020), Garbizo et al. (2021), Camacho (2021), Lorenzo-Fernández et al. (2022), Luo et al. (2022) and Pishghadam et al. (2022) have emphasized the preparation and improvement of teachers to exercise the functions of tutor and mentor. Likewise, they have offered various development and improvement pathways, such as action plans and professional development strategies.

Although the scientific community has provided professional development paths for teachers who assume or

aspire to assume the functions of tutor and mentor, it was found that there still needs to be an unsystematic character in such development. In the interview conducted with the three teachers who were tutors from the 2nd to 4th year of the day course, it was found that only one had tutoring experience. The other two acted as tutors for the first time and had not received any advice or preparation for the job.

The reality of the tutor teachers did not differ from that of the mentors. In the survey results, the need for knowledge of the functions they had to assume and the systematic nature of their training predominate. Several of the mentors agreed that they used to assume functions only because they were assigned as part of the job, although there was no preparation or remuneration for the fulfillment of tasks that not any teacher would be able to develop (see figure 1).

Figure 1.Results of the interview with tutor teachers and the survey to mentors



Source: Own elaboration. Note: the figure appears in its original language.

The results evidenced in the interview with tutor teachers and the survey with mentors needed to be improved; however, this has been an ongoing problem for some time. Perez (2022) highlights the tendency to make the university teacher responsible as a mentor, as it falls within his or her guiding and educational role. The authors of the research agreed that, although the professor belongs to the Ministry of Higher Education (MES) or the Ministry of Education (MINED), he/she should contribute to the scientific-technical, pedagogical, methodological, and professional improvement of the other members, as long as he/she is in a position to do so.

Returning to the deficiencies in the results, it is necessary to reflect on the guiding work of the tutor and mentor. In the current socio-historical context, students who arrive at the university do so without having a straightforward life project, i.e., they choose a career and study it but are still determining whether or not they will practice their profession once they graduate. In the case of the Bachelor's Degree in Education, Foreign Languages, and English, the professional training students receive is intended to enable them to direct the teaching-learning process of the English language in different educational contexts. However, it is striking that, in the interview with the students, most of them felt they needed to be identified with the teaching work and the goals related to their fulfillment, leading to demotivation, vocational insecurity, and indecision.

If the professional-pedagogical guidance provided by tutoring and mentoring strategies were adequately developed, would students feel encouraged and committed to their profession, the object of work, and mode of action, and would they aspire to acquire the professional-pedagogical skills and qualities of the foreign language professional described in the model of the career professional? These questions made it possible to reflect on the work carried out and the work they aspire to develop. The authors debated these questions with an emeritus professor of the career at the University of Ciego de Avila, who has 49 years of experience as a university professor. This meeting resulted in the following assessment:

University students are the future of education. In their integral formation as future professionals, pedagogical orientation is necessary for them to succeed professionally, especially those who will work as teachers. Teaching the same subjects contributes to their professional pedagogical orientation, providing them with the knowledge and skills necessary for their future performance. Accompanying strategies through tutoring and mentoring also contribute to professional-pedagogical orientation. Faculty tutors and mentors offer individualized and personalized support that helps university students improve their practices and succeed in their careers. Tutoring and mentoring sessions

can guide specific topics, such as developing teaching skills, planning practical lessons, evaluating performance, and managing conflict in the classroom, among many others. Students can also benefit from the social and emotional support offered in tutoring and mentoring sessions or during the internship. Tutoring and mentoring teachers must encourage and engage their students with their profession, object of work, and mode of action and build rapport with them.

On the other hand, the interview with the students also revealed aspects to be considered, such as poor use of the internship time. The students reported that, on the day set aside for the internship in the labor entities, the mentors were assigned only one shift of English class (and sometimes none at all), and after that, the students had no other tasks to perform. This fact was corroborated in the career faculty's visits to the work entities when it was reported that the students had already concluded their day in the early morning hours. However, students in their PLI period were assigned a plan and a guide of actions or activities to be carried out during their time in the entities.

Similarly, the lack of scientific rigor was evidenced while reviewing the internship reports. In their preparation, the standards established in writing the PLI completion report were not considered, and the main actions or activities assigned needed to be fully complied with. The assigned actions or activities should have been specific, considering the year, the semester, the student's interests, the time load of the internship period, and the level of education to which it was addressed. However, the study of the practice plans showed little difference in the actions or activities based on the above indicators.

Although the link between the tutors and mentors complemented the accompaniment of the students in training and the management of the labor component, it was possible to confirm the insufficient communication between both during the entire management cycle of the labor practice, especially in the systematic and final evaluation. For the culmination of the work experience, it was difficult for both professors to be present because the work entities were located in different municipalities of the province, and transportation made it difficult for the tutors to travel to the entities or for the mentors to travel to the university. However, this did not justify not considering the mentors' opinions and assessments when evaluating the students during their defense of the internship report.

Thanks to technological development, there are several means of communication among which stand out: telephone calls and conversations through instant messaging networks -such as WhatsApp and Telegram- in which the tutor teachers and mentors were able to reach a consensus about the internship student's performance; which was complemented with the defense of his final report. Faced with this or other problematic situations, the teacher should not remain neutral and immobile but should adopt an active stance in the identification and analysis of the problem, as well as in the search for possible solutions, making use of critical, analytical and creative skills to identify and address the challenges present in contemporary education seeking, in this way, novel and practical solutions to improve it.

CONCLUSIONS

The work component constitutes an indispensable element in the professional training of future English teachers, in short, because it is precisely in this component where the acquired knowledge system is generalized and applied, where pedagogical skills are formed, or where traits, values, methods, and techniques are perfected and consolidated. It is also where the study-work relationship becomes evident.

Likewise, through the exploration of the management of the work component through the accompaniment of students in training for the Bachelor's Degree in Education, Foreign Languages, and English in Ciego de Avila, the presence of limitations that affect the pedagogical professional orientation and consequently, the professional training of future English teachers in the province is noted.

The systematic character of the professional improvement of the tutors and mentors comes to light during the research, showing the need to look for ways of development and improvement of the management of the labor component through tutoring and mentoring as strategies of accompaniment of the students in training of the career.

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