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Mentoring: Help or Hindrance?

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The research literature shows mentoring programs in education to be highly complex and situational. While there are potential advantages for both the mentor and the novice teacher, several issues remain problematic and presently limit the effective, widespread use of mentoring as a way of inducting new teachers into the profession.

When we finished our preservice teacher education programs, we were awarded teaching certificates and were thought to be competent in all classroom endeavors, including teaching, discipline, and establishing classroom climate and environment. We had only one field experience, our student teaching. After securing a teaching position, we entered the classroom excited yet apprehensive. Noone was assigned to help us cope with any ensuing problems or to help us with school policies and procedures. Luckily, we attached ourselves to experienced teachers who were kind enough to help us muddle through our first year of teaching.

Not everyone is so lucky, though. Linda Darling-Hammond noted in a recent issue of *Kappan* (1996) that the lack of effective mentoring is one of the barriers to having competent teachers for every child. She suggested that teachers "... who do get hired are typically given the most difficult assignments and left to sink or swim, without the kind of help provided by internships and residencies in other professions. Isolated behind classroom doors with little feedback or help, as many as 30% leave in the first few years, while others learn merely to cope rather than to teach well" (p. 195). Rosenholtz (1989) and Veeman (1984) support Darling-Hammond's assessment regarding the astoundingly high attrition rate of beginning teachers after just a few years of service. Whether beginning teachers experience frustration and difficulty in the profession because they are expected to be responsible for the same work that experienced veterans do (Lortie, 1975), or because they are frequently given the most difficult or undesirable teaching situations, educators from across the country have responded by initiating teacher mentoring programs.

In recent years, we have worked with public school systems and their mentoring programs for beginning teachers. From our discussions, there appear to be wide latitudes regarding the processes and procedures in developing and maintaining mentors and mentoring programs. Our observations are verified by the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education (NASDTEC) who notes variance in programs across states. Mentoring programs, or "Beginning Teacher Support Systems" (BTSS) as they are referred to by NASDTEC, are described in the 1996-1997 *NASDTEC Manual*. Currently, it is noted that only 28 states have BTSS programs and of those, just over half (15) have all of their beginning teachers involved in the programs. Most include some type of training and/or inservice programs for beginning teachers (20), but only 16 states provide

additional funding for the BTSS programs. The elements of each state program vary widely with regard to: (a) criteria and processes for selection to the BTSS, (b) criteria and processes for the selections of mentors, (c) policies regarding evaluation of the BTSS, (d) policies regarding second year support, and (d) funding of the BTSS. Further, the report notes that only eight states require support for beginning teachers by the teacher education institutions.

The original mentor is found in the classic poem *The Odyssey* by Homer. When Odysseus leaves to fight in the Trojan Wars, he entrusts his son, Telemachus, to an old and dear friend named Mentor. Mentor was to nurture and educate Telemachus during Odysseus's absence. Telemachus was to respect Mentor. Therefore, a mutual relationship developed where an older, experienced individual helped a younger novice to develop and grow. From this Greek myth, the process of helping entry persons into a profession by utilizing more experienced and valued employees has been labeled "mentoring." The established programs are based on the premise that a positive emotional attachment exists between two individuals. The older or more experienced persons share their wisdom and insights, while the younger or novice individuals value such knowledge and learn from it. Business and government introduced mentoring in their worlds beginning in the 1970s. Schools, colleges and universities, and states developed mentoring programs in the 1980s in an attempt to help acclimate new teachers nationwide (Gold, 1996; Tellez, 1992).

The literature reviewed for this article was very perplexing and compounding. One thing is clear. There is wide variance in how the term mentoring is used and in the programs described. Its implementation appears to be highly dependent upon the leadership of the organization, the interest generated, and available funds. There are numerous articles that described in detail how the various programs use mentors, including selection and training. The literature was much more limited, however, regarding how mentors or mentoring programs significantly improved an individual's performance.

The Impact of Mentors

The limited research available does indicate mentoring generally has a positive impact on both mentor and protégé. Kram (1983), in her study of 18 business mentoring relationships, concluded these relationships can enhance a novice's develop-

ment. The phases of development she identified were similar to those of Fuller and Bown (1975) or others. They included initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition. She also found the positive impact was influenced by the individuals and the type of interpersonal relationship that ultimately developed. Kram did note, however, that under certain circumstances, the mentoring relationship could become destructive for one or both individuals. Head, Reiman, and Thies-Sprinthall (1992) concur, warning that in facilitating the professional growth and development of teachers inadequate or nominal mentoring programs may actually be worse than no program at all. It appears, therefore, that mentoring programs can have either positive or negative effects.

In recent years, mentoring research has focused on educational inductees at various levels. For example, individuