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The Relationship Between a University-Based Mentorship Program and First Year Teachers' Performance

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Teacher attrition affects both the stability and quality of schools. Nearly 24% of teachers leave after one year, 33% leave after three years, and 40-50% leave within their first five years (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). Effective mentorship programs can effectively assist teachers in overcoming the challenges that lead to resignation. This study implemented a teacher mentorship program where the mentor was a teacher educator who had worked with the mentees in their undergraduate program. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the study examined first-year teachers' performance through monthly field observations, interviews, and self-reflections. Themes emerged that are critical to a first-year teacher's performance: (a) increased instructional effectiveness; (b) relinquish survival mode, and (c) effective management.

Keywords: University mentorship program, mentoring, first-year teacher, teacher educator

Introduction

According to Shaw and Newton (2014), "If the most precious product developed in education is the student, then our most prized commodity should be the classroom teacher" (p. 3). Yet, a dissatisfaction with teaching conditions is most commonly associated with nearly two-thirds of teachers in the United States who leave prior to retirement. This dissatisfaction results from unfavorable feelings towards compensation, preparation, mentoring and induction, and

teaching conditions (Carver-Thomas, Sutchter, & Darling-Hammond, 2016; Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). Complicating these issues are new teachers who enter the field with a lack of knowledge about the realities of education, and how to successfully address possible, predictable obstacles. Subsequently, new teachers report feeling underprepared, over-whelmed, and under-supported, leading to premature burnout (Callahan, 2016). Thus, it is plausible that a significant disconnect exists in the transition from preparation to practice, creating a vicious cycle of teacher turnover that consequently affects student achievement (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013).

Background Literature

In light of this harmful cycle, research has been conducted on mentorship programs for nearly half a century to address teacher turnover and attrition. According to Callahan (2016), mentors assist beginning teachers in predicting potential obstacles, providing instructional feedback, and facilitating open and honest communication. When new teachers participate in effective mentorships, they are more committed to their jobs, better at keeping students on task, managing the classroom, and developing lesson plans (Ingersoll & Strong, 2012).

The Mentor and Novice Mentee Role and Relationship

A beginning or novice teacher can be defined as a teacher within the initial years of teaching. Teachers in this stage are just beginning to develop their personal teaching philosophy while simultaneously implementing practices learned during teacher preparation. In contrast, a teacher mentor has vast experiences in the field of education and the capacity to effectively guide the novice teacher throughout his or her very first experiences in the classroom (Carver-Thomas et al., 2016).

The novice teacher and mentor relationship should be characterized by professional, honest, and confidential communication. Additionally, mentors should be able to assist the novice teacher in developing his or her professional identity and philosophy. By assisting the mentee in strengthening their sense of identity, confidence, motivation, and commitment increases, and the mentor contributes significantly to retaining the novice teacher.

Mentor structures also exist at the university level (Beam, Burgess, Gut, & Wan, 2016). University mentors are involved in the novice teacher's pre-service preparation, and assist in the transition to inservice teacher. While this mentorship is less common, benefits include a pre-existing relationship and knowledge of the novice teachers' educational background. A university mentor who is not affiliated with the novice teacher's school also provides a level of confidentiality and

objectiveness in existing school policies, procedures, traditions, and/or culture (Beam et al., 2016).

Adverse Effects of Teacher Mentorships

The current body of literature provides ample research on successful mentorship relationships. However, it is important to note that assigning a mentor, also known as the “buddy system,” to a teacher does not always ensure that the mentor is equipped for success. While a positive mentorship contributes to the effective development of teacher identity and instructional effectiveness, a negative mentorship can be detrimental to teacher effectiveness and retention (Behrstock-Sherratt, Bassett, Olson, & Jacques, 2014). Problematic results of deficient mentorships have been noted as discrediting the mentee’s own personal beliefs or opinions, abandonment of the mentee, and overstepping a mentee’s instructional boundaries (Ozcan & Baylor, 2012).

