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First-Year Teachers' Perceptions of the Mentor Program in a Southeastern School District

Taylor L. Castaldo
Walden University

Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Taylor Castaldo

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

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District

by

Taylor Castaldo

MA, SUNY Oswego, 2015

BS, St. John Fisher College, 2013

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Educational Psychology

Walden University

May 2023

Abstract

Many educators are leaving their teaching positions, especially in the early years of their career. This has led many states and districts to mandate teacher mentor programs for new teachers with the hope of retaining these teachers. However, even with these mentor programs, new teachers are continuing to leave their positions, which affects the district, the school, its employees, and the students. A lack of knowledge about teachers' experiences as mentees in mentoring programs limits a state's ability to improve programs. This study was conducted to address this gap in knowledge. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore new teachers' perceptions of their experiences with their state's mentor program and how they feel supported by the mentor program. The theoretical framework for this study was the Knowles's adult learning theory, andragogy. A generic qualitative approach was used to learn about new teachers' experiences. Participants were nine teachers within a suburban school district in a Southeastern state. Semi structured interview questions were used to gather data regarding teachers' description of their experiences. Data were interpreted through a thematic analysis. Four themes were identified in response to the research questions: (a) mentees' relationships with mentor determine outcome, (b) mentees' sense of community, (c) mentor communication with mentee, and (d) mentor program's overall structure. This study's findings may have potential implications for positive social change within school districts and the ways they support new teachers. Greater support for new teachers may increase teacher retention and contribute to positive social change in the community.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving family. To my husband, Matt, thank you for supporting me through this long process and never second guessing my dream. Thank you to my mom for always being a phone call away to update on my progress and being my number-one cheerleader! To my dad for always being proud of me and my accomplishments. And, of course, to my dog Beau for joining my work time as a foot warmer!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

For the past decade, teacher retention has been a concern for schools across the United States (Spoon et al., 2018). Compared to other professions, teachers are leaving at a much higher rate, especially within the first years of their careers (Ingersoll, 2003; Spoon et al., 2018). Sutcher et al. (2019) found numerous ways that teacher turnover can negatively impact both the schools and the students. Reasons for teachers leaving their profession can include lack of administration support, lower salaries, school or classroom size, or preparedness (Sutcher et al., 2019). States and school districts have been working to determine how to combat teachers leaving, especially those leaving with less than 5 years in the classroom (Hudson & Hudson, 2016). Many states are trying to resolve the issue of teacher retention in a variety of ways, including increasing salaries or stipends, increasing the amount of professional development available, providing a supportive administration team, and grade-level teams including supportive coworkers and mentor programs for new teachers (Feng et al., 2019; Young, 2018). Still, the rates of teacher attrition continue to be concerning. This is especially true for Southeastern states, which have the highest rate of teacher turnover (16.7%) compared to the Northeast (10.3%) (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore new teachers' perceptions of their experiences with their state's mentor program and whether they feel supported by the mentor program within a school district in the Southeast. While there have been studies about the mentor role being crucial to the success of a mentoring program by

helping new teachers transition into their first years of teaching (Lejonberg et al., 2018;

Miller et al., 2019; Peiserm et al., 2017), there is little to no information from the

mentees' perspective and their feelings of the mentor program. This information can be

used to support development and changes to programs to better support teachers and

retain them in their positions with positive implications for school districts, teachers, and

students.

In this chapter, the background, purpose of the study, and theoretical foundation

will be explained. The chapter also includes the research questions and the nature of the

study, definitions of terms used in the study, and discussions of the significance,

assumptions, and limitations.

Background

Teacher mentor programs are being used in school districts across the country to

help combat the concerning rate of teachers leaving their teaching positions, especially

early in their career. The attrition rate has been a concern for over a decade (Spoon et al.,

2018). This trend continues in the United States, including states in the Southeast. One

study in the 2018–2019 school year found that 36% of teachers who left the profession

had 5 or fewer years teaching, and 5% were first-year teachers (Center for Educator

Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement [CERRA], 2019). This was an increase among

teachers with 5 or fewer years of teaching, and the first-year teachers' percentage was the

same as the previous year. The rate of teachers leaving affects the school district, but the

most concerning factor is the effect it can have on students, especially elementary

students. Rondfeldt and McQueen (2017) found that teacher turnover can negatively impact both reading and math achievements in elementary students.

Teachers leave the profession, especially within their first years of teaching, for many reasons. One reason teachers are leaving is that the stresses of teaching becomes too much to handle. This includes feeling misguided and defeated (Callahan, 2016). Another reason teachers are leaving is the increased number of students in their class without additional support (Vannatter, 2019). A third reason teachers are leaving their teaching position is because they feel isolated and overwhelmed (Gordon, 2017). This comes from the climate of the school or school district, which can determine if a new teacher is able to build new relationships with other teachers (Gordon, 2017).

In response to the increasing rate of attrition among teachers new to the profession, many schools and school districts have adopted mentor programs to help new teachers acclimate in their new role (Feng et al., 2019). Teacher mentor programs vary widely depending on the needs of the state and school district (Peiser et al., 2018). When policymakers and school administrators are developing a mentor program to best suit their school district, aspects must be considered for the program to be successful. These aspects include whether the program will be a mentor program or an induction program. An induction program provides more than mentoring. In addition to mentoring, an induction program provides professional development, study groups, and built-in administration support (Lozinak, 2016). Those developing a teacher mentor program should also be concerned with the length of the program. Callahan (2016) and Spoon et al. (2019) indicated that a mentor program should last 2 years, not just 1 year, as many

programs do. Another concern should be the process of pairing a mentor and mentee. A positive relationship between mentor and mentee has been found to positively affect the chances of the mentee staying in their teaching position (Spoon et al., 2019). Consistency is also a key aspect to a successful teacher mentor program. To be consistent, mentors and mentees should schedule meetings for open and honest conversations (Lozinak, 2016). The roles and expectations of the mentor and the mentee should be clearly stated and referenced throughout the program (Behar-Horenstein & Kuang, 2019; Miller et al., 2019). Developers of a mentor program should also consider incorporating local colleges and universities to provide a successful transition (Aktas, 2018).

Teacher mentor programs have been designed to support new teachers with their transition from college to career. Chen (2018) explained that mentoring provides on-the-job training, as well as experience transfer and educational training. The training and support mentoring programs provide for mentees can increase teachers' self-efficacy, which is their level of confidence in their position (Feng et al., 2019). The current literature states that using these key aspects to develop a mentor program can increase the success of the program and teacher retention (Feng et al., 2019).

The research literature mainly speaks to the role of a mentor within a teacher mentor program (Miller et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2019). However, mentees' perspectives and the roles they have during the program are important to understand. The mentees within Sikma's (2019) study explained that mentees need four different kinds of support from their mentors: (a) emotional, (b) contextual, (c) academic, and (d) social. Sikma (2019) also found that mentees tend to value informal mentoring, any help from a

veteran teacher outside of the formal expectations of the teacher mentor program, compared to the formal support. These experiences, formal or informal, allow a mentee to feel less isolated in their classroom and could change their outlook on the field of education (Hudson & Hudson, 2016; Sparks et al., 2017).

A mentor's role and perceptions of the mentoring program seem to be well represented in current literature (Feng et al., 2019; Gilles et al., 2018; Kirkby et al., 2017). Mentors are key to the success of a mentoring program, which depends on whether they are fully invested in the program (Callahan, 2016; Spoon et al., 2019). Willingness and ability to be fully invested may be affected by the other responsibilities a mentor has as a teacher (Sandvik et al., 2019). Mentors become key parts of a school community. Along with the administration, mentors provide mentees with a look at the school's community, culture, and goals (Sikma, 2019; Spoon et al., 2019).

Relationships between a mentor and their mentee is well documented in literature. Spoon et al. (2018) developed a case study to determine the perceptions of a mentor program used at a school. The authors found that the mentor and the mentor–mentee relationship were the most crucial parts to the program and its success (Spoon et al., 2018). Miller et al. (2019) developed a study to examine how a mentor program helps prepare elementary classroom teachers for effective instruction. However, the researchers' focus became the mentors' role, knowledge, and training and not how mentees were helped (Miller et al., 2019). Sandvik et al., (2019) looked at mentors and the other roles these teachers had on top of being a mentor for first-year teachers. The

authors found that the commitment of a mentor was vital to the success of the mentorship compared to the mentor's experience level (Sandvik et al., 2019).

Callahan (2016) stated that studies should be conducted to determine if current mentoring programs schools have established are effective ways to support new teachers. Ronfeldt and McQueen (2017) determined that future research should include ways to determine the support mentee teachers receive. Considering the policy analysis of one Southeastern state's mentor program found in Goldrick (2016), a review of mentees' practical experiences within mentor programs could contribute additional knowledge about these programs and their successes retaining teachers. While the mentor role and responsibilities during the mentor program have been well explored (Miller et al., 2019, Sandvik et al., 2019; Spoon et al., 2018; Whalen et al., 2019), far less is known about mentees' experiences after completing a mentor program. Perspectives from first-year teachers could help alter and develop mentoring programs that better fit first-year teachers' needs, which might increase teacher retention.

Problem Statement

The lack of knowledge about the perspectives of first-year teachers about their experiences with mentor programs means the programs cannot be altered and developed to best fit first-year teachers' needs and allow for an increase in teacher retention. Current research suggests that successful mentor programs can support and retain new teachers (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). Mentors can support the transition from a collegiate teacher program to a career (Miller et al., 2019). Even with state-mandated teacher mentor programs, teacher retention continues to be an issue in many schools, especially

among new teachers (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). The lack of knowledge about teachers' experiences as mentees in mentoring programs limits a state's ability to improve programs.

To gain a greater understanding, current research has looked toward the mentor or the veteran teacher for insight (Lejonberg et al., 2018; Peiser et al., 2017; Sandvik et al., 2019). For example, Sandvik et al. (2019) found that successful mentors must be committed to the program, including the effort they are able to or are willing to put forward. Lejonberg et al. (2018) determined that teacher mentors that go above and beyond what is asked of their role in the mentor program are likely to build a relationship with their mentees. Peiseret et al. (2017) found that a mentor's training is crucial to a successful mentor program. The authors also found that the training mentors receive can vary by state and state policy guidance. While the discussion continues to be focused on mentors and their roles, mentees' perceptions of mentor programs seem to be rarely considered last if at all.

Few studies have been conducted in which mentees' perceptions were considered. Thomas et al. (2019) conducted research asking mentees what they wished their mentor would focus on or what they felt they needed more support in, and the answers depended on grade levels. Whalen et al. (2019) found that mentees felt that, when done correctly, the mentor program shaped their career, but in many cases, mentees informally sought out a mentor as opposed to being assigned a mentor through a program. Whalen et al. (2019) stated that more research is needed to determine if and how a mentor program can increase retention rates of new teachers.

Whalen et al. (2019) explained that more research needs to be done about why mentor programs are not increasing teacher retention rates. This is especially true in Southeastern states, which have the lowest rates of teacher retention (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). These states may be able to increase support for mentee teachers when they gain insights into their experiences of the mentor program. Knowledge of mentees or first-year teachers' experiences of a teacher mentor program could provide knowledge relevant to improving these programs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore new teachers' perceptions of their experiences with their state's mentor program and how they feel supported by the mentor program. The state program reviewed in this study has developed a mentor program for first-year teachers to help prepare and support them in their transition from college to their own classroom (Spearman, 2017). A suburban school district in the Southeast was used to gather information about the mentor programs mentee teachers have available and are required to complete when beginning their career as a teacher in this school district.

Using a qualitative approach, teachers who have been involved in a district program as mentees were asked to describe their experiences and what aspects of the mentor program they thought supported them during their first year of teaching, what aspects of the mentor program supported teacher preparation, and what elements of the program they believe could have been changed. My hope was to better understand first-year teachers' perceptions of the statewide teacher mentor program so their experiences

can influence any changes that need to be made to the mentor program. Better support of first-year teachers may lead to retaining those teachers for years to come.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do first-year teachers describe their experiences with a Southeastern state's teacher mentor program?

RQ2: How do first-year teachers believe their state's teacher mentor program supported them?

Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical framework was the andragogy learning theory developed by Malcolm Knowles (1984), which is also known as adult learning theory. This theory was used to inform research decisions in this qualitative study. Andragogy was chosen for this research study because it is a learning theory solely for adult learners (Knowles, 1984). Within the theory of andragogy, Knowles (1984) explained there are three assumptions essential for successful adult learning different from when a child is learning. The assumptions include that the adult must understand why they need to learn the lesson or topic, adults will learn through trying or experimenting, adults will try their learning with a problem-solving mentality, and the lesson or topic must be considered of value to the learning adult (Knowles, 1984). These assumptions highlight the self-directed characteristics of adult learning.

While a mentor can help a new teacher with most of the assumptions that Knowles (1984) cited, there are some aspects of the theory that a mentee must work through themselves. Adult learners must be internally motivated to learn (Knowles,

1984). They must also be self-directed along the learning journey (Knowles, 1984). This can be a challenge for new teachers who can be overwhelmed within their first year.

This theoretical framework was used to explore the selected teacher mentor program regarding how it supports learning as an adult. This framework will allow for the exploration of the role mentees themselves have during the program. This theoretical framework along with the assumptions were used to develop the research question that focused on mentees' experiences within the mentor program as a first-year teacher. Knowles' theory was also used to shape data collection and analysis of the interviews conducted with the first-year teachers by considering the assumptions within Knowles' andragogy to guide thematic analysis.

Nature of the Study

A qualitative research design was used in this study to gather first-year teachers' perceptions of the statewide mentor program. According to Kegler et al. (2018), qualitative research is helpful to recognize the framework of the study. As Denzin and Lincoln (2013) explained, qualitative research allows a researcher to "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 4). A qualitative research design instead of a quantitative approach is the most appropriate because it provides the opportunity to look past the numbers to make sense of a phenomena based on how the participants experienced it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013).

The specific research method for this study was a generic qualitative method, which focuses on the perceptions individuals have about their experiences (Brinkmann &

Kvale, 2018). The focus of this study was to explore how people interpret their own experiences and the meanings they give to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The specific generic model that was followed was developed by Percy et al. (2015), which provides the researcher with 12 explicit steps for data analysis. Kahlke's (2014) approach to a generic study may have been useful, but the lack of structure did not seem to support this study. Other qualitative research methods may have been useful, such as a case study or phenomenology. However, I did not choose a case study because the data and findings may have been too specific to the group of teachers in the study and difficult to replicate or consider for other groups of teachers (McLeod, 2019). Because the objective was to find out about individuals' perceptions, a phenomenological study focused on lived experience would not have been a good fit (Wertz et al., 2011).

The phenomenon that was studied—first-year teachers' perceptions of a state-mandated mentor program—was based on information about teacher retention and turnover rates. Across the United States, teacher retention rates continue to decrease (CERRA, 2019). This is especially true for first-year teachers (Goldrick, 2016). The perceptions of these teachers about the training they have received may contribute useful insights about the programs.

The participants for this study are first-year teachers who have completed the mentor program based on the state's mandates within one suburban public school district. Semi structured interviews with open-ended interview questions were used to gather data from first-year teachers about their experiences. Once the interviews were completed, the

interview recordings were transcribed, and the transcriptions were coded following Percy et al.'s (2015) method of thematic analysis.

Definitions

The following terms are commonly used in teacher mentor programs and the field of education.

Attrition: The process of teachers leaving the profession for a reason other than reaching retirement age (Den Brok et al., 2017; Kelchtermans, 2017).

First-year teachers: Teachers who are within their first contacted year as a teacher (Callahan, 2016).

Initial mentor training: A program, used statewide, for first-year teachers providing support from mentors as the first-year teachers transition from college to becoming a teacher (CERRA, 2019).

Mentor teachers: Veteran teachers assigned to a first-year teachers or mentees to help facilitate the requirements of the mentor program (Hudson & Hudson, 2016).

New teachers: Teachers who are within their first 5 years of being a contracted teacher (Feng et al., 2019).

Professional development: "Professional development generally refers to ongoing learning opportunities available to teachers and other education personnel through their schools and districts" (Rebora, 2004).

Retention: When a teacher stays in their position the following year. This includes teachers not moving to another school within the school district, moving to another school district, or leaving the profession all together (Callahan, 2016).

Teacher efficacy: A teacher's perceived thoughts of being successful in the classroom, including student motivation, engagement, and learning (Kim & Seo, 2018).

Teacher induction programs: Programs for first-year teachers that include mentoring programs, workshops, orientations, seminars, collaboration, and support to help new teachers navigate their profession (Bowden & Portis-Woodson, 2017).

Teacher mentor programs: Programs based on school district and state requirements that place a veteran teacher and a first-year teacher together. The veteran teacher becomes a mentor to the first-year teacher, providing insight and support to help the first-year teacher be successful in their new role (Gholam, 2018).

Assumptions

All research approaches are based on philosophical and methodological assumptions (Nowell et al., 2017). The assumptions for this qualitative study are within four categories: (a) ontological, (b) epistemological, (c) axiological, and (d) methodological. Ontological assumptions are those that relate to perceptions about the nature of reality (Kreiner et al., 2009). One ontological assumption is that each person perceives their experiences or reality in a different way. This was illustrated in the mentee teachers' responses in the interviews in this study. The assumption was that participants would answer the questions to the best of their abilities based on their experiences and knowledge. Another type of assumption is epistemological, which relates to assumptions based on knowledge or what can be known within a study (Kreiner et al., 2009). The assumption is that many answers may be different from the views or assumptions of a researcher and their experiences. However, in this study, the differences

would not affect the way the mentees' answers were interpreted. The third type of

assumption is axiological, which is about values and what is valuable within a study

(Kreiner et al., 2009). Participants' values and beliefs can be different from those of a

researcher. The assumption here was that the questions developed for the interview were

based on theory with the goal of gaining insight into participants' experiences. The

questions were not based on researcher biases. The final type of assumption is

methodological; these assumptions are based on the methods and procedures used in a

study. The use of interviews and thematic analysis as the most appropriate way to analyze

the data is a methodological assumption. These assumptions are essential to this study as

they pertain to the participants in the selected mentor program and to the researcher.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was to examine first-year teachers' experiences during a

statewide initial mentor training. The study was delimitated to first-year teachers who

have completed their Southeastern state's teacher mentor program. Participants were

those who had not taught at another school or school district and were assigned a mentor

for the start of their career. The teacher participants were from elementary-level

positions. I chose the elementary school level because there is limited literature focused

on that level in the Southeastern states.

Only first-year teachers were used for this study. Teachers who were new to the

specific school district but had previous teaching experience, outside their student

teaching, were not considered for participation. These teachers were not included because

the study was not focused on the transition to a specific school but more to the transition from college to career and support received in that transition.

Limitations

Limitations, challenges, and barriers could have presented themselves during this study. Areas of concern within the study's limitations were about trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, and dependability. According to Cope (2017), dependability is possible when another researcher can agree with study findings. A limitation of this study that relates to dependability was the number of first-year teachers starting during the time of data collection. This number was not something that could be controlled and could affect sample sizes. A barrier could have been recruiting new teachers to participate in the interview and their continual participation throughout the process. According to Cope (2017), credibility is the truth of the data collected based on the person's perception. A limitation that relates to credibility was that the data collected could be specific to the experiences of these first-year teachers. These first-year teachers' experiences may not be similar to those in other states or other school districts. To ensure the study has transferability, which is the ability to apply this study to other groups, all the data collected, and interview questions used are included in the study (see Cope, 2017). This will allow readers to make their own determination from the provided information. Finally, a limitation that relates to trustworthiness could have included the location and program itself considering that I work within the same district but have not been through this specific mentor program. To control bias, I kept notes that allowed for reflection and constant check-ins to prevent biases from altering the study findings. Another challenge

could have been the changes in schools based on the COVID-19 pandemic. Recommendations for schools may change the way the state mentor program is completed. All these obstacles were closely monitored throughout the study.

Significance

The purpose of this qualitative study was to learn about first-year teachers' experiences completing a teacher mentor program. According to Goldrick (2016), in many cases, a mentor program is developed without the input and support of new teachers. This could lead to concerns about whether support needed by first-year teachers were left out. The information may help administrators develop a more supportive program and maintain their staff more effectively. Understanding teachers'/mentees' perspectives can provide insights into the changes that need to be made to the selected school district's mentor program to ensure new teachers are professionally supported. As Goldrick et al. (2012) explained, such knowledge is important because teachers new to the profession have identified lack of support and guidance as a reason for leaving their new position.

This study is significant to the practice and field of education by bringing awareness to teacher retention through mentor programs. This qualitative study will contribute to the understanding of first-year teachers' experiences completing a mentor program and potentially could help this school district make any changes to increase teacher retention. The mentor programs that have been established to help with this concern have not resulted in significant changes in teacher retention (Goldrick, 2016).

Knowles' theory of andragogy (1984) has been used in previous mentor research. However, little research has been done using this theory to study teacher mentor programs. Thus, the use of this theory to understand mentors' training experience may extend the theory to new areas of study. This study could also facilitate social change needed in the field of education as the findings might inform education leaders of what teachers most need to be successful in their first year. Additionally, schools may use these insights to increase teacher retention and support teachers through what can be a challenging year of transition.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I described the problem that school districts have in retaining teachers, especially new teachers, and the reasons teachers leave using findings from previous research (Thomas et al., 2019). I identified the connection between teacher retention and teacher mentor programs and previous research about mentor programs and the role of mentors (Feng et al., 2019). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore new teachers' perceptions of their experiences with their state's mentor program and how they feel supported by the program. This study's theoretical framework was andragogy developed by Knowles (1984), which is also called adult learning theory. A mentor training program in a selected school district in the Southeast was the focus. A generic qualitative method was used for this study to focus on the perceptions of individuals about their experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

In Chapter 2, I describe the methods for searching literature on the topic and expand on the theoretical framework. The theoretical framework of andragogy is

explained in detail, including how it supports the research design for this study. A review

of the literature will describe many factors of this issue. The topics of transition from

teacher turnover and retention, internship to career, mentees' insights, mentors' roles,

mentor–mentee relationships, and mentor programs in the Southeast will also be

described to complete the literature review.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In Chapter 1, I described the lack of first-year teachers' perspectives of their experiences in teacher mentor programs as a problem related to teacher retention rates (see Thomas et al., 2019). Teachers making the choice to leave the profession continues to plague the education system. Reasons for teachers leaving tend to vary; however, a common reason for new teachers leaving their position is due to lack of support or little to no guidance within their school community (Spoon et al., 2018). To combat the increasing numbers of new teachers not returning to the classroom each year, mentor programs have been established in districts around the country (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017).

The focus of this qualitative study is to explore first-year teachers' experiences with a specific school district's state mandated teacher mentor program. This state is located within the Southeastern section of the United States. Mentor programs have been used and developed in schools across the country to help new teachers transition into their full-time role as teachers and meet the district's expectations (Whalen et al., 2019). Mentor programs are also in place to retain teachers after their first year. In this review of current literature, I explore new teacher turnover; teacher mentor programs; roles of mentors, mentee, and administration within the programs; South Carolina's teacher mentor program; and research methods.

In this chapter, the search strategy for relevant literature about the topic and the theoretical foundation, Knowles's (1984, 1996) theory of adult learning or andragogy

will be described. Next in Chapter 2, I present the main concepts and topics in the literature within the fields of teacher mentor programs and the support of first-year teachers. These topics include teacher turnover and retention, mentor program concepts, transitioning from internship to career, mentees' roles, mentors' roles, mentor–mentee relationships, and southeastern states' mentor programs. The chapter will be concluded with a summary.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature was compiled from Walden University library books and journal articles from the following databases: ERIC, Education Research Complete, Education from SAGE, and ProQuest Central. In addition, alerts were set up in Google Scholar for related topics. I also considered dissertations and literature published 10 or more years prior, along with current peer-reviewed literature when needed. This process was used when I found fewer studies relating to a topic. The search terms used in the literature review included the following: *teacher mentor program, teacher mentor, new teacher needs, teacher turnover, teacher turnover reasons, teacher mentee, southeast state mentor program, southeast state teacher, southeast state teacher turnover,* and *teacher mentor relationships*. Most of the literature reviewed was published within the last 5 years. However, some studies and peer-reviewed articles stretched past the 5 years to provide historical context and foundations for the topic. Reviewing both current and historical literature, I found a gap in current research regarding mentees' perspective of a specific Southeast state's mentor program.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation for this study was Knowles's (1984) theory of adult learning, which is also known as andragogy. A mentor program for first-year teachers must consider how adult learning is different from how children learn (Loeng, 2018). Pedagogy, or the way that students or children learn, is different from andragogy, the way adults learn. Within pedagogy, teachers are responsible for the information a student learns (Thessin et al., 2018). Andragogy, however, proposes that adults learn best when they understand what, when, and how they learn (Thessin et al., 2018).

Knowles's (1996) theory is based on assumptions about adult learning. Knowles identified six assumptions that offer a better understanding on the process adults take to acquire or learning something new: (a) adults must understand the purpose for their learning and the benefits must be evident, (b) adults are self-directed and need to be active participants in the agenda, (c) plan and evaluation of their learning, (d) any previous learning or experience must be valued and incorporated, (e) adults must have a sense that they need to learn the information or lesson, (f) there is a need for more engagement including problem-solving, (g) task-solving rather than just focusing on the content, and (h) adults are both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to learn and better themselves.

Knowles was not the first theorist to research adult learning and the theory behind it. The first known researcher to discuss the concept of andragogy was Alexander Kapp (1833) whose book was based on the teachings of Plato and included a section about andragogy. However, Knowles's theory is better known, especially in the United States

(Loeng, 2018). Knowles used the name *andragogy* to refer to the theories of adult learning that were previously nameless (Loeng, 2018).

Knowles and adult learning theory are well established in the field of mentoring. Mentees, with the help of their mentor, are tasked with learning how to become self-directed learners and successful teachers. This application of their learning as a student in their college program continues as they learn as a new teacher and provides the opportunity to gain experience of something new. In studies conducted by Thessin et al. (2018) and Vikaraman et al. (2017), the theory of andragogy was applied to teacher mentor programs. This was based on the theory that Knowles's andragogy (1970) provides the assumption that developers of teacher mentor programs and mentors can use to guide their work with mentees. Therefore, within this field, Knowles's andragogy provides a justification for use as the theoretical foundation for this study.

Thessin et al. (2018) found that a majority of Knowles's assumptions or principles of adult learning are present in the themes when studying mentor relationships. The researchers used a case study methodology to collect data from pairs within a mentor program. Data were collected using interviews, observations, journals, and logs. Five of the six principles of Knowles's (1996) andragogy were present in the study were: "self-direction, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, previous knowledge, understanding of the purpose for learning, and engagement in problem-solving and task-solving" (Thessin et al., 2018, p. 48). Within this study, Thessin et al. (2018) used the framework of Knowles's adult learning theory based on real-world learning opportunities embedded within teacher mentor programs.

Another study that incorporated Knowles's theory of andragogy is one by Vikaraman et al. (2017) who studied coaching and mentoring for beginning teachers. Vikaraman et al. (2017) found adult learning theory was appropriate for their research based on mentors' and mentees' abilities to be self-directed. This included applying their college course information to their teaching experience and continuing to develop within the beginning stages of their career with the help of their mentors (Vikaraman et al., 2017).

Andragogy, as developed by Knowles (1984), was crucial to the development of this study. Mentees or first-year teachers are in the process from student to adult learner. This transition can be difficult for many adults. Andragogy provides explanations of the important aspects of a mentor program and the ability to help transition and retain new teachers.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

In the following sections, I cover concepts present in current literature related to teacher mentor programs, especially programs in Southeastern states. The key concepts found in the literature were the components of the teacher mentor programs, the transition from teaching within an internship to teaching as a career, the roles that both mentors and mentees have within mentor programs, the relationships between mentor and mentee, and the state teacher mentor programs found in Southeastern states. In the review, I present the relevant background knowledge and these ideas under the following headings: teacher turnover and retention, mentor program concepts, transitioning from internship to career,

mentees' roles, mentors' roles, mentor–mentee relationships, and southeastern states'

mentor programs.

Teacher Turnover and Retention

Over the last decade, the rate of teachers leaving the field of education continues

to be a concern. To understand how to increase teacher retention it is important to

understand why teachers are making the choice to leave. One of the reasons Thomas et al.

(2019) found for teachers leaving is the class sizes teachers experience each year. The

authors found that with the increase in student enrollment, class sizes continue to grow.

That, along with a teacher shortage across the country, leads class sizes to continue to

increase.

Gordon (2017) found that retention rates can be affected by the climate of the

school or school district where a new teacher is beginning their career. The climate of the

school can affect the new teacher's ability to build new relationships with other teachers,

help with understanding the building, and making a connection to the community

(Gordon, 2017). Without a sense of belonging, a new teacher can feel isolated. Callahan

(2016) found that teachers leaving the field explained the stressors of teaching became

too much to handle. Participants noted that two stressors of teaching included feeling

misguided and defeated in their work (Callahan, 2016).

The school and the teachers are not the only groups being affected by the rates of

teacher turnover. Ronfeldt and McQueen (2017) found that teacher turnover can have a

long-lasting effect on students, especially their reading and math achievements. Not only

are teachers leaving the field of education, but there is a decrease in the number of

teachers entering the field. Thomas et al. (2019) identified a reduction in the number of students enrolling in preservice or college-level education programs.

Mentor Program Components

Mentor or induction programs are used within school districts across the United States (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). One of the goals of a teacher mentor program is to develop a teacher's efficacy or the level of confidence a teacher has in the classroom (Feng et al., 2019). These programs have similar components but are tailored to the needs of a state and school district where the mentor program is being implemented. Whalen et al. (2019) found mentor programs tend to have differences when considering the need and level of mentoring the program provides new teachers. Peiser et al. (2018) found that mentoring programs are open to the interpretation of policy makers and developers. Some school districts provide more than a mentoring program for new teachers, and these are called induction programs. According to Lozinak (2016), induction programs also include professional development, support groups, study groups, and built-in administration support, along with a mentoring aspect.

Budget constraints also affect the mentor programs school districts can provide. Lozinak (2016) explained that school districts experiencing budget challenges often cannot provide all-inclusive teacher support. Along with the mentee, mentor, and administration, policy makers also need to understand everything about mentor programs. When they are able to see all aspects, policy makers can determine its importance and apply that to the budget (Sparks et al., 2017). In many cases, if a mentor program is provided to a new teacher, it is completed in the first year, and after that, the teacher is

assumed ready. However, Callahan (2016) indicated that mentor programs should be provided for at least 2 years. Within these 2 years, there is more of a chance the program can help improve a mentee's teaching ability which in turn improves teacher retention (Callahan, 2016; Spoon et al., 2019).

One component of mentor programs includes an introduction to the program before beginning (Aktaş, 2018). During this introduction to the program, information about the process is shared, mentors and mentees are paired, and initial meetings are discussed (Aktas, 2018). Each mentor program can do this initial meeting differently depending on the aspects of the program and the needs of their mentors and mentees. However, Aktas (2018) found that both mentees and mentors explain that this delivery of information is usually inadequate. Mentees also explained that at the beginning of the process, most were nervous, which was reflected in their meeting with their mentor (Aktas, 2018).

Once the program is explained the matching of the mentor and mentee is done. The matching of a mentor with a mentee is one of the first crucial parts to a successful mentor program (Spoon, Thompson, & Tapper, 2019). This process can look different within each state and school districts. In many cases the mentor is assigned to the mentee without either's input. There are some criteria that should be taken into consideration when matching the two teachers. At this point expectations between the two educators should be discussed. Behar-Horenstein and Kuang (2019) found that when there is little to no discussion between the mentor and the first-year teacher about the expectations, especially for the first-year teacher's work, there will be negative feelings and frustration.

The authors also found that during these weekly meetings communication is a key aspect. The communication between the mentor and the mentee should be open, flexible, positive, and consistent (Behar-Horenstein & Kuang, 2019). This may not always be easy, especially when the discussion is about topics. Horenstein and Kuang (2019) explain that some difficult topics could include lack of teamwork, productivity of the mentee, and any information about salaries. However, not all pairs will have to have these difficult conversations, it is important that the foundation is solid before an uncomfortable situation must happen.

     The key to a successful mentor program is consistency. Lozinak (2016) found that 76% of first-year teachers reported that the program was not consistent. Behar-Horenstein and Kuang (2019) that when meetings between the mentor and first year teacher were scheduled weekly rather than with the thinking of just holding meeting when they seem to be needed, the meetings were more focused and productive. Consistency from their mentors allowed mentees to feel less isolated (Sparks et al., 2017). The consistency of the mentoring program also allows the mentee accountability and structure that they might not have without the program (Sparks et al., 2017). Another key to a successful program is that it is well-planned, including all areas of education and focus on new teachers changing beliefs and limited experience (Callahan, 2016). Mentor programs should also allow changes to be made based on the mentee and their changing beliefs and the experiences that can be limited (Callahan, 2016). The effort that both the mentor and mentee put into the program will also determine the level of success the program has

(Sandvik et al., 2019). With a goal of a successful mentor program to retain teachers, these all should be taken into consideration.

Throughout the mentor program there are chances for the mentor and mentee to reflect about the experiences in the classroom. During this time, it is crucial that the mentor provide the mentee with solutions that the mentee can apply immediately to their own classroom (Hudson, 2016). The solutions should be provided through modeling and reflecting. According to Hudson and Hudson (2016) mentors should lead the reflective practices with their mentee and model teaching practices, especially classroom management to their mentee. This should include observations of both classrooms, co-planning, as well as brainstorming solutions to any issues that come up within the year (Feng et al., 2019; Hudson & Hudson, 2016). Other activities that should be included in a mentoring program should provide the mentee with insight to the school's climate and culture (Sparks et al., 2017). This insight will allow the mentee to feel a part of the school community.

While the teacher mentor programs were developed to formal build relationships between new teachers and veteran teachers to support the new teacher, some of the most crucial mentoring can happen in an informal setting. Sikma (2019) found that mentees valued both the formal and informal interactions with their mentors.

Mentors and mentees are not the only people that are responsible for a successful teacher mentor program. The administration team at the school level also holds an important role (Spoon, Thompson, & Tapper, 2019). It should be the administration's responsibility to provide the mentor with clear guidelines, a checklist, and the goals that

they would like the program to provide. This information should be provided to the

mentor before the school year begins to allow the mentor time to process the information

(Spoon et al., 2019). The mentor can then pass this information on to their mentee (Spoon

et al., 2019). According to Sikma (2019) administration should focus on the culture at

their school. Along with the climate and culture of the school, the administration team

should help the mentor inform the mentee of the vision of the school. It is also important

to help the mentees see that they belong in this vision of the school and community

(Spoon et al., 2019). This includes addressing the trust and community aspect within their

school. Administration should also be checking in with their new teachers and the

mentors. Sikma (2019) explains that the check ins with the mentees from the

administration should be informal and frequent. During these check ins the administration

can support the mentee both with emotional support, allowing the mentee to vent, and

contextual support, anything that is specific to the school and the way that it is run

(Sikma, 2019; Spoon et al., 2019). According to Lozinak (2016) these check-ins should

produce more of a team approach to mentoring, different from the mentor being

completely in charge.

Research continues to prove that a successful experience with a mentor program

can increase retention of teachers (Gordon, 2017; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). Feng et

al., (2019) stated that "Teachers, who were assigned a mentor and felt supported, planned

to stay with their current district and in the field longer than those who said they did not

receive mentoring" (p. 84). There are many benefits from a successful mentor program.

Daresh (2003) stated in Sparks et al. (2017) that four benefits of mentoring include a

more capable staff for schools, teachers have an improved self-esteem, greater

productivity from teachers, and teachers have a high level of job satisfaction. Mentor

programs continue to become increasingly important with the growing need for quality

teachers across the United States (Spoon et al., 2019). However, Feng et al. (2019) also

found that research is needed to determine the effects of mentoring over the first 3 to 5

years, as most research is within the first 2 years. While research explains that mentor

programs help teacher retention, Whalen et al., (2019) stated that more needs to be found

out about why the mentor programs are not increasing retention rates.

Transition From Internship to Career

The mentor program's goal is to support first year teachers with their transition

from their college internship or student teaching to having their own classroom

(Callahan, 2016; Spoon et al., 2019; Wexler, 2019). Aktas (2018) found that first-year

teachers described their internship as not proper reflection of a school environment and

that the mentor program was more comprehensive and practical. Mentees also reported

that the mentor program during their internship was not practice oriented and not as

structured and serious as the mentor program their first-year teaching (Aktas, 2018).

Sikma (2019) believes that this reflection could be that college programs are not

explaining the expectations of a first-year teacher well enough to their preservice

teachers.

The connection between college education programs and local school districts is

important for the success of both student teachers and first-year teachers (Sikma, 2019).

According to Ingersoll and Smith (2004), as cited in Crutcher and Naseem (2015),

mentoring practices are and should be integrated throughout the education system in the United States. Ingersoll and Smith (2004) also stated that college/universities continue to build their relationships with their local school districts. However, these relationships can vary based on the particulars of both the colleges and local school districts. These college or university programs should provide first-year teachers with the ability to effectively lesson plan (Sikma, 2019). This knowledge will allow a first-year teacher to focus more on the culture of the school and classroom management.

Mentor programs that are used at the college level with a student teacher or a preservice teacher have many components just like the mentor programs used for first-year teachers. Crutcher and Naseem (2015) explained that in most cases a preservice teacher is required to observe and learn from teachers from local school districts. They also are required to co-plan and co-teach with teachers from those schools. These interactions with local teachers are used to provide preservice teacher real life examples of the requirements that teachers have. This at the internship level allows teachers to come into their first year with a solid understanding of teaching as a career. According to Hudson and Hudson (2016) mentors should help the mentee expand on their knowledge that they have already gained. This could be providing resources to the mentee.

Callahan (2016) explained that mentor programs should have the goal of providing first year teachers with the confidence to manage and become successful in their own classroom. Atkas (2018) stated that universities and local colleges should continue to be a part of the mentoring during the first year. However, Callahan also stated that there is not enough data to support if this is true or not. Throughout the process

mentees tend to shift their outlook. This comes with the change in roles of an intern to having their own classroom (Wexler, 2019). The mentor program allows for this change to happen with the support of school personnel.

Mentees' Roles and Perspectives

While most of the literature focuses on the importance of the mentor within the teacher mentor program (Feng, Hodges, Waxman, & Joshi, 2019; Gilles, Wang, Fish & Stegall, 2018; Kirkby, Moss & Godinho, 2017), the opinion and feedback from the mentee is also crucial to developing a successful program. An opinion mentee stated, according to Aktas (2018) was that mentees prefer that their mentors work in the same location that they do. This is not always the case, the pairing of mentor and mentee can be across different schools, even though Spoon et al. (2019) and Sandvik et al., (2019) both explain the importance of a mentor and their mentee to work in the same school. This can make meetings and discussion more challenging (Aktas, 2018). Mentees also felt it was important that their mentors teach in the same grade or the same content that they do (Spoon et al., 2019). Thomas et al. (2019) found this to be important because different grade level mentees require different feedback and support from their mentor. The authors found that mentees in kindergarten to second grade wanted their mentor to focus on their questions and answering when observing their teaching. However, mentees in third to fifth grade wanted their mentor to focus on their student engagement in the lessons (Thomas et. al, 2019). Feng et al. (2019) also found that mentees are placed with mentors in same grade or content reported higher levels or self-efficacy or confidence

when comparing a new teacher that worked with a mentor that fell into a different grade

or content area or a new teacher that did not receive a mentor in their first year.

Mentees can learn from their mentor throughout the mentor program. One way is

through observations. Mentors and mentees found observing both classrooms to be

beneficial (Sparks et al., 2017). However, the mentor is not always a teacher or uses a

teaching method that the mentee would use. In these cases, Mosley et al. (2017) found

that new teachers still learned through this experience explaining that they now know

what they do not see for themselves as a teacher. New teachers believe that the mentor

programs should be reconsidered and developed in a different manner (Lozinak, 2016).

However, the positive of observing and learning through a mentor can impact the way a

mentee plans and presents their lessons and can help support interactions the mentee has

with their own students (Abbass et al., 2017). In some cases, mentees become frustrated

because their mentor did not provide them with the support, they felt they needed. Abbass

et al. (2017) point out that the mentor may have not provided their mentee with the

support or information or they themselves do not know enough about the topic to

adequately provide help to their mentee. The lack of support can lead to the mentees

feeling confused, like they do not belong in the school community, anxious, that they are

a burden to their mentor, and leading to coping with unwanted behaviors (Aktas, 2018).

These negative feelings do not help the rate of teacher retention.

According to Sikma (2019) there are four different types of support that mentees

want and need from their mentor to feel successful. These four supports included

emotional, contextual, academic, social, and relational. Sikma (2019) found that mentees

sought out emotional support from their mentor most regularly. When a mentor was looking for emotional support, they were simply looking to vent to someone they trust (Sikma, 2019). Emotional support is different from contextual support that mentees actively sought out as well. With contextual support this is help with information specific to the school. Sikma (2019) explains that this can be anything from back-to-school night or classroom responsibilities. The literature also found that the more contextual support a mentee had the happier they were with their position (Sikma, 2019). Academic and social support were also important to the mentee, but not sought after as much. Academic support included anything related to instruction and curriculum. This was also different for each mentor based on their level of understanding the curriculum or history in the classroom as interns (Sikma, 2019). While social support had to do with non-school related interaction, simply just checking in with each other (Sikma, 2019). The final support mentees needed during their first year of teaching was relational support. Sikma (2019) explains that relational support is someone that is related to any experiences the mentee is going through. This support allowed the mentees to feel that their experiences were normal, and it was not a reflection of poor teaching abilities (Sikma, 2019).

Not all mentees want, need, or receive a mentor in a professional stance. Ronfeldt and McQueen (2017) found that different groups of mentees received varying levels of support. The authors reported that Black teachers received more support during the mentoring program than white teachers. Teachers that had more time teaching during their college experience received less support. However, Rondfeldt and McQueen (2017) found no difference in support during a mentor program when considering gender,

highest degree earned, the content taught, salary, and full-time verses part-time. Whalen et al. (2019) found that the participating mentees in their study wanted a mentor and, in some cases, found their mentor in a less formal role. In the informal route that some mentees choose to take included them seeking out an experienced teacher in their school (Sikma, 2019; Whalen et al., 2019). Sikma (2019) found that mentees tend to value informal support over the formal support of their mentors.

Mentees' experiences within the mentor program are often overlooked. However, it is their perspectives that help with the development of the teacher mentor programs. Kirkby et al. (2017) explained the importance of mentees sharing their experience with the hope of continuing to build the culture of the school and their awareness of new teachers.

Mentor's Roles and Perspectives

The mentor is one of the key factors to a successful mentor program (Callahan, 2016). According to Barrera et al. (2010) a mentor is when a senior, teacher in the case of this study, provides support to a novice teacher. This support can be in the form of information relating to the school and teaching, advice, and a place to reflect both professionally and emotionally. While there are common components of a mentor program, most districts and schools have the autonomy to determine the best fit for their teachers and their needs. According to Ambrosetti and Dekkers (2010) as cited by Mosley et al. (2017) finding the right mentor is crucial for first-year teachers, because a mentor can become a "supporter role model, collaborator, friend, teacher or trainer, protector and evaluator" (p. 406). Spoon et al., (2019) believes that it is important that a

veteran teachers volunteer for the role of a mentor, but that is not always the case. Some

teachers are required to be mentors to first year teachers (Lozinak, 2016; Aktas, 2018).

The mentor not being fully invested in the program and mentoring their mentee can affect

the overall success of the program (Spoon et al., 2019). According to Aktas (2018) this

can limit the feeling of burden or stress on the mentor. Lozinak (2016) stated that mentors

believed considering a mentor's outside commitments were also important when

choosing a mentor for the program. The lack in time a mentor has based on the other

responsibilities they have as a teacher can affect the professionalism of the mentor

(Sandvik et al., 2019).

Sikma (2019) explained that those who plan to work with new teachers, especially

those that have become mentors, must commit to the formal aspect of the mentor

programs, as well as the informal aspect of supporting their mentee and building a solid

relationship with them. The informal aspect of mentoring can include the mentor

focusing on nurturing and encouraging their mentee (Sikma, 2019). Mentors can initiate

conversation of both professional and personal lives of the mentee (Hudson & Hudson,

2016). In many cases this is the support a mentee needs from their mentor to feel less

isolated and understood. Some mentees do not know what help they need or should ask

for, it becomes the job of the mentor to continuously check in with their mentees and

provide the help that they need (Sikma, 2019; Callahan, 2016). The informal mentoring

can also come from a transition of the mentors judging their mentees and allowing them

to become more supportive (Lejonberg et al., 2018).

The mentor must complete a training program before they are able to work with a first-year teacher (Spoon et al., 2019). This training will look different based on the state and program the mentor is involved with. A crucial aspect was for mentors to receive strong professional development that they can apply when working with their mentee (Callahan, 2016). The goal of the training for the mentor is to explain the program and their responsibilities (Behar-Horenstein & Kuang, 2019). Effective training for mentors increased their belief in the program and felt more prepared to support their mentees through the program (Miller et al., 2019). However, Behar-Horenstein and Kuang (2019) found that the training for the mentor does not always lead the mentor to efficacy. Miller et al., (2019) found that to be effective mentor training must be research based. The authors recommend a more intense evaluation process to help with this lack of change. Peiser et al. (2018) found that mentors are influenced the most by policy guidance, the training that they are provided, the selection process, and professional training. All these aspects shape the mentor and the experience in the mentoring program.

Mentors become key parts of the school community. Mentoring is a form of leadership in most schools. Teachers that wish to become mentors may be looking for a leadership role in their school for many reasons, including professional growth or collaboration. There is a need to invest in the success of their schools (Gilles et al., 2018). The leadership role of mentoring allows the mentor to work with their administration team to provide them with what they are seeing and working through. This information can help the administration team better support their new teachers and understand any

challenges they might be facing (Thomas et al., 2019). Mentoring also can help the

mentor develop their own self-esteem and professionalism (Sandviket al., 2019).

While it is the job of a mentor to facilitate the transition from internship to having

a classroom of their own, this is not done by just telling the mentee what to do. Instead,

Aderibigbe et al., (2016) found that mentees want to be supported and guided through

their first years as a teacher. The support from a mentor can lead to many positive effects

including positive relationships, the mentee feeling assisted and supported, and less

isolation (Sparks et al., 2017). Hudson and Hudson (2016) found that mentors perceived

themselves as knowledgeable, experienced, and sounding boards for their mentors. A

mentor should not be expected to have all the answers but instead learning alongside their

mentee when they do not know (Grimmett et al., 2018). This is different than seeing their

role as a mentor as someone to just tell the mentee what to do (Hudson & Hudson, 2016).

However, many times it has been found the mentor provides little or no guidance to their

mentee (Aderibigbe et al., 2016). Mentors should help their mentees determine their short

term and long-term goals as a teacher. Callahan (2016) explained that a mentor should

provide their mentee with basic information about the school and teaching and always

allow their mentee to provide feedback.

A change that could be made to the mentor program, which could benefit the

amount and quality of mentoring, is the amount of paperwork that is required. This

amount can lead the mentor to feel overwhelmed and not encouraging (Aktas, 2018).

Mentors see themselves as teachers first and mentors second. This outlook explains that

mentors can become overworked when adding mentoring on top of all their other

responsibilities as a teacher (Sandvik et al., 2019). It is important for policy makers to

consider this when developing or changing their mentor programs. A second change

Aktas (2018) found should be made to the mentor programs were evaluations. In many

cases the mentor must observe their mentee and provide them with a score and feedback.

This can cause a lot of stress for both sides. Aktas (2018) recommended removing the

scores from the evaluation in turn framing it as an observation with helpful feedback.

Another change would be providing a designated time for the mentor and mentee to meet.

This was found to be one of the hardest parts of making the mentor program work.

Sparks et al. (2017) stated that districts should provide the mentees and mentors an early

release time for consistency.

Mentor/Mentee Relationships

A theme that is seen throughout the literature of teacher mentor programs is the

importance of a relationship between the mentor and the mentee within the program

(Mosley et al., 2017; Sparks et al., 2017). The relationship between a mentor and mentee

is crucial and should be the center of the mentoring process, many mentees explain that

their relationship with their mentor was one of the reasons that they stayed at the school

they started teaching (Hudson & Hudson, 2016; Sparks et al., 2017). The relationship

with their mentor could also affect how a mentee looks at the educational field as a whole

(Spoon et al., 2019). The transition from college to career can be difficult without a

strong mentor with a personality that compliments the mentees (Lozinak, 2016; Spoon et

al., 2019). This can lead to less confrontation and more open and honest conversations.

Lozinak (2016) also stated that a collaborative approach was crucial for new-teacher

support. It is important that the mentor create a welcoming environment for the mentee when the program begins and throughout the process (Gordon, 2017). However, Grimmett et al., (2018) found that many times mentors have a negative perception of the mentee that they are working with or mentees in general. These perceptions can include the mentor feeling cynical and frustrated. These feelings could come from the mentor feeling as though the mentees are not ready or able to take on all that a teacher must do, or the mentor could have made assumptions about their mentee if they should have more experience than they do. To shift this perception, professional development is needed for a greater understanding of mentees and any misconceptions (Grimmett et al., 2018).

The determination of the mentor and mentee is just the beginning. The relationship needs to be built around key aspects if it is going to be successful and support the mentee in their transition. While a positive relationship is crucial to the success of the mentoring, it might not come natural to all mentors and mentees. Hudson and Hudson (2016) provided four ways of building or developing a relationship. These ways include conversations that are productive and include goal setting, establishing a rapport between the two teachers, both the mentor and the mentee acknowledging the skills the other possesses, and being supportive through active listening. For other partnerships there could be other ways to form a solid relationship. Hudson (2016) stated that respect and trust were the two key traits that were needed for the relationship. These traits became important based on the situations both teachers would be exposed to together. Hudson (2016) explained that both teachers could be in difficult or challenging situations and may feel vulnerable. This is especially true of the mentee. Trusting that the

other teacher will keep the ongoing to themselves, allows for security and willingness. Mentors can also set the precedence of open and honest communication when they share their own weaknesses in their pedagogy (Hudson, 2016). This comes from the mentor reflecting on their own career (Behar-Horenstein & Kuang, 2019). Hudson (2016) also found that following respect and trust, mentors and mentees expressed that the other was supportive, willing to share practices and resources, and willing to collaborate with problem solving techniques.

Mosley et al., (2017) found that while model and reflective mentoring and the relationship that can build between the mentor and the mentee is the strongest relationship, that is not always the case. The authors found that some mentor/mentee relationships can include tension between the two teachers, which can happen for a variety of reasons. Behar-Horenstein and Kuang (2019) explained that someone mentor and mentee relationships can be faced with tough conversations, or the mentor is unaware of the mentee's experience. This negative conversation leads to unclear directions and tension (Behar-Horenstein & Kuang, 2019).

The best relationships between a mentor and mentee are when the mentor is also willing to be open to input and change that may come from the mentee challenging them (Lejonberg et al., 2018). However, many mentors feel that only the mentee's beliefs about teaching should change, not their own, especially when the mentee does it (Lejonberg et al., 2018). This challenge from their mentees to learn new ideas and strategies can cause tension for some relationships.

Other issues that can lead to tension or a negative relationship between the mentor and mentee include not getting along, not receiving feedback, mentee comparison to other mentees, and the mentees being shown poor examples when observing (Aktas, 2018). This tension can lead to little or no reflection or conversations between the mentor and mentee, which is a key component of any mentor program (Mosley et al., 2017). Hudson (2016) explains that throughout the reflection process the mentor can provide actual advice for the mentor to take back into their classroom, this advice can also show the mentee that with education there is a continued learning journey and teacher continue to develop over their career. To allow for the reflectiveness between the mentor and the mentee, Lozinak (2016) reported that some mentors felt that it was important to not only work in the same building as their mentee but also have similar schedules. This set up would allow for a functional way of setting up times to meet. To allow for a successful pairing and relationship between the mentor and the mentee, getting information from both educators is crucial (Lozinak, 2016). These conversations can also allow those involved to have a better understanding of the program and their role within it (Lozinak, 2016).

A successful mentoring experience with a solid relationship built by the mentor and mentee can lead to continued success for teachers. Lozinak (2016) found that a positive experience with mentoring can build the support system a new teacher will need throughout their career. Lejonberg et al., (2018) explained that in some cases the mentor that goes above and beyond their role as a mentor tends to build solid relationships with their mentee. The success of a mentor and mentee relationship can depend on the role that

the mentor takes on. For example, Grimmett et al. (2018) found there is difference when

a mentor is the role or coworker compared to when they act as caregivers. Mentors that

are coworkers continue to reflect on their mentees teaching as well as their own teaching.

This is done from constant reflection and modeling for their mentee (Grimmett et al.,

2018). A coworker mentor also facilitates the reflective process for their mentee; the

mentor wants to be both a learner as well as a teacher while in the program. This leads to

the mentee feeling comfortable asking questions or being observed by their mentor. This

is compared to the situation in which mentors act as caregivers to their mentees. In these

situations, mentors act as nurturers. This usually happens when the mentee is young.

However, this interaction still leads to a solid connection between the mentor and mentee

(Grimmett et al., 2018). The different roles a mentor has depends on the situation that

they are in. Mentees appreciate when their mentors make them a priority (Lejonberg et

al., 2018).

A Southeast State's Mentor Programs

Southeastern states including Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia,

Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Kentucky have

active teacher mentor programs for their new teachers. Each state's program and needs

are different.

CERRA (2019) reported that from the 2014-2015 school year to the 2019-2020

school year, a continual increase of teachers leaving the profession in South Carolina

from 7.8% to 9% over the five school years. While this information is concerning for the

education system, the number of teachers early in their careers that are not returning is an

even more concerning figure. Garrett (2016) reported that in the school years of 2013 up

to 2015, 1,300 of the 4,100 South Carolina teachers that did not return to their positions

were teachers that had five or less years as a teacher. Even with mentor programs in

place, South Carolina, like most of the United States, is seeing an increase of new

teachers not returning to the profession after their first year (Goldrick, 2016).

The state's mentoring program is based on 12 specific skills and abilities a mentor

teacher must use to evaluate their mentees (Spearman, 2017). These skills and abilities

include "beginning-teacher professional development and effective adult learning

strategies, familiarity with the state's performance assessment system, and the

willingness and the ability to engage in non-evaluative assessment processes, including

planning and reflective conversations with beginning teachers about their classroom

practice" (Goldrick, 2016, p. 13). The mentor's training in the state is not completed after

the initial training since a mentor must also participate in continual professional

development to better support their mentees (Goldrick, 2016). The state being studied is a

state that considers the mentor's workload to allow for the needed time to work with their

mentee; this is not a consideration in all states.

Goldrick (2016) reported on all the mentor and induction programs in all 50 states

discussed their strengths and needs. The state mentor and induction program being

reviewed in this study is one of six states that provides funding for mentor stipends and

local induction program costs. Along with 10 other states, this state focuses on three main

"program elements: (1) classroom observations of and by beginning teachers; (2)

formative assessment of or feedback on teaching from mentors; and (3) participation in a

professional learning community or beginning educator peer network" (Goldrick, 2016, p. v). However, Goldrick (2016) discovered that this state's mentor program was different from the other state programs.

Recently, the department of education within the state used the Expanded Assisting, Developing, and Evaluating Professional Teaching (ADEPT) Standards to align district mentor programs. To ensure the plan's success, each school district within the state was required to draft a plan in which to implement the mentoring program (Spearman, 2017). There are guiding principles for each district as they develop their mentor program. The guiding principles include the requirement that roles across different areas within the school district must be a part of the development, that each person involved must have specific roles and responsibilities throughout the program, specifics to explain how a mentee and a mentor with be paired together, a mentee must complete the designed mentor cycle with their mentor, and that the mentor program must be evaluated annually to determine effectiveness (South Carolina State Board of Education, 2017).

Summary and Conclusions

In chapter 2, the current literature relating to teacher mentor programs and the teacher mentor programs in the Southeastern states was reviewed. Multiple themes emerged in the literature to guide the literature reviews. The themes were teacher turnover and retention, mentor program concepts, transitioning from internship to career, mentees' roles and perceptions, mentors' roles and perceptions, mentor and mentee relationships, and Southeastern state teacher mentor programs. This chapter also included

a review of literature of the theoretical framework of Malcolm Knowles and his adult learning theory, andragogy.

The current research continues to show that a successful teacher mentor program can lead to an increase in teacher retention of qualified teachers (Callahan, 2016; Gordon, 2017; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017; Whalen et al., 2019). When speaking to mentors and mentees, a solid relationship with open and honest communication and willingness to be challenged and grow professionally was key to considering their mentor program to be successful (Feng et al., 2019; Sikma, 2019; Whalen et al., 2019).

The literature review here supports the articulation of the problem addressed in the current study as there is a gap in the research literature about why teacher mentor programs are not helping to increase teacher retention, especially in the Southeastern states (CERRA, 2019; Feng et al., 2019). There is also a gap in the research literature about using mentees' perspectives and experience in the mentor program to help develop more successful programs (Thomaset al., 2019; Kirkbyet al., 2017).

Chapter 3 will provide a detailed discussion about the research design for this study. This will include the research model and the rationale for the model. The role that the researcher has during the study is also explained. Details about the methodology will be explained, including how and why the participants were selected, the instrumentation used for data collection, the procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection and the plan for data analysis. This will be followed by the explanation of the issues of trustworthiness and the ethical procedures.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore new teachers' perceptions of their experiences with their state's mentor program and how they feel supported by the mentor program. In this chapter, I describe the research design and my role as the researcher. In addition, I discuss the population of the participants used in the study, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, any threats to validity, and ethical considerations.

Research Design and Rationale

The nature of this study was qualitative. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2013), qualitative research uses the meaning that people have given their experiences to gather a greater understanding of the given phenomena. The phenomenon studied was the experiences and perceptions of first-year teachers in a Southeastern state in relation to the teacher mentor program they completed. The research design was focused on answering the following research questions:

RQ1: How do first-year teachers describe their experience with a Southeast state's teacher mentor program?

RQ2: How do first-year teachers believe their state's teacher mentor program supported them?

A qualitative approach did support learning about the experiences and perceptions of these teachers. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2013), qualitative research allows a researcher to interpret or understand a natural event based on the experiences and

perceptions of people. Quantitative research would not have been suitable for this study because the goal of the study was to make sense of the teacher mentor program based on the experiences of the mentee teachers.

The specific research method for this study was a generic qualitative approach, which focuses on the perceptions of individual experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The generic model used for this study was developed by Percy et al. (2015). This approach has a detailed 12-step process for data analysis. These 12 steps have been included in the data analysis section. The structure and detailed steps of Percy et al.'s (2015) process was the reason for choosing this generic model.

Using this model allowed for clear themes and patterns presented in the data to be found and analyzed. The themes and patterns provide a better insight into the ways first-year teachers perceive the phenomena of the teacher mentor program. This was crucial to the study because each person perceives the events in their lives based on their experiences (Evans & O Connor, 2017).

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher was to develop and implement the study itself. I also collected and analyzed the data. From this, I was able to write up and present my findings. My history is as a teacher, including a teacher in a Southeastern state public school. My bachelor's degree is in childhood and special education while my master's degree is in literacy education. This experience has provided me the insight into first-year teachers and mentor programs and led to my interest in creating this study.

Given my history of teaching in this Southeastern state, I could have worked with any of the participants. However, I have never mentored or been a supervisor to any of the participants. As the researcher, I kept the participating teachers' identities confidential. Codes were not given to the participants to make sure of this.

There could have been biases based on my history and my position as a teacher within the school district in the study. However, in my role as a researcher and a professional, I managed my thoughts and biases and monitored my wording and directions of questions so that accuracy, credibility, validity, and transferability stayed intact. In analyzing data, I kept notes and a journal throughout the process as forms of accountability. I used these to constantly check in to assure I was on the right track and biases were not affecting the study.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The population for this study included elementary school teacher mentees employed in a Southeastern state school district who had completed the state's mentor program. Within this Southeastern state school district there are three high schools, six middle schools, and 11 elementary schools. The population was taken from all elementary schools, except the one where I work. A population is the larger group from which an appropriate sample for a study is recruited (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The inclusion criteria for participants were that they must be elementary teachers. Elementary teachers can teach kindergarten to fifth grade within this state. The participants also had to be mentees who were able to participate in the teacher mentor program in their first

year of teaching. This means they had graduated recently from a college program. Teachers excluded from the population were teachers who have taught within other school districts before teaching within the school district under study. Teachers were also excluded if they had worked with me.

The population of first-year teachers who have completed their teacher mentor program was used to find a sample of 10 teachers for this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) asserted that this is generally an appropriate size sample for a qualitative study. Purposive sampling was used to select participants from a specific suburban school district in the state. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who are most likely to have information useful to a study (Campbell et al., 2020).

Instrumentation

The instrumentation for data collection was an interview guide. I developed the semi structured interview questions. According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2018), semi structured interview questions allow a researcher to respond to a participant. This allows a researcher more information on the topic being discussed that might not be covered in a structured interview (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

I created the interview questions using current literature about teacher mentor programs and adult learners and Knowles's (1984) adult learning theory, andragogy. The interview questions were developed to allow first-year teachers to discuss their perceptions of the teacher mentor program they completed. Once the interview questions were completed, two teachers who participants of the study were not reviewed the wording and provided feedback.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The participants for the study were recruited from a suburban Southeastern school district. The teachers who met the qualifications of first-year teachers who had completed the school district's state mentor program within the last 3 years (2019, 2020, 2021) were emailed an invitation to join the study as well as an informed consent form. The teachers' contact information was provided to me by the district's coordinator for educator effectiveness. To schedule interviews, participants replied with their consent after reading the background of the study, the procedures, and any risks or benefits from participating in the study.

Once a participant consented to being a part of the study, I sent another email to schedule a time for an interview, which was conducted virtually via Zoom. During the interviews, which were scheduled outside of school hours, I used the interview questions (see Appendix D). I asked all participants the questions in the same order. During the interviews, I took note of demographics and reminded participants of the purpose of the study. I documented all that first-year teachers said by recording the interview within Zoom and using the Olympus voice recorder.

Leading up to the day of the interview, I reminded each participant by email and personally reviewed the interview. Before the interview began, I clarified with the participants that I would be recording the conversation with their permission. I explained that recording allows a researcher to confirm that all information is included and accurate.

Once the interview and recording began, I asked each of the semi structured interview questions following the same order with each participant. Based on the participant's answer to the question, I asked probing or follow-up questions when needed. These follow-up questions, along with the initial questions, allowed for participants to speak about their experiences of the teacher mentor program that they completed. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted once for each participant.

To end the interview, I debriefed each teacher about the interview and the purpose of the study. Then I asked if the participant had any questions and answered their questions. I thanked the participant for being a part of the study, and I made sure that each step was completely documented. This level of documentation allows for any review necessary. The audio recordings from each interview were then uploaded.

Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis was based on the 12-step model developed by Percy et al. (2015). Once the interviews were conducted and the recordings transcribed, I conducted analysis of the data following the 12 steps as outlined. Percy et al. (2015) stated that the first step should be to review and become familiar with all the data collected. Any other field notes or personal notes kept are also reviewed during this first stage. During this stage, it is crucial to become completely immersed in the data, including reading, and highlighting anything that seems to be meaningful for the study (Percy et al., 2015). Once the data are reviewed and highlighted for importance, the next step is to determine whether the information is related to the research question. A researcher must distinguish which information is interesting compared to the information that helps answer the

research question. Once this is determined, Step 3 is to focus on the information related

to the question and eliminate anything else. However, Percy et al. (2015) suggested

keeping the additional information in another location in case there is a time when that

information needs to be revisited. Step 4 is to code the information related to the research

question. This should be done one piece of information at a time (Percy et al., 2015).

Then the data that are connected provide a glimpse into patterns beginning to show in the

data. In this step, a researcher must use their own words to describe the patterns, not the

participants' words. Step 6 is to continue to place patterns revealed in the data, including

direct quotes from the interviews, into categories determined in Step 5. In Step 7, these

are moved from patterns to overarching themes. Percy et al. (2015) explained that this

can be achieved by combining categories from previous steps in themes, which is Step 8.

These themes then became more meaningful.

Once the themes are determined and analyzed, Step 9 (Percy et al., 2015) directs

that the themes are then arranged with corresponding patterns that support the theme.

This is done in a matrix with words and phrases used when discussing the specific theme.

These first nine steps are done with each participant's interview; this is Step 10. Once

that is done, Step 11 is to combine all the analysis of the data that has been completed.

This step is used to find patterns and themes consistent across all participants. This data

analysis plan results in a thematic analysis of the collected data. This is accomplished by

closely examining the data for emerging themes, patterns, and similar categories (Evans

& O Connor, 2017). Percy et al. (2015) explained that the final step to their generic

qualitative research data analysis approach is to use synthesized data to answer the

research question for the study. I developed an Excel spreadsheet to organize the coding process of identifying patterns and recording emerging themes.

The use of qualitative data analysis is essential for finding patterns and themes. According to Evans and O Connor (2017), the way that each person experiences a specific phenomenon leads to their own perception and meaning of the event. These descriptions of experiences are needed to gain more of an understanding of human experiences (Evans & O Connor, 2017). Any discrepant cases found are given close attention. If any discrepancies are found, a researcher revisits the discrepancies. These cases can be used to help modify an emerging theory being used or considered in the study (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

Issues of Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, the areas of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were taken into consideration. Credibility supports the truth of the data and study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). The transferability of the study means that it can be applied to other, similar phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Dependability is the ability of the data to apply over a given time and conditions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Finally, confirmability is the ability to confirm the outcomes through other studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013).

To establish credibility different strategies were used. The first strategy was peer review. This included my committee members, who are not involved with the study, reviewing the conduct of the study and the findings. Member checks were also used, that was, asking one or more of the participants to check the findings of the study (Creswell &

Poth, 2018). This form of checking allowed for any clarification and elimination of confusion. Transferability was ensured with thick description of the participants, the setting of the study, and any resources used. This thick description allowed for other researchers to perform a similar study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Dependability will be ensured by keeping an audit trail for each step. All the steps will also be described in detail for understanding and replication. Both strategies allow for transparency and reliability of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, the confirmability of this study was ensured by basing the findings just on the data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There was no personal bias or other factors that lead to the conclusions of the study. To ensure this an audit trail was used for each step of the study and bracketing and journaling was employed to reduce any personal bias. These details ensured no bias was involved in the study.

Ethical Procedures

The ethical procedures were in the forefront of the development and application of this study. To make certain this study followed ethical procedures, the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) provided permission, approval number 03-28-22-0751627 and protocols were followed. Ethical procedures were followed in all areas of this study from participant selection to data collection and analysis. Permission from the school district was received before any actions were taken (see Appendix). The participants were sent an email that provided them with all the information about the study, including the voluntary nature of participating. Participants were also informed that they could have withdrawn from the study at any point without any questions.

Throughout the study participants' identities were kept anonymous, including their names and the school district that they worked for. All data that I collected was stored and protected by a password and any handwritten notes were locked in a filing cabinet. Both collections of data were to be only accessible to the researcher. All information will be permanently deleted or shredded after 5 years. Because I work within the school district used in the study potential conflict of interest was avoided by not including participants from the same school.

Summary

Within Chapter 3, the research method of this qualitative study was described. The chapter began with the reasoning for the research design based on the research question that has been determined. The specific research method for this study was a generic qualitative approach, developed by Percy et al., (2015). This was followed by the role that the researcher has in the study, including my history with teaching in a Southeastern state and any biases that may have been present. The section on methodology included many important aspects of the study, including the selection of participants and the rationale behind the selection process, the instruments that were used in the study, all the procedures that covered recruitment, participants, and data collection, and the plan for data analysis. The methodology section explained the process of developing the interview questions using current literature about teacher mentor programs and adult learners, and Knowles's (1984) adult learning theory, andragogy. This section was followed by a discussion of trustworthiness in which the areas of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were discussed (Creswell &

Poth, 2018). Finally, the ethical procedures that were followed throughout the study are described.

Chapter 4 will discuss the data collection and analysis of the study. This chapter will also include the setting of the study as well as the demographics that were documented. The results of the study will also be discussed in Chapter 4 and the evidence of trustworthiness.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore new teachers' perceptions of their experiences with their state's mentor program and how they feel supported by the mentor program. Data were collected using semi structured interviews completed through Zoom with nine participants to answer the two research questions. This chapter includes the study setting, participant demographics, and the process used to collect and analyze the data. The chapter also includes evidence of trustworthiness, results, and a summary.

Setting

The goal of the study was to allow mentees or first-year teachers to explain their experiences during the state mentor program completed through their school district. The study was proposed in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic changed many things within the landscape of teaching. During the data collection period of this study, many teachers were given additional duties and responsibilities. I assumed that with these new responsibilities and duties, teachers—especially new teachers—would not want to add another role to their schedule. This is why there was a limited number of participants who volunteered and met the criteria of the study.

Demographics

The inclusion criteria for participants included that they must be elementary teachers. Elementary teachers can teach kindergarten to fifth grade in the state where the research was conducted. Another requirement was that participants had to have participated in the teacher mentor program within their first year of teaching. Participants

were excluded from the population if they had taught within other school districts before teaching within this school district or if they had worked with me, the researcher. The nine participants included eight women and one man. Most of the participants fell within the age range of 20–25 years (seven participants); one participant was in the age range of 26–30, and one participant reported being 35 years or older. A majority of the participants began their mentor program during the 2021 school year. Of the nine participants, seven were classroom teachers, one was a media specialist, and one was a special education teacher.

Data Collection

To begin the data collection, I reached out to the school district's coordinator of educator effectiveness. I briefly shared the purpose of the study and the participant criteria being used for the study. I also spoke to the assistant superintendent of human resources and educator effectiveness to receive approval for the study. Once approval of the study was obtained, the coordinator of educator effectiveness provided me with the email addresses for those who had recently completed or were about to complete the mentor program within the school district. I sent an email to the potential participants. To show interest, the participants filled out a Google form, which included consent information and the participant's ability to consent to the study.

Once they consented, the participants completed their demographic information and signed up for times that suited them for Zoom interviews. The times offered were all after the school district's contract times for elementary teachers. I referred to each participant as a number, such as Participant 1, Participant 2, etc. Most of the participants

chose to have their video on during the interview, but three participants did not. Participants took part in the interview from many different locations, including their home, office, or car. I conducted all interviews from my home office to provide privacy to the participants. All the interviews took place on Zoom and were recorded on Zoom and with an Olympus voice recorder, VN-541PC. The recruitment and data collection process took 7 weeks. Those who volunteered for the study and were determined to fit the criteria were asked to participate in a Zoom interview.

At the start of the interviews, before the recording had begun, I reminded the participants of the purpose of the study. Once approval was provided from the IRB, data collection began. The interviews ranged in time; the longest was 56 minutes, and the shortest was 29 minutes. The location for the participants varied based on the Zoom component of the interview. I conducted a total of nine semi structured interviews. While the plan was to interview 10 participants, by the ninth interview, saturation had been met. Data saturation was shown by the recurring themes as the interviews continued. As stated in Merriam and Tisdell (2016), once there is redundancy within the data, saturation has been met.

Once the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed using Happy Scribe, a web-based application that transcribes interviews. I then checked the interview in Microsoft and made any edits needed, such as words that were not accurately transcribed. Both the video recording from Zoom and the transcription of the interview were saved in a digital password-protected file on my computer.

Data Analysis

Once the transcriptions were finished, I uploaded them to the Dedoose program for analysis. I used this program while also following the 12-step model developed by Percy et al. (2015). The first step is for a researcher to become completely immersed in the data. I was able to do this by reading each of the interviews multiple times. While doing this, I also highlighted and took notes about each of the participants. Once I had been fully immersed in the data, the next step was to determine if the information helped answer the research questions or was just interesting information to know. The data connected to the two research questions regarding how first-year teachers describe their experiences within the teacher mentor program and how they felt supported within the mentor program were analyzed to find patterns.

