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# *Mentor Accountability: Varying Responses to the New Jersey Provisional Teacher Certification Program and their Implications for Proposed Changes in Wisconsin Licensure*

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The State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction is currently proposing changes in teacher licensing that will include the creation of distinct license stages for public school teachers (State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 1999). Beginning in the 2004–05 school year, first-year teachers will be appointed at the “initial educator” level and will be required to complete 3–5 years of supported teaching coupled with continued professional development before progressing to the stage of “professional educator” and the subsequent stage of “master educator.” Teachers at the initial stage, the state contends, can expect support from a variety of sources: administrators, peers, and, mentors.

The effects of initial professional experiences on beginning teachers are well documented (Hayes and Kilgore, 1991; Shimahara and Sakai, 1995; Zeichner and Gore, 1990). According to Shimahara and Sakai (1995), this socialization period may have the more influence on the beginning teacher than either prior beliefs or teacher education programs:

Learning to teach is a complex, intersubjective process that occurs in multiple social settings, including the classroom, hallways, the teachers' room, and other formal and informal places... learning to teach is a sustained process of intense engagement in seeking advice from experienced teachers. (p. 123)

Given the potential influence of these initial experiences, mentor programs are warranted. And because Wisconsin's proposed initial educator license will be non-renewable, the mentor's responsibility to the first-year teacher will be great. However, while the value of mentor programs is well-documented (Ganser, Bainer, Bendixen-Noe, Brock, Stinson, Giebelhaus and Runyon, 1998; Anctil, 1991), effective mentor programs are neither effortlessly manufactured nor easily monitored. Will Wisconsin mentors appreciate their responsibilities to the first-year teachers they will advise? And how can this appreciation be monitored? These questions must be addressed before the implementation of Wisconsin's proposed licensure changes. An examination of another state-initiated mentor program may offer some insight.

Recent discussions of proposed licensure reforms for teacher certification in Wisconsin have given me cause to look back at some not-so-recent changes in New Jersey's teacher certification requirements. One such change occurred in the fall of 1995, when the New Jersey Department of Edu-

cation implemented its Provisional Teacher Certification Program (see State of New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.). A first-year teacher applying for initial certification would no longer be awarded a permanent teaching license. Instead, the first-year teacher would be awarded a Certificate of Eligibility with Advanced Standing (CEAS) license which would authorize the holder to seek employment. Once under contract, the first-year teacher would be awarded a Provisional License and would complete one year of mentored teaching before being issued a standard license. The hiring district was to appoint an “experienced” veteran teacher to act as mentor to the new teacher in a non-evaluative, non-supervisory capacity. The mentor's responsibilities to the new teacher would include bi-weekly observations during the first ten weeks of school and four additional observations during the subsequent twenty weeks. In exchange for providing “training, support, and evaluation,” the mentor would receive a \$550.00 stipend which was to be deducted from the new teacher's salary over the course of the school year.

Coincidentally, during that same fall semester, I began collecting data for a study of four first-year English teachers and the influences that affected their curricular and instruction decision making. While I had not intended to examine the new mentor program requirement, it did turn out to be an important influence on the decision making of my participants, both in positive and negative respects. The purpose of this article is to explore the various responses that four first-year teachers, Betty, Caroline, Lori, Marie, and their mentors had to one state-mandated mentor program and to consider the implications for Wisconsin's proposed program.

## A Brief Description of the Study

Four first-year English teachers were selected to participate in this study. All four were teaching in a suburban schools in northern New Jersey. Betty and Lori were teaching in large high schools; both Caroline and Marie were teaching in middle schools.

Data collection occurred in the teachers' classrooms. During each of eight monthly visits to the four classrooms, I took anthropological field notes; during available periods following my observations, the teachers' and I participated in stimulated recall interviews in which the field notes acted as stimuli for inquiry into the thinking behind the teachers' curricular and instructional decision making. On occasion,

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our talk turned to the teachers' feelings about the new state-mandated mentor program. Each of the teachers' mentors and/or building level administrators had varying responses to the program. These responses indicated four very different views of mentor accountability and resulted in relative success or failure of the program for the four first-year teacher-participants.

### Varying Responses to One Mentor Program

*Betty.* When considering Betty and her response to the Provisional Teacher Certification Program, it is important to note that participation in the program was, in the fall of 1995, mandatory. Interestingly, Betty did not have a mentor. Aside from myself and two inclusion teachers assigned to two of her classes, Betty, a half-time teacher/half-time year-book coordinator, did not seem to receive a great deal of support from the other members of the English department, the department supervisor included. During our last visit, Betty asked about the other study participants and how they had fared with their mentors, and she stated that she was not pleased with the lack of support she had suffered:

Well, it's bad...I don't know how anyone else is, from the people you've talked to, how their first year...you know, the state thing? Where you're supposed to work with a mentor? I really wish my experience would have been a lot more formal, the way it's supposed to be, where you're...you know. I don't even think they took the money out of my paycheck. I would have rather that they had done that and then I would have had the chance to talk to somebody on a regular basis...Sometime it just would have helped to check in and to have caught something before it became a big problem.

For Betty, the Provisional Teacher Certification Program was a complete failure. Operating on a technicality (Betty's half-time teaching load), the district did not provide Betty with a mentor. Her half-time status, however, did not spare her the anxieties experienced by many first-year teachers. By not providing a mentor for her, Betty's building level administrators failed to appreciate the spirit of the Provisional Teacher Certification Program.