Effects of Positive Mentorships

On the contrary, effective teacher mentors have the ability to assist beginning teachers in making daily decisions that improve student achievement (Mathur, Gehrke, & Kim, 2013). The impact of a strong mentor teacher has the capacity to cause a trickle-down effect on student learning, as strong mentoring programs aid in developing stronger and more effective teachers. As mentors guide beginning teachers towards obtaining small successes during their first years, confidence increases. Confidence is noted as a key indicator of success in many careers (Mathur et al., 2013).

Even though multitudes of effective mentorship programs are administered from within the traditional school, mentorships can also involve outside affiliates, such as university teacher education faculty. A particularly successful study on mentorship between university teacher educators, inservice teachers, and pre-service teachers found that the most effective variable in a mentorship was the use of a reflective dialogue journal kept by the pre-service mentee (Beam et al., 2016). The journal guided conversations during collaborative sessions with the mentor and a university affiliate from within the mentee’s teacher education program. This mentorship model was significant, as it helped bridge the gap between teacher preparation and entering the initial years of the profession — the critical point at which teacher retention rates decrease largely due to a lack of preparedness and support (Beam et al., 2016).

The key element contributing to the success of the aforementioned mentoring program was the constant facilitation of communication. Thus, an effective mentorship relationship must have an intentional tool that facilitates sustained conversation and reflection. Another catalyst for success was the gap that was bridged between teacher preparedness and initial classroom experiences

through the involvement of a university affiliate. By involving a university instructor from the mentee's teacher preparation program, changes were made to the teacher preparation curriculum so as to address specific obstacles described in the mentee's observations or experiences. While outcomes were positive in this three-pronged mentorship program, the mentee central to the study was not a first-year teacher (Beam et al., 2016). Thus, further examination of similar university level programs is needed to determine the impact such programs can have on first-year teachers.

Study Aims

While similar programs exist, the program in this study paired first-year teachers with a teacher educator with whom they worked during their preparation program. Subsequently, a pre-existing bond ensured that the relationship was already formed. This factor is crucial for successful mentor-mentee pairings (Beam et al., 2016; The Texas Teacher Mentor Advisory Committee, 2015). Additionally, the mentor was not an employee of the first-year teachers' schools and the first-year teachers had complete autonomy of their classrooms, unlike some triangulated designs of mentorship (Hobbs & Putnam, 2016). Thus, the mentor had no obligation to involve school faculty in discussions that occurred during mentoring sessions, in contrast to what is seen in Beam et al's (2016) study, and modeled in other school administered mentorship programs. Since the university mentor was an *outside* mentor, another level of confidentiality was assumed. Lastly, this study placed a significant emphasis on self-reflection and explored mentorship from a new perspective by including a university faculty member as a first-year teacher mentor to address the following research questions:

- (1) How does a university-based mentorship impact a first-year teachers' performance?
- (2) Does a university-based mentorship affect a first-year teacher's ability to implement new teaching strategies learned during teacher preparation?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are located within Vygotsky's notion that social interaction is fundamental to learning (1978). The collaboration between an effective mentor and novice teacher relationship, as seen in this study, is a paramount example of social interaction leading to the highest levels of mastery, and ultimately, producing a highly qualified, confident, and skilled teacher who is prepared to lead students to success and increased academic achievement.

Methodology

Design

Principal approval was obtained from all schools prior to implementation of the mentorship program. In addition, four first-year teachers verbally agreed to participate in the mentorship program, and the study was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board. The study took place within four elementary schools in Northwest Mississippi from August 2017 - May 2018 and participants were certified elementary school teachers (K-6). Due to the nature of the program, a convenience sample was utilized for participant inclusion. In addition to being licensed elementary teachers, all participants were graduates of a unique wellness and physical activity endorsement program that prepares teachers to integrate research-based practices using wellness and physical activity into academics. The endorsement can be added onto a teacher's license through the completion of four courses that were approved by the state's Department of Education in May, 2015.

The mentor was a teacher educator who had previously mentored and taught all first-year teachers during their undergraduate teacher preparation program at a university in the Southern United States. This mentoring consisted of informal conversations outside of class or in the teacher educator's office about wellness and physical activity integration and included guiding the teachers as they developed integrated lessons during their undergraduate wellness and physical activity coursework. In addition, the teacher educator had supervised the teachers as they developed and taught a 10-day integrated unit with wellness and physical activity in an elementary classroom.

Instrumentation

Participant observation. The lead researcher observed each participant at least once a month from August 2017 - May 2018. Each participant introduced the lead researcher during the first observation to alleviate any questions from students. Lesson observations were scheduled at the convenience of the mentee, and while participants did know when the observations would take place, lessons were taught in a typical manner without interference of the mentor (ie: mentees did not teach a special lesson for the observations.)

Participant interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researchers with all participants. An interview script was created to ensure all participants received the same, open-ended questions (See Appendix A). Interviews at the beginning of the year took place via Skype, while end of the year

interviews took place in person and in each teacher's classroom. Follow up questions during all interviews enabled participants to clarify any misunderstandings or to elaborate when needed. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim in preparation for data analysis.

Teaching reflections. After each observation, participants reflected on their teaching through a four square reflection document (See Appendix B). All documentation was kept in a Google folder to promote constant dialogue between the mentor and mentee. Dialogue focused on what went well, what the mentee would change, and how the mentor could help. Reflections were often completed during a mentee-mentor conference after the observation, or in rare circumstances, during a phone call within 24 hours of the observation. This metacognitive process enabled the mentees to focus on areas of strengths and to determine solutions for weaknesses that engaged the mentor in co-constructing goals, ultimately guiding the mentee towards success.

Data Analysis

Analysis took place in two phases. During the first phase, all three data sources were analyzed individually and sorted into subsets. The second phase employed techniques of analytic induction and constant comparison, which enabled the researchers to code data into broad categories, followed by emerging themes. Trustworthiness and credibility of the analysis were strengthened through member checking and triangulation (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Participants were able to read and voice any discrepancies from the data as well as confirm the data as presented through a member checking protocol. Through triangulation, researchers compared data to ensure analysis was coherent among all data sources.

Results

Three themes emerged from the data that are critical to understanding the relationship between a first-year teacher's performance within the context of a university mentorship program: (a) increased instructional effectiveness; (b) relinquish survival mode; and (c) effective management.

Increased Instructional Effectiveness

The participants followed the similar development patterns of novice teachers: teacher centered lessons, teaching the content as written, and limited instructional strategies. It was not until several months in, through observations, discussion and reflection, that more effective instructional strategies emerged. Because the mentor taught the teachers in undergraduate studies, they shared

similar ideals for quality teaching (all names are pseudonyms):

I want them to do a lot of self-teaching. That's one of the biggest things I learned throughout your class and just in undergrad in general, is self-teaching. And it works for us and it works for the students. (*Darla, 5th grade, pre-interview*).

Perhaps the most beneficial tool for the participants was the reflection document, which provided a platform for discussions that followed each observation, without the mentor automatically suggesting ways to improve the lesson:

How can I help? Help me set a goal of implementing more active lessons little by little ... I need a goal for how quickly (or slowly) I should implement it (*Beth Ann, 3rd grade, reflective journal*).

The mentor experienced lessons from the outside looking in, thus noticing events happening that the participants did not. For instance, at the 45-minute mark, the mentor noticed students getting restless. For subsequent observations and feedback, instruction time was shorter and lessons either had a kinesthetic component or included a movement break to keep the students on task and academically engaged.

According to the field notes, all participants initially started the year with very little physical activity in their lessons. However, through constant feedback, examples, and encouragement, movement and alternative seating was gradually introduced into the classroom. One participant noted that she introduces the alphabet each week through movement and that the students will stop her and say "Hey! We haven't done that" if she forgets to include it in the weekly routine. From strategies such as these, student engagement increased as well as teachers' instructional effectiveness:

I teach math a lot with movement, such as addition stories. For example, "I have 2 birds flying," and my little birds will fly to the front of the room, and I say, "3 more came to my nest" and the other birds will fly to the front of the room. I say, if you're not following, you're not focused, you don't get picked, so they have to be involved. It's an engager for them. (*Alexis, Kindergarten, post-interview*).

Another observable change was the transition from whole group to more paired and individual work. This is a testament to the guidance of the mentor to help the mentee reflect and realize that some modes of teaching are not always

effective. The mentor encouraged the mentees to employ new strategies that involved more active approaches, particularly during centers. One participant moved from all direct instruction in mathematics, guided solely by workbooks and problem solving on the board at the beginning of the year, to slowly creating centers which included one active center that enabled students to connect movement to what they were learning. An example of this is a center that involved students physically measuring square foot units around the classroom.

Relinquish Survival Mode

During the first few months of school new teachers meander through the survival stage as they struggle to “keep their head above water” while becoming consumed with the daily teaching routines and need to constantly produce new curriculum (New Teacher Center, p. 2, 2016). However, participants in the present study noted that having someone in “their corner” was essential to a successful first-year of teaching and not feeling “thrown to the wolves.” It is important to note that all participants completed four undergraduate classes with their mentor in wellness and physical activity. Thus, all had preparation for the challenges they would encounter in implementing innovative research-based practices. One participant explained:

I feel like being able to really dig into the curriculum was good during my undergraduate courses. We really broke down the standards and looked critically at how health standards and physical activity standards can be integrated. That opportunity helped me build good lessons this year and feel comfortable trying them out with my students (*Leigh, 4th Grade, pre-interview*).

Document analysis of the field observations revealed that although the participants did encounter daily unpredictable challenges, they had a mentor and confidant to reach out to. Subsequently, the mentees steadily gained confidence in their abilities as first-year teachers. Additionally, each mentee had a school-based mentor within their grade level who also supported and guided them through daily challenges. Two of the participants each had a close friend at their individual school whom they could go to for support and/or to ask questions. However, all mentees did note that they felt they could “open up” more to and receive “honest” feedback from their professor mentor:

Despite all of the challenges this year, I have been supported. Through every change that has been made, I have been given great feedback. I have been pushed to do things I am not comfortable with and made to do them; it has really bettered my students and myself (*Beth Ann, 3rd Grade, post-*

interview).

Thus, the layers of survival mode that most first-year teachers develop and carry with them during their first year were peeled off and relinquished half way through the school year, as noted in field observations, teaching reflections, and end of the year interviews. While some teachers may still be grasping to stand confidently in their abilities at the midpoint of the school year, one teacher mentioned that she had “seen a lot of growth, and I think that’s huge!” Beyond academic growth, teachers reported that their students who did not like to do a whole lot became self-motivated by mid-year, which was encouraging for the teacher to see. Self-realization of relinquishing the survival mode was apparent:

I bumped up the rigor, because rigor is a hard thing to master your first year in general. I did this at the end of the 2nd nine weeks, and I just started laying out hard tests. And it failed them at first, but after a while they finally began to rise to the occasion ... their intrinsic motivation started to shine through ... they were just doing it, they knew the expectation, and they knew it was best for them (*Darla, 5th Grade, post-interview*).

Effective Management

As any veteran teacher would attest, effective classroom management is key in creating a positive learning environment (Stronge, Tucker, & Hindman, 2004). Contrary to instructional effectiveness, all four participants demonstrated strong managerial strategies from the beginning by using routines and other strategies that encouraged activity. One participant noted that her students had really “adjusted and are becoming more independent.” From the first day of learning cafeteria routines and “trays flying and things going everywhere,” to “now they’re in and sitting down in no time,” is a testament to teaching routines effectively. This teacher also employed an active management strategy learned in a wellness and physical activity course of “placing tape on the classroom/hallway floors to teach spatial awareness and daily routines” (See Figure 1). For this strategy, electrical tape is laid along lines where students would normally walk for daily routines (lining up to leave the class, walking to the cafeteria, going to the bathroom, etc.) These lines create a concrete visual for the space that students should utilize, which supports learning of routines. For many young children, it is challenging to determine proximity in the spaces they inhabit and the objects that surround them. Thus, utilizing tape as a marker or cue for initial space awareness within a new environment can help students quickly adjust to their surroundings in the classroom.