In this step, I used my own words, rather than the participants' wording, to describe the patterns that emerged based on the data that helped answer the research questions. The patterns were determined by identifying 19 different codes common throughout the data. These codes included: authentic, COVID, frequency, informal, reflective, time management, alone, communication, community, constructive, frustration, helpful, not helpful, open, positive, simplified, structure, unaware, and welcoming. To establish these codes within the data, the Dedoose program allowed me to highlight, and group based on the code determined. The next step in my data analysis was to determine categories. While continuing to determine categories and patterns in the data, I included direct quotes from the interviews. I was able to determine four different categories based on the coded data. These categories included (a) positive interactions,

(b) feeling isolated, (c) program structure, and (d) mentor feedback. I then moved from patterns and categories to overarching themes. The themes identified based on the responses to the research questions are discussed in the results section of this chapter.

For Step 9 (Percy et al., 2015), I used Google Docs to set up tables to organize the themes and direct quotes that corresponded and supported each theme. Once I had done this with all the interviews, I began to combine all the data from each participant. I was able to find patterns and themes consistent across all participants. This data analysis plan allowed for a thematic analysis of the collected data. As Percy et al. (2015) explained, the last step to their generic qualitative research data analysis approach is to synthesize the data collected to answer the research questions for the study. At this point, I was able to answer the research questions that guided my study.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

As established in earlier chapters evidence of trustworthiness was concerned in all areas of the study. These strategies to established credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were used throughout the study to determine trustworthiness.

Credibility

Credibility allows for the truth of the data and study to be supported (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Within this study, credibility was established by using different strategies including checks from members who were not involved with the study directly. This included peer review of the data collected and of how the study was conducted. I used member checks, recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018), by asking three of the

members to review their transcripts. These forms of checking done throughout the study allow for clarification, as well as determining any areas of confusion that need to be eliminated.

Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability

The transferability of the study means whether it can be applied to other similar phenomena; dependability is the ability of the data to apply over a given time and conditions; and confirmability is the ability to confirm the outcomes with other studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). These were also ensured throughout this study. To ensure transferability, I completed a detailed description of the participants, the setting of the study, and any resources used. These descriptions will allow for future researchers to conduct the same or a similar study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

During the study, I kept an audit trail for each step with details for transparency and reliability of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This ensured the study's dependability, and that the data can be applied to the school district's mentor program. To ensure confirmability, I used journaling throughout the study. This strategy helped reduce any personal bias that would have affected the outcome of the study. Journaling also ensured that the findings of the study were focused on the data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

<div align="center">

Results

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In this study, I interviewed nine participants. I asked questions that focused on answering the two research questions. The goal of the research questions was to review the perceptions of first-year teachers about the state teacher mentor program and the level

of support they perceived to receive during the program. The results are presented using

themes to support the two research questions. Results are first explained with the themes

for RQ1 followed by the themes for RQ2. Table 1 presents the themes and subthemes for

each of the research questions posed. In this section, I review each theme and subtheme

in detail.

Table 1

Research Questions and Data Themes

Research question	Data themes
RQ1: How do first-year teachers describe their experience with a Southeastern state's teacher mentor program?	Theme 1: Mentees' relationships with mentor determined outcome. Subtheme1.1: Mentees were provided with a mentor through the program. Subtheme 1.2: Mentees found their mentor independently. Theme 2: Mentees' sense of community Subtheme 2.1: Mentees felt supportive and helped. Subtheme 2.2: Mentees were left feeling isolated
RQ2: How do first-year teachers believe their state's teacher mentor program supported them?	Theme 3: Mentor communication with the mentee Subtheme 3.1: Feedback mentee received from mentor after observation. Subtheme 3.2: Informal communication from mentor Theme 4: Mentor program's overall structure Subtheme 4.1: Mentee felt assignments were helpful. Subtheme 4.2: Mentee became frustrated with timing and assignments

RQ1

The first research question in this study asked: How do first-year teachers describe their experience with a Southeastern state's teacher mentor program? The first research question's goal was to explore the experiences of first-year teachers during their state teacher mentor program. To address this question, three major themes were found and two subthemes for each theme, for a total of four subthemes. In this section, I discuss each theme and subtheme, including quotes from the data collected.

Theme 1: Mentees' Relationships with Mentor Determine Outcome

This theme focuses on the relationship between the mentee and the mentor. There were differences in the outcomes of the pairings. In this district, the administrators would assign a mentor to each mentee. In some cases ($n = 4$), the mentor would be in the same school as the mentee but could teach a different grade. Participant 7 was an example of a mentee with a mentor within their school building. Participant 7 recalled:

> And then during the school year, she would just pop down, ask how I was doing, ask about my family, and then move on. So, it was just kind of nice to have a friend, but then also somebody I could ask questions too.

Participant 6 also had a similar experience with their mentor in the same building. This allowed the frequency of meetings to be simple and constant. Participant 6 explained that she felt comfortable asking questions of her mentor "because I know she's just right downstairs if I needed that."

Other participants did not have mentors within their building. Some participants ($n = 6$) had mentors who taught a similar subject but were in another building. Participant

1 explained how this type of mentoring worked: "I'm the only one in my school who I can talk to. But because of COVID, her coming into the building was very restricted." When mentees did not have a good relationship with or accessibility to their mentor provided through the mentor program ($n = 5$), they sought that relationship and support elsewhere. Participant 9 explained that she found a coworker on her grade-level team who served as her mentor unofficially: "I've had a really strong relationship with my team now, and I just don't I don't want to leave yet."

Some participants ($n = 3$) shared about their experiences with their mentor advocating for them with their principals or other administrative roles. The mentors advocated for their mentees for a variety of reasons. One reason was support from students' parents. Another example was connecting with other teachers, especially those on the mentee's grade level. Participant 1 explained how her mentor helped her set up observations in different schools in the district: "She talked to my principal that having to go take a day off and go observe two other media specialists, which I wouldn't have been able to do without her."

Subtheme 1.1: Mentees Were Provided a Mentor Through the Program. In this subtheme, participants described their experiences with a successful pairing of their mentor through the program. Successful pairing was shown in different ways for each of the participants. For example, some participants related to their mentor as a peer compared to a formal advisor. These relationships include conversations about topics outside of school, like family and hobbies. Participant 7 was a mentee who had a relationship with their mentor as a peer:

I think it goes back to just having a friend, especially me. I moved to the south

from Ohio, and I didn't know anybody. Going into a new environment of where I

lived and then a new environment of where I taught and where I was working.

Just having a familiar face, those relationships just means so much.

Participant 6 also had a similar experience with their mentor:

And then during the school year, she would just pop down, ask how I was doing,

ask about my family, and then move on. So, it was just kind of nice to have a

friend, but then also somebody I could ask questions, too.

Participants with this type of relationship with their mentors were able to fit into the

school community. Participant 4 also discussed the frequency that they would see their

mentor both formally and informally was an important part to their successful

relationship.

Like I know that I could go to her for anything, and she pops in all the time and

we kind of keep up with each other, so.

Participants explained that they felt more comfortable being themselves and trying new

things with the informal support of their mentor. Participant 4 explained their experience

with their mentor.

We became peers as well. We were team members, so I felt like I wasn't being

judged or anything. Again, I was very lucky to have this experience.

While participants enjoyed the informal discussions with their mentor, there were also

participants who appreciated the discussion about school related material. Participant 4

described her experience discussing her classroom and schools needs with their mentor.

So, we saw each other a lot all the time. Constantly talked about curriculum,

students, parents, any sort of need that I had. I just need to walk across the hall

and ask her.

When asked about mentors not in the same building or have a negative relationship with

their mentors, Participant 4 stated:

I would imagine I would have been very stressed out. And I kind of see other

people, who don't have it (support from mentor) as much and how it's impacting

their work lives as well. Absolutely. Yeah, I'm very fortunate. I think it made a

big impact, for sure.

In summary, participants were able to develop a successful, positive relationship

with their program provided mentor. The relationships were founded on frequency,

support, and informal conversations. These examples can help mentors and mentees

navigate through building a relationship with each other that is successful.

Subtheme 1.2: Mentee Found Their Mentor Independently. A majority of the

participants (n=6) stated that the most successful part of the mentor program was the

relationships it built. This subtheme discusses the mentees (n=3) that did not form the

positive relationship with their mentor provided by the school district program but instead

they found the support from another coworker. In most cases this informal mentor was

another teacher that worked either in the building of the mentee or worked on the same

grade level. Participant 9 explained their experience with leaning on their colleagues for

mentoring support.

But outside of even just my mentor, I had really great colleagues from all overreach out, you know, observe. If I ask them, I said, hey, can you teach or can you come and watch me teach ELA or Math or any of these things? So, it was more of an open relationship with a lot of different teachers coming in and out of my room and it never felt like it was pressured or felt like I was putting on a performance. It was all very constructive. Any criticisms I did get, they were tactile, so it was something that I could implement into my next lesson. It wasn't just You did really good or What do you think you should have done better? They had real positive notes to say if needed, cleaned up. They were very specific in what those things were.

Participant 9 was able to find support from many coworkers in a nonformal way. The idea of getting feedback rather than being "scored" or "graded" was refreshing to participants like this one. Participant 5 had a similar experience. They explained that finding an informal mentor, compared to the one that was provided to them, led to more helpful feedback.

I just felt like I was getting more of a straight direct answer because the individuals I was asking knew what I needed or they knew what I was asking, so they were able to give me the answers I was looking for. Whereas with my fourth-grade mentor was a little different. She tried her best to give me those fifth-grade related answers, but there was always going to be a little disconnect where she would say no. Maybe she asked so and so on your team. So, give me that connecting piece.

Participant 8 also found a mentor outside of the program. But credit the program for building the connections and relationships during their first year. They were provided with a mentor that taught a different grade than they did. While they reached out to their team or grade level more. They did find it beneficial to have met other teachers outside their own grade, that they might not have if it was not for the program. Participant 8 explained, "building those connections getting a teacher on a different grade level that I probably would not have met if I wasn't for this mentor program".

In summary, all participants felt that having a successful mentor relationship was the most important aspect of the program. Because of this, those participants that were not assigned a mentor that provided the support or relationship the mentee needed, these mentees found that with another coworker. This was usually someone on their team or grade level. The three participants that had this type of mentor relationship felt that the informal mentor was able to provide them with the information and support they needed in their first year.

Theme 2: Mentee's Sense of Community

The participants shared the importance of the relationships with their mentors to a successful first year. Another relationship that led to success for the mentee was the sense of community they felt within their school as a whole. This theme shares participants experiences with the school community. Some participants (n=5) share their experiences of the mentor program and their mentor helping them to fit into the school community. While others (n=4) were left feeling isolated and alone in their school, leading to negative overall experiences.

Subtheme 2.1: Mentee Felt Supported and Helped. The participants who felt supported and included in their school community explain their positive experiences, especially within their first year of teaching in the school. Some participants experience a strong community within their team, compared to others that also felt this throughout the school. Participant 8 explained the relationship they had with their grade level coworkers, "I've had a really strong relationship with my team now and I just don't, I don't want to leave yet". Participant 8's positive experience with their grade level was the reason that they wanted to continue their position the following year. The retention of teachers, like participant 8, is the main reason for the mentor program. Participant 6 shared their experience of their first year. They explain there are many things to consider when starting your career as a teacher. This includes getting to know the people within your school.

> I had because when you come into a new school that there's all these people and you don't know who you can go to. So, it gave me a set like teacher that I could go to, and it also gave me an administrator. Like, she's just not that I couldn't go to my other two administrators, I definitely could. But she was just my go to because like I already have a relationship built with her. Come on down there and tell her what's going on.

The relationship with participants 6's mentor led to relationships with other coworkers and their administrator within the school. Participant 4 also discussed the relationships within their school and the importance of it for them.

having relationships with the people that we work with to make it feel at home

and comfortable and that kind of thing.

Participant 7 illustrates the importance of the school community that they were able to

experience, with the help of their mentor. This sense of community is the reason

participant 7 chose to stay another year in their position at the school.

I love the dynamics of our school. I love the population of our school. I think

we've got administrators who are supportive when they can, and they've got a lot

going on. But I think you could ask them for help, and they'll help however they

can. I'm excited to move up a grade level because I get my same kids again,

which is exciting, and then it'll just challenge me as an educator to work with a

different team and to learn new standards.

Subtheme2.1: Mentee Was Left Feeling Isolated. While many first-year

teachers discussed their new environment as welcoming and open. This positive

experience had a lot to do with the mentor and their ability to bring their mentee into the

school culture. However, there were 4 participants who shared that most of their

experience their first year both with their mentor and the community felt isolating. Three

of the participants explained that the feeling of being alone was the reason that they

would not return to their position.

Participant 2 provided their experience with feeling alone and the effects that it

had on the success of their first-year teaching. While this participant was provided with a

mentor for their first year, they explain that the match was not great based on

personalities. They explain that they were not able to find that person within their school building that they could talk to and collaborate with.

> It kind of goes back to, like, I kind of feel alone this year. I don't have that person that were our personalities connect and no one to vet to and just talk to about things anyone to really plan with.

Participant 3 also shared their experiences without the collaboration their first year. This participant's mentor was not in the same school. Others who were a part of their collaboration team were also not located within the same school. Participant 3 shared the frustrations of trying to collaborate and work together.

> But there a significant reason is just the collaboration that I have to do with teachers that aren't teachers in my school. We're not willing to do that, and that really hurts a resource kid when we're trying. That's all they need is collaboration. When you won't collaborate, I can't. I'm not a miracle worker. I can't get them to generalize if you're not going to work with me either. And then just some support from admin and overarching pieces and unfortunately the formal parents, not that I don't love them, but sometimes it can be difficult.

Collaboration is not only with other teachers, but there is also the importance of working with the administration of the school and/or the program of the new teacher. Both participants 1 and 2 discussed the frustration of feeling isolated from their administrators. Participant 2 explained the effect of COVID-19 on their ability to work together.

Originally the relationship I had with admin in the beginning of the year,

especially because we were in a pandemic, it was a lot of do your best you can.

Participant 1 also spoke about the frustration of COVID-19 and observations. They said,

"Who I can talk to. But because of COVID, her coming into the building was very

restricted" and "She was on the computer, I was in the classroom teaching my kids, and

she had to watch it on the computer because she had been quarantined." While participant

5 was able to find an unofficial mentor, they share their experiences with feeling alone at

the beginning of their career.