*Caroline.* Because she held a split position (half-time at a middle school and half-time at a high school) Caroline had two mentors. During our first interview, Caroline spoke of the support she received from her department, and she mentioned both mentors by name:

Ian is my mentor here [at the middle school] and Chris is my mentor at the high school. So I have two mentors and they're both really good and helpful. And they both [are concerned that] they're mentoring and helping.

Throughout the course of the year, however, with one brief exception, Caroline never referred to these mentors nor mentioned any support or guidance she might have re-

ceived from them. Furthermore, when Ian, Caroline's mentor at the middle school, passed away half-way through the year, Caroline was not assigned a new mentor. It appeared that all involved had abandoned the mentor program. Unlike Betty, who lamented the fact that she did not have a mentor, Caroline appeared to have much in common with the 46% of Anctil's (1991) subjects who reported that a mentor was not necessary, even though they also reported that the quality of mentoring they had received was "very high" (p.7). Although the mentor program was mandatory, and she should have been assigned a mentor, Caroline, apparently, did not see the need for one. The mentor stipend, however, continued to be deducted from Caroline's salary.

*Lori.* In addition to the support and/or evaluation she received from other teachers in her department, her department chair, and her younger sister, who was also beginning her teaching career that year, Lori, in contrast to Caroline and Betty, received a great deal of support from her mentor, Marty. In fact, Lori often spoke of "Marty-izing" her lessons. Lori's mentor made regular visits to her classroom and offered suggestions to improve her teaching. He also helped Lori navigate the politics of that particular school and provided her with a sounding board off which she could safely vent her frustrations. As Bower (1991) and Weinstein (1988) maintain is often the case with beginning teachers, Lori's expectations conflicted with the reality of teaching.

*Marie.* Marie's story is a worse-case scenario. Marie had been assigned a mentor; however, as of my last meeting with Marie, she had yet to meet with her mentor other than in passing. She described her first year of teaching as less than rewarding:

They just throw you (into the classroom). Here's your classes and you're just expected to know what their expectations are of you and the curriculum and the program and all these things...I think that's where the mentor thing was supposed to help. And I guess that if you had it set up the right way, I can't see how it wouldn't be helpful, at the very least! But if it's not set up where you see this person, and she gets the extra prep...I told her [to observe me during her extra prep], but she's never done that. And she tells me "I hear you're doing a good job."

According to Anctil (1991), "mentor accountability" is a critical issue in mentoring and an area that receives too little attention. The inadequate response of Marie's mentor to this assignment, and the resulting alienation suffered by Marie, support this contention. Clearly, Marie's mentor did not perceive the importance of her role as mentor to this first-year teacher.

### Understanding the Mentor's Role

Hayes and Kilgore (1991) found that new teachers expect support and assistance from veteran teachers and that this support helps new teachers develop a reflective teach-

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ing stance. To this end, several states, New Jersey and Wisconsin among them, have instituted or are about to institute mentor programs for first-year teachers. Consistent with these expectations, the apparent level of reflection in which each of my participants engaged was affected by the amount and quality of support she received (or didn't receive) from her mentor (Stinson, 1999). My findings suggest the importance of mentor programs for first-year teachers. My findings also illustrate the varying responses mentors and building-level administrators can and do have to mentor programs and the need to place more emphasis on the importance of the first-year teacher/mentor relationship and the mentor's responsibility for fostering that relationship.

The mentors mentioned here exhibited very different understandings of the mentor role. Betty's building level administrators failed her by not providing her with a mentor. In not appreciating the importance of a mentor for a first-year teacher, they chose to not assign one to her, as if half-time teacher do not have the same fears and concerns about teaching as full-time teachers. In this school, for this first-year teacher, this resulted in an inadequately implemented mentor program.

Lori's official mentor and the other members of her extensive support staff exhibit a strong appreciation of the first-year teacher/mentor relationship and an appreciation of the importance of the support and assistance many new teachers want and need. In contrast, Marie's mentor and those around her failed to appreciate the importance of their roles; thus, they failed to provide this necessary support. These failures resulted in the worst implementation of the Provisional Teacher Certification Program of any school in my study.

Will Wisconsin's mentors appreciate their responsibilities to the first-year teachers they will advise? I believe there are some steps we can take to insure that they do. First, mentors must be selected from among experienced teachers who believe that their influence can have an impact on first-year teachers. Second, potential mentors should attend inservice programs or similar training sessions to heighten their sense of both their responsibility and their scope of influence with regard to their proposed mentees. Third, administrators must make sure that mentors and mentees have common prep periods and otherwise compatible schedules. Fourth, while the level of their participation will be governed by the first-year teachers themselves, mentor programs must be made available to all first-year teachers. Finally, to insure that the mentor programs are being effective, administrators must be aware of the levels of support being offered in their schools through continued inservice experiences for mentors and mentees.

Mentor programs are not necessary for everyone. Certainly Caroline survived, even flourished, without extensive mentoring. More than likely, Lori would have sought out her own support system even without the guidance of her mentor. However, for first-year teachers like Betty and Marie, first-year teachers who need and want such support in the form of formal mentor programs, properly implemented mentor programs administered by trained individuals who thoroughly understand their roles as mentors are critical to first-year teaching success.

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