Figure 1. First-year teacher placing tape on the ground to teach daily routines.

The feedback following each lesson provided implementation ideas for new strategies, improved management, and increased instructional time. Often, the mentor would review time spent in a task, transition times, and downtime. Reviewing and developing a solution for the next lesson proved beneficial as observations that followed improved in each particular area. Reflections, interviews, and field notes also provided insight into the participants' struggles that perhaps they did or did not recognize on their own:

I feel like I waste a lot of time passing out things and handing out materials. I would like to find a more effective way to go about doing those things (*Darla, 5th Grade, reflective journal*).

From observation, some students work better independently ... what do students do after the DO NOWs? There was quite a bit of downtime between completion and next set of instructions (*Mentor, Field Notes*).

Another challenge with my kindergartens is when I first started movement, getting them to realize we need to have self control...and now that we've done it enough I say "Okay, we're gonna do it, but we gotta come back and focus and sit down." (*Alexis, Kindergarten, post-interview*).

Another area of improvement throughout the first year was class set up and distribution of supplies and teaching materials. The mentor provided several

options, allowing the participants to reflect and give them autonomy for what would be best in his/her specific classroom:

In groups, one student can be the paper or supply monitor and be responsible for getting materials and distributing. I have also seen crate or rolling bins placed at groups ... designated bins where papers are placed. You could have materials ready in folders for each row, table, etc. The folders can be distributed before the lesson or as they are needed (*Mentor, Field Notes*).

Through the advice and encouragement of the mentor, participants also began incorporating both music and movement into their lessons as a management tool. For one participant, playing music signaled transition time. This practice was taught and often reinforced in the wellness and physical activity endorsement and easily transitioned into real-world teaching:

Student engagement levels rose as soon as you mentioned the song. This was great! Even the students who were not engaged sat up to participate in this. You reinforced the song throughout the lesson for students to remember how to round (*Mentor, Field Notes*).

Discussion

Beginning teachers have become the most sizable group to leave one of the largest occupations in the United States (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2018). Experiences of first-year teachers are often considered the most challenging time in a teacher's career and survival remains a common goal for the first year (Gavish & Friedman, 2010). However, this study suggests that a quality university-based mentorship program can effectively address the challenges of first-year teachers while simultaneously improving instructional and managerial performance in the classroom.

Clark (2012) stated that "acknowledging that novice teachers need more training before they are to be left alone to teach autonomously can go a long way toward supporting them" (p. 198). This study confirms that having a supportive mentor can effectively counter the feelings of isolation and lack of support that new teachers often feel; in this study, that mentor was a university faculty member with whom the new teacher already had a relationship. The mentor was a constant sounding board both professionally and personally. When a new task was introduced or a new method implemented, the mentor provided the support and encouragement needed.

In line with congruent research, mentors often provide more behavior and management strategies to first-year teachers than other areas of teaching (Bradley-

Levine, Lee, & Mosier, 2016). Additionally, quality, structured time spent with the mentors is key. Within this study, the university mentor allocated time each month to visit and conference afterwards with the mentee. Without specific classroom release time, peer mentors may have more difficulty allocating the needed time to observe, meet, and/or conference in the same way that the university faculty mentor was able.

Aligned with Beam et al. (2016), this study also confirmed that personal reflection is critical to a teachers' first year successes. The mentor in this study incorporated a formalized reflection tool to model that importance, offering additional guidance towards using reflection as an improvement tool. These first-year teachers understood and valued the practice of reflection in their teaching practices.