At the beginning it was stressful because we had meetings and I didn't understand

half the stuff they were talking about and the observations, because specialists

were being observed differently than the teachers.

Participant 5 also shares their untraditional start to the school year and the ways they

believe it negatively impacted their experience.

I feel like a lot of that I had to do on my own and I think that was because starting

at a weird time of the year I had to figure a lot of stuff out on my own before I

even got any support which is fine but the purpose of the program was to help

with that process and I just never received it when I needed it so I was definitely

delayed in that aspect.

In summary, although participants experienced challenges within their first-year

teaching, a strong relationship with a coworker allowed them to navigate the difficulties.

Their responses and experiences can provide solutions and guidance for future mentees of

this south-eastern state's teacher mentor program. Finding a coworker, whether it was the

assigned mentor or another coworker, and building a relationship, both formal and informal can impact a first-year teacher's choice to stay at the school, school district or in the teaching profession after the mentor program is completed.

RQ2

The second research question in this study asked: How do first-year teachers believe their state's Teacher Mentor Program supported them? The second research question focused on the state's Teacher Mentor Program itself and the experiences these 9 mentees had during it. There are two themes, each with two subthemes. This section will include direct quotes to illustrate each theme and subthemes.

Theme 3: Mentor Communication with the Mentee

Theme 3 explored the types of feedback and communication from the mentor to the mentee. The participants explained that their communication with their mentor fell into different situations. The first was feedback from their mentor observing the mentee teaching. This type of feedback was more formal. However, participants explained that having their mentor observing rather than an administrator provided more sense of ease. Participant 7 explained their experience when their mentor would come in to observe a lesson:

> Informal-ness of the observations, especially in that first year, are just so helpful because even if it's not on that 4.0 rubric, they're saying, okay, if we were to score you like, these are the things that you're excelling in, and these are the things that are positives to keep in your in your lessons. And then the things that we didn't, it was like, okay, you're not, not doing them. It's just how can we do

those better? So, the observations and having that really constructive feedback was one of the most positive things, and this led me to really successful year this year.

Another situation that was described with mentor feedback was that of curriculum, classroom, and student support. These conversations tended to happen informally and as they came up, rather than in the meeting setting. These questions were usually posed by the mentee to their mentor about something that was happening in their classroom recently. Participant 6 explains the importance of these conversations:

But there's really nothing that compares to being able to go to your mentor or even administration or your industry coach and saying like, hey, what has worked for you, or I have these types of learners, what do you suggest and then kind of working through it together or if they have personal experience.

The third type of communication that was shared was the informal communication was informal conversations that had less to do with the classroom and teaching, but more about the community of the school and checking in with the mentee. Participant 8 explains the conversations they were able to have with their, informal, mentor:

More specific conversation as to what those stresses are coming from or where we can alleviate those things.

These different types of communication between the mentee and the mentor became a crucial part of the mentor program and whether the mentee felt supported and would continue in their position another year.

Subtheme 3.1: Feedback Mentee Received from Mentor After Observation.

During the mentor program, mentees are required to be observed by their mentor, as well as observe their mentor teach. Participants explain that the feedback after they were observed was helpful. Participants also explained that the informal feeling of being observed by the mentor and the low stake conversations after provided them with the feeling of being supported. The feedback from the mentors was reported to be about many different aspects of teaching. Participants stated that feedback included help with students, curriculum, and classroom management. Participant 6 explains the feedback they would receive from their mentor, "communication all the time regarding kids, lessons, and all of that," and "she would coach me". Participant 6 experiences with their mentor communication focused on helping them in the classroom, especially after their mentor would observe them.

Participant 7 had a similar experience with their mentor. The communication was focused on the ways that the mentor could support them in the classroom. Participant 7 explains that the mentor would support them with their concerns. Their mentor would ask frequently, "what skills do you want to work on?"

Participant 4 explained that they would also observe their mentor. They explained that this can give a new teacher idea to use in their classroom after seeing how they actually work in a classroom. Participant 4 would have a discussion with their mentor after the observation and the biggest question that would lead the discussion was, "how can I make this work in my classroom?". This question led to open discussion about

application of ideas in the first-year teacher's classroom. Participant 5 explained their

process of observation and feedback with their mentor during the program,

>she's like three classrooms away from me. But she'd come in scheduled once a
>
>month, but usually once at least every other week. And it wasn't always a sit
>
>down and like, what are you doing? Good. What are you doing bad? A lot of
>
>times it was reflecting on my feelings for teaching. How am I handling the stress?
>
>What am I taking home with me every day? Right. And stuff like that. And things
>
>that I didn't really get a lot of experience in college with was the student teacher.
>
>And I didn't take grading home or I didn't take all these lesson plans home with
>
>me. And my first year I really struggled working like 16 hours a day

Feedback that was provided from the mentor came off as less formal or nerve racking

than if an administrator came in to observe. It was explained that these observations did

feel like the teachers were being graded or critiqued, but more of how to become a better

teacher. Participant 8 explains their experience with this,

>So having her come in as a total outsider, it was low stakes. It was just somebody
>
>who was genuinely there to give you feedback, and I thought that was one of the
>
>best things,

This communication between the mentor and mentee fell into the required aspects

of the mentor program. Which includes the mentor and the mentee observing each other

and discussing the lesson and all that went into it. Overall, the participants explain the

importance and the level of support that they felt with this aspect of the mentor program

within their first year of teaching.

Subtheme 3.2: Informal Communication from Mentor. Communication with the mentor and mentee did not just come in the form of feedback after an observation. Seven participants described communication with their mentor to also be informal. They explained that this was form of communication that was not in a meeting setting or as a part of the required aspects of the mentor program. But they were more casual conversations that happened from pop ins or other locations. Participant 9 explained their experiences with informal communication with not only their mentor but other supportive people in their school building:

> But there's really nothing that compares to being able to go to your mentor or even administration or your industry coach and saying like, hey, what has worked for you, or I have these types of learners, what do you suggest and then kind of working through it together or if they have personal experience.

Participant 9 was an example of the mentee pursuing the informal conversations and feedback. However, there are other situations in which the mentor would come to check in with the mentee informally. Participant 8 explains their experiences with their mentor:

> More specific conversation as to what those stresses are coming from or where we can alleviate those things.

These leading questions provided the structure of the conversation that help the first-year teacher. Participant 8 goes on to describe how the relationship and conversations with their mentor developed over their first year:

> But in the beginning of the year, it was my mentor, teacher and then my fourth-grade team around me. And so, it was a lot of just check ins mostly.

Other participants explained that their mentors would also help them with formal conversations or observations that needed to be completed by the first-year teacher. Or they would help with talking to parents about their students. Participant 4 described how their mentor would help with parent communication by saying, "My mentor was there to help me know what to say," and "We were able to communicate on that level." While participant 7 explains the support they received when preparing for an observation with the administration their first year:

> They gave suggestions for improvement in any areas that she saw and also helped me figure out going into an observation with Admin, what to tell them. What they were going to ask, or what did they want me to be looking for? Other questions she would ask What is something that you would like to improve on that you want me watching out for? So, she gave me those pointers of like, okay, this is what you should work on over the next few weeks.

These examples of informal communication and support between the first-year teachers and their mentors helped solidify the relationship between the two. These types of conversations also were able to fill in between the more formal meetings and conversations.

Theme 4: Mentor Program's Overall Structure

Theme 4 explores the mentor program itself. This includes how the southeastern state and school district set it up. Along with meetings with their mentor and observations, the mentor program required the first-year teachers to complete

assignments, most likely on google classroom, throughout the year. These assignments varied in length and topic throughout the year.

The participants that brought up the assignments and their experiences completing them, had two distinct thoughts about them. The first reaction from the participants was that the assignments throughout the mentor program we helpful and the first-year teachers found them to be useful to their teaching. Participant 8 explains their thoughts on the assignments completed their first year:

> very helpful, everything that we do in the induction program has a point. It has meaning, not just doing little things, just to say, oh, we did this. Everything that we did had meaning and provided value for our time throughout the induction program.

Their experience with the assignments were positive. They felt that the assignments were applicable to their teaching. However, this was not the case for all the participants. There were 6 participants that shared their negative experiences and thoughts about the assignments and overall set up of the program. Participant 3 shared their experience:

> It's a lot. I felt like every time my plate was really full, I'd get almost like, Hey, it's time for our next observation. I'm like, oh, no, the last thing I have time for.

Their experiences with the program felt like additional stress to their already stressful and busy first year.

The different takes on the assignments and the overall structure of the mentor program, while different, shaped the experiences of the 9 participants. These experiences

are important to consider when a new teacher is making the choice to return to their position the following year, or not.

  Subtheme 4.1: Mentee Felt Assignments Were Helpful. During the mentor program, the mentees were required to complete an assortment of assignments. These assignments and any meetings were mostly done virtually because of COVID-19 procedures. The assignments varied in length and topic. Participant 4 was one of the participants that felt that the assignments aspect of the program was beneficial to their first year of teaching. When asked about the assignments Participant 4 shared:

   very helpful, always making sure that not that we're doing like, everything that

   we do in the induction program has a point. It has meaning, not just doing little

   things, just to say, oh, we did this. Everything that we did had meaning and

   provided value for our time throughout the induction program.

  When the assignments can be applied to the first-year teacher's classroom, the benefit was experienced by the participants. Participant 7 had a similar experience with the assignments of the mentor program. They explain that the assignments were not additional stress, to an already stressful first year:

   Because for me, it wasn't like, that difficult. I mean, we had observations. We had

   a few little things that we had to do for induction. I never felt overwhelmed at any

   point in time with my tasks for induction. Like, if I was stressed out in my own

   life, that's a different story. The actual asks that we had to do, I found them

   helpful. They weren't difficult. I never was struggling with them. If I had a

question about something, we did have to do this one project. The project took

like ten minutes. Nothing was very difficult.

Those participants that had positive experiences with the assignments that were a

part of the mentor program explained that the assignments were useful and short. This is

important when consider working with adults, especially adults that have a lot of new and

could be stressful work already, like new teachers.

Subtheme 4.2: Mentee Became Frustrated with Timing and Assignments.

While some participants felt that the assignments were short and useful there were others

that experienced frustration when it came to this aspect of the program. Six different

participants shared their negative experiences with the structure and assignments of the

program.

First year teachers are experiencing new parts and requirements of their career.

Many teachers try to stay as organized as possible, which can allow for time to complete

each new thing they are given. Participant 2 shared their thoughts on the organization of

the mentor program and what they wish would have happened, "But even everyone I

talked to now, I wish that they had given us some kind of calendar of, like, what you need

to do each year." Participant 2 also went on to express how now a couple of years into

her career, they wish they had been provided more information about things that would

need to be done as a teacher in this southeastern state, like renewal of certificates and

other processes. They shared:

Because I know every time I asked, it was like, oh, you don't have to worry about

it your first two years. Right? Well, yeah, that's great. But now I'm getting close

and thankfully I was able to kind of catch up with some of the credits, but I wish

that that was a little bit clearer for renewal points and credits and tech points and

all of that.

Participant 5 also had a more negative experience with the additional requirements of the

mentor program. They stated, "so all of that it was a little confusing," and "we were

dealing with so much other stuff that it was overwhelming." Participant 1 had a similar

experience. Their frustration came from the assigned times of aspects like the

observations that needed to be completed for the mentor program. This participant

explained their feelings by saying:

But if my observation was during that time, it was really hard to get my kids out

of the mode to do an observation and then get back into the progress mode. So, it

was just it was just a lot with how it fell within the lineup of how the schedule of

the year goes.

Participant 2 felt as though the scheduled observations did not lend well to their

planning and pacing. This frustration may cause the mentor or any other educator that is

observing to not see the first-year teachers' true capabilities and how they have

developed as a teacher. Like most adults, participant 1 wanted to make sure that they

were able to use and understand any activities or assignments within the mentor program

was something that they could use within their classroom. However, this became

somewhat frustrating when the purpose of the assignments were not clear. Participant 1

explains their thoughts:

The other aspects where they're like, all right, go to Flip Grid and post some

questions you have, and someone else will give you an answer. I was like, It's

extra work. One of my questions, like, how do you handle fifth grade? And

they're like, develop a relationship with them. And I'm like, Okay, but I see them

40 minutes a week, right? Yeah, I don't know.

Participant 3 had similar thoughts and takeaways as participant 1 about the extra

assignments that were a part of the mentor program. Participant X explains their

frustration with assignments such as flip grid reflections that they were assigned during

their first year of teaching:

I feel like the flipgrids with the little reflection pieces or things that we enjoyed

about teaching or more the fluff activities. Because I would submit a flip grid, I

would respond on to somebody else's because I had to, but not because I honestly

was genuinely interested at times. I just did it because that was what I needed to

do to check the box.

Platforms such as flip grids were used in place of meetings during and after the

COVID-19 pandemic. while this platform allowed for easy access especially with first

year teachers that tend to have a packed schedule already. However, with meetings there

is a chance for authentic discussions and feedback. These discussions can be harder to

establish outside of a typical meeting setting. Participant 3 explains their feelings about

the changes COVID-19 had caused on the mentor program:

Absence of normal meetings. I put that to the wayside where I was doing those

assignments two days in advance or something like that, where I was like, oh,

that's coming up. I get my notification on my Google calendar. I'm like, I got to

find a topic to talk about in the middle of doing all these things.

In-person meetings allowed for reminders and check-ins for assignments that were

coming up. A lot more organization and structure was needed from the first-year teacher

if they were going to be successful within the mentor program.

This sub theme described first year teachers' negative experiences with the extra

assignments that were assigned throughout the mentor program. The first-year teachers'

frustrations ranged from assignments that they did not understand the meaning of to

being able to develop a schedule to stay on top of the assignments as they were due. The

common experience was that these mentees felt as though the assignments were

additional stress to an already stressful year and job.

Summary

Chapter 4 included the results of this study. The chapter began by describing the

setting, which explained the changes that the COVID-19 pandemic may have caused to

the collection of data from first year teachers. Next the demographics were presented

including the characteristics of the nine participants that were relevant to the study and

collection of data. This was followed by the explanation of data collection. The number

of participants was discussed as well as the location and duration of the interviews that

were recorded. This section was also used to shed any light on any changes that were

made after the plan was presented in Chapter 3 of this study. Once the data analysis was

discussed chapter four also explained the evidence of trustworthiness within this study.

This included the evidence of credibility, transferability, dependability, and

confirmability. Chapter 4 concluded with the results from the data collected during the interviews. This included the four themes indirect quotes from the participants that addressed both research questions posed in this study.