Another imperative finding from this study and previous studies (Beam et al., 2016) is that communication is key. Mentors should facilitate reflection and guide mentees through exploring different options, creating independence for the learner (Bradley-Levine et al., 2016). Constructive talk is crucial in providing first-year teachers autonomy to find their own solutions and self identity. Communication must be inclusive of trust and without judgment. For a successful mentorship program to work, first-year teachers must be open and honest about their feelings of anxiety, lack of confidence, and be willing to ask for help. The mentor must also be willing to be honest with feedback.

While this study is novel in its focus on a university-based mentorship program, it is not without limitations. The number of participants could be considered a limitation. Due to the new and unique nature of the wellness and physical activity endorsement, the number of participants was relatively small for this mentorship program. Additionally, the geographical location is a limitation in that the participating schools were positioned only in a north-central portion of a southern state, with similar demographics.

Future research can extend upon the current study. One practical and useful extension would be a comparison of first-year teachers' perceptions and experiences with traditional mentors to those with university mentors. While this study only focused on a university-based mentorship, the effectiveness of such mentorships may prove to outweigh traditional mentorships and provide a means for school districts across the United States to supply their new teachers with effective mentors regardless of their overabundance or lack of resources.

Conclusion

In summary, the present study demonstrates how a university-based mentorship program, grounded in pre-existing mentor/mentee relationships, can positively foster the development of teachers during the early years of the profession. Findings provide practical, positive implications for pairing university

mentors with first-year teachers and the impact such programs can have on performance. All first-year mentees in the present study are currently in their second year of teaching and one of the mentees was recently named *Teacher of the Year* within her school district. Another participant was also named *Teacher of the Month* (December, 2017) for her school. While graduates do enter the field with an education degree and endorsements in specialized areas, they are not finished products (Davis & Higdon, 2008). New teachers necessitate positive social interaction within the context of a mentorship to develop confidence in their capacities to facilitate effective classroom management and high levels of instruction. University-based mentorship programs such as the one within this study can provide the support, pre-existing relationships, knowledge, and expertise for beginning teachers to not only become effective teachers who employ innovative strategies for the twenty-first century classroom, but also foster job satisfaction within those teachers, which can contribute to decreased attrition rates as new teachers choose to stay in the profession.

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Appendix A

Beginning of the Year Interview Questions

Expectations for the Year

1. What are your hopes for this year?
2. What goals have you set for yourself this year?
3. What strategies/techniques that you learned in your undergraduate program do you plan to implement?
4. Do you feel prepared or do you have any concerns about any aspect of teaching?

Classroom Management and Organization

5. How are you organizing your classroom for instruction? Seating, teacher records, student records, homework procedures? Absentees? Receiving and distributing materials?
6. How do you plan to use time effectively?
7. What is your code of behavior?
8. How do you plan to achieve good control and how will you handle discipline problems if they arise?

Delivery of Curriculum

9. How do you plan to address the standards/content?
10. How will curriculum be presented?

Meeting Students Needs

11. How will you meet the needs of students in your class?
 - o Reading abilities
 - o Integrating
 - o Preparing for state tests
 - o Supporting ELLs
 - o Groupin

End of the Year Interview Questions

1. How do you feel the school year has gone from zero (this is the worst experience of my life and I am quitting teaching) to ten (this was exactly what I imagined teaching would be like)? _____ Why do you give it this rank?
2. What are the top three things that you feel went well for you this?
3. What are three areas that you hope to improve on for next year?
4. How well did your preparation at _____ University support you to start teaching?
5. Do you feel you are better prepared than other new teachers? In what ways?
6. In what ways do you wish you would have been better prepared for your first year of teaching?
7. What ways have you been able to successfully implement your endorsement program ideals?

Appendix B

Name:

Observation Date/ Time:

Goal(s):

Content Area:

Setting: Small group instruction

Centers

Other:

What Went Well?	What Would You Change?
What Goal Can I Work On?	How Can Dr. _____ Help?

Teacher: _____

Mentor: _____