Chapter 5 will include the researcher's interpretation of the findings. This will include the comparison to the findings within the peer reviewed literature used within the literature review found in Chapter 2. These findings will also be analyzed based on the theoretical framework used for this study. Chapter 5 will also discuss the limitations found within this study. As well as the recommendations and implications to social change based on the findings.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore new teachers' perceptions of their experiences with their state's mentor program and how they felt supported by the mentor program in a school district in the Southeast. Semi structured interviews of nine elementary teachers within a school district in a Southeastern state were conducted to gather data to answer two research questions. In previous literature, researchers focused on mentors' perceptions of mentor programs. Little or no research was found on this issue from the perspective of teachers who completed mentor programs as mentees.

I conducted this study to learn about their perspectives with the intent to support changes that could be made to the teacher mentor program to best support new teachers. Findings from the study include both positive and negative experiences from participants' perceptions. One of the main findings of the study included the importance of a positive relationship between the first-year teacher and the mentor. In many cases, the participants who did not have a positive relationship with the mentor the school district had provided found the relationship with a different veteran teacher. Another finding of the study included the importance of community in the overall experience of the mentee. Those who felt supported were more likely to stay the following year compared to those participants who stated they felt isolated at their school. Mentor communication with mentees was also important based on the findings. Participants explained that this communication could be feedback after an observation or informal conversation between the two teachers. The most negative experiences of the participants related to other

aspects of the mentor program outside of working directly with their mentor. Participants found the additional assignments included in the program frustrating, and few participants found them to be helpful. These findings are discussed more and interpreted in this chapter.

In this chapter, I explain the interpretations of the findings based on the themes connected to each research question. I describe the limitations of the study and recommendations derived from my analysis of the data collected from the interviews. The implications, including the potential for positive social change, based on the improvement of mentoring programs are also provided.

Interpretation of the Findings

In this section, I interpret the findings and compare them to findings from the literature as discussed in Chapter 2. The themes in the findings were (a) mentees' relationships with their mentor determine the outcome of the program, (b) mentees' sense of community, (c) communication between mentor and mentee, and (d) structure of the mentor program. I include comparisons to the literature and the framework used to develop and create this study. In this section, the connections between the findings and the literature are organized by the two research questions used in the study. The research questions were:

RQ1: How do first-year teachers describe their experiences with a Southeastern state's teacher mentor program?

RQ2: How do first-year teachers believe their state's teacher mentor program supported them?

Interpretations of RQ1 Findings

The first research question was developed to focus on the first-year teachers' experiences with the state's mentor program. The two themes for this research questions were the importance of the mentor and mentees relationship and the sense of community mentees felt during their first year. The literature confirms that the relationship between a mentor and mentee during the program is essential not only for the success of the program and retention of new teachers but also for how new teachers view the education field (Mosley Wetzel et al., 2017; Sparks et al., 2017). According to the data collected, participants who had a positive relationship with their mentor were choosing to return to their position the following school year.

The literature indicated that negative relationships between a mentor and a mentee can develop for many different reasons, including the mentor not being willing to develop and learn alongside the mentee throughout the mentor program process (Hudson, 2016). Participants shared similar explanations for not having a positive relationship with their mentor. These participants also expressed that they would not be returning to their position the following school year.

The next theme identified to answer the first research question was whether mentors or the school helped first-year teachers in the mentor program feel they were a part of the school community. The participants who shared that they had feelings of isolation or negative overall feelings about their school community expressed that this would be another factor in choosing to not return to their current position the following year. However, those participants who expressed feeling comfortable and included in

their school community explained that they would not want to leave their position and were looking forward to continuing their work at their school. Thomas et al. (2019) explained that mentors are a key role in the school community. Mentors can work with both administration and new teachers to bridge any gap there may be. Sparks et al. (2017) also stated that mentors can help to support their mentees, which can lead them to feel less isolated within the school community.

There was a connection between the literature and the data collected during this study, but also between the theory used for the foundation of this study and the data collected. The theory used to develop this study was Knowles's (1984) theory of adult learning or andragogy. One of the six assumptions within the theory of adult learning is that any previous learning or experiences need to be valued and incorporated in new learning (Knowles, 1984). Participants shared that their mentor learned alongside them and listened to their experiences and thoughts, which built a more trusting relationship overall.

Interpretations of RQ2 Findings

The second research question focused on the level of support the participants felt while completing the state's mentor program. There were two themes that were identified to answer this research question based on the data collected: mentors' communication with mentee and overall structure of the mentor program. Hudson (2016) found that mentors who are able to openly communicate with their mentees, even about the weaknesses they found in their own teaching, are able to build strong connections with their mentees. Open and honest communication is crucial according to participants who

explained their experiences in the mentor program. Behar-Horenstein and Kuang (2019) and Hudson (2016) found that mentors who modeled reflecting on their own career allowed for a safe level of respect between mentor and mentee, which also led mentees to reflect and be open about their experiences.

The second theme presented in the data collected was the participants' experiences and feelings about the structure and work associated with the mentor program. Most participants expressed the feeling that the work included in the mentor program, like Flipgrids, research projects, etc., felt like added stress and work on top of what they already experienced as a new teacher. Many participants explained that the additional work felt as though it was provided to "check boxes" and did not support them in their first year as a teacher. The literature explained that each mentor program will have specific aspects determined by the state and school district. This can depend on the needs and funding of the state and school district. However, the goal of all aspects of a mentor program, no matter the state or school district, should be to establish a relationship between mentor and mentee that provides support for the new teacher at the beginning of their career (Sikma, 2019). Spoon et al. (2019) explained that there should be clear expectations and guidelines communicated to the mentor from administration, which can then be shared directly with the mentee. Without these expectations and relationship focus, the program is more likely to not support the new teacher in the ways they need to feel successful and be willing to continue in the education field.

The theoretical foundation of this study, the theory of andragogy, also supports the findings of the data collected. Knowles (1973) included six assumptions in his theory

about adult learning. One of the aspects included was that when adults are learning, they must understand the purpose for their learning and the benefits must be understood. The participants in this study explained that they felt the additional requirements of the program did not help them during their first year of teaching, which caused them to become frustrated with those tasks. Another aspect of the theory stated that there is a need for engagement like problem solving or task solving, not just to focus on the content. The positive experiences most participants explained had more to do with the interaction between themselves and their mentors compared to the assignments.

Limitations of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore new teachers' perceptions of their experiences with their state's mentor program and how they feel supported by the mentor program in the Southeast. There were limitations to the study. As stated in Chapter 1, limitations of the study were categorized as trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, and dependability. The first limitation, falls within the dependability, was the study was limited to a small sample size. The nine participants were able to show saturation, this was shown by the recurring themes as the interviews continued. As stated in Merriam and Tisdell (2016) once there is redundancy within the data saturation has been met. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) also explain that unless the study's purpose was to provide generalization within other research, then small sample sizes are possible. Another limitation relating to credibility was experiences the participants shared were only their experiences. These experiences may not be shared with other teachers that have completed a teacher mentor program. However, the purpose of this study was not to

provide generalization but instead to learn about teachers' experiences within the specific school district in the Southeast. Another limitation explained was under transferability. The study has been explained in great detail, including the data collected and interview questions that were used in this study. This transparency throughout the study allows readers to make their own determination. Finally, the limitation that falls under the category of trustworthiness was the awareness that the researcher worked within the location of the study. Throughout the study, notes and reflections were used to limit any biases that may have been presented. All these limitations were considered throughout the study.

Recommendations

This study provided first-year teachers' experiences, including the level of support they felt they received, during the Southeastern state's state mentor program. The data collected was able to help fill the gap in the literature about teacher's first-hand experiences of the mentor program. However, future research could continue to fill the gap. These gaps would be exploring new teachers' experiences with other states' teacher mentor programs. As well as, adding more senior teachers' perceptions of their experience during the mentor program.

The first recommendation would be to consider similar studies in other states within the United States. These studies could lead to more insight into the first-year teachers' experiences and needs during the crucial beginning of their career as teachers. If future studies were able to collect more responses and find similarities then educational

boards at the school district, state, or federal level would be able to develop the best program to support and retain more teachers.

Another recommendation would be to conduct a study similar to this study but include participants who have completed the state mentor program five or more years to the more recent participants. These participants might provide more insight into the teachers' experiences of mentor program before, during, and after COVID-19. A third recommendation would be to recreate the study with a larger sample size. This could be done by including secondary teachers, those who teach grades 6 through 12. This may provide a more comprehensive perspective of the teachers within the given school district.

Implications

The findings of this study can lead to positive social change for the specific school district in the Southeastern section of the United States. The insights provided from this study can help school district members and administration make changes or additions to the mentor program within their school district to improve teacher retention. The findings have the potential to not only help retain new teachers by providing the correct support needed to transition into the field of education, but may also support administration, teachers, and students. Teacher turnover can have a long-lasting effect on students, especially when considering their reading and math achievements (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). Understanding what new teachers need to be successful in their careers and continue to be successful would lead to positive social change.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore new teachers' perceptions of their experiences with their state's mentor program and how they feel supported by the mentor program in the Southeast. This study was developed to include the perception of mentees during the teacher mentor program, which was lacking in previous literature. There was also a need based on the continuous increasing levels of teachers, especially new teachers that are leaving the education field (Spoon et al., 2018).

Nine elementary school teachers who completed the state required teacher mentor program of a Southeastern state school district were interviewed for insight about their perceptions and experiences during the mentor program. Once the data from the interviews were collected, the data analysis resulted in the emergence of four themes and subthemes that provided answers to the two research questions of the study.

The results of the study found that relationships and communication between the mentor and mentee, the feeling a part of the school's community, and relevant assignments were the aspects of a successful mentor program according to the participants. These aspects of the mentor program experience could be monitored and changed within the mentor program to provide increased numbers of teacher retention. These findings have the potential to provide positive social change by providing administrators and others who contribute to the development of the teacher mentor program an understanding of what new teachers need to be and continue to be successful as educators. This positive social change could come at a time in which the education field needs support.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study about the state's teacher mentor program.

This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study seeks 10 volunteers who are:

- Teachers within the specific state and district
- Completed the teacher mentor program within the last three years (2019, 2020, 2021)
- Has not taught in any other school or district
- Has never taught with the researcher

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Taylor Castaldo who is a doctoral student at Walden University. You might already know the researcher as a teacher, but this study is separate from that role.

Study Purpose:
The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore new teachers' perceptions of their experiences with their state's mentor program and how they feel supported by the mentor program.

Procedures:
This study will involve you completing the following steps:
- Completing the background survey and signing up for a zoom interview time
- Completing the zoom interview, that will last 45 minutes to an hour
- Be available for any clarifying questions from the researcher

Here are some sample questions:
1. Would you begin by describing your experiences during the teacher mentor program?

2. What was your relationship with your mentor like?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Research should only be done with those who freely volunteer. So, everyone involved will respect your decision to join or not. No one at XXX District will treat you differently based on whether you volunteer or not.

If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time. The researcher will follow up with all volunteers to let them know whether or not they were selected for the study.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
This study offers no direct benefits to individual volunteers. The aim of this study is to benefit society by providing information to the district to emphasize important aspect of the mentor program or aspects that should be considered to better support the mentees. Once the analysis is complete, the researcher will share the overall results by emailing you a summary of the results.

Privacy:
The researcher is required to protect your privacy. Your identity will be kept anonymous, within the limits of the law. The researcher will not ask for your name at any time or link your responses to your contact info. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. If the researcher were to share this dataset with another researcher in the future, the dataset would contain no identifiers so this would not involve another round of obtaining informed consent. Data will be kept secure by make sure all data that will be collected will be stored and protected by a password and any handwritten notes will be locked in a filing cabinet. Both collections of data will only be accessible to the researcher. All information will be permanently deleted or shredded after five years. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions:
You can ask questions of the researcher by emailing XXX. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant or any negative parts of the study, you can call Walden University's Research Participant Advocate at XXX. Walden University's approval number for this study is 03-28-22-0751627. It expires on March 27, 2023.
You might wish to retain this consent form for your records. You may ask the researcher or Walden University for a copy at any time using the contact info above.

Obtaining Your Consent If you feel you understand the study and wish to volunteer, please indicate your consent by returning a completed questionnaire

Printed Name of Participant

Date of consent _____

Participant's Signature

Researcher's Signature _____

Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

From: Taylor Castaldo
Sent: Friday, January 31, 2020 11:51:15 AM
To:
Subject: Possible research

Hello,

My name is Taylor Castaldo. I teach 5th grade at XXXX. I recently spoke with XXXX about the possibility of looking at the mentor program for my dissertation from Walden University. She recommended that I reach out to you both. If you have time, I would love to meet to discuss the possibility of this study, as well as any other helpful information. Thank you for your help.

Thank you,
Taylor Castaldo

Appendix C: Letter to Potential Participants

Note: this email will be blind copied to the list of mentees provided by the Coordinator of Educator Effectiveness

Dear Potential Study Participant,

Hello! My name is Taylor Castaldo. I am currently working on my Ph.D. from Walden University. I am in the process of completing my dissertation. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore new teachers' perceptions of their experiences with their state's mentor program and how they feel supported by the mentor program. I am also interested in how the mentor program was supportive during their transition from college to their own classroom. To get information for this study, I will be interviewing new teachers, that have completed the teacher mentor program.

To participate in this study teachers must meet the following criteria (a) be an elementary schoolteacher (b) will complete the teacher mentor program (c) has not taught in another school district before XXX.

Your participation in this study would be greatly appreciated. The study will last approximately 45- 60 minutes. It will be completed by zoom and recorded. Your responses will be kept confidential. If you would like to participate it is completely voluntary and you can withdraw from the study at any point.

If you believe that you would be a good candidate for this study and would like to participate, please use the link below to fill out a brief background survey. Once that has been completed, I will be in contact to schedule a time that is best for you.

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Note: Prior to beginning the interview, I will go over the Consent Form and ask if the individual has any questions before asking them to sign.

Hello, thank you for agreeing to be part of my study. I am going to ask you a few questions about your experience in the teacher mentor program. Do you have any questions about studying before we begin? ....I will not turn on the recording.

1. Would you begin by describing your experiences during the teacher mentor program?

2. What was your relationship with your mentor like?

3. What aspects of the program do you feel were most beneficial to your teaching?

4. If there were aspects of the program that were not helpful, how did you feel they were not helpful?

5. Do you have suggestions for how those might be changed?

6. Do you feel that the mentor program supported you as a new teacher? Why or why not?

7. Will you be returning to your current position next school year? Why or why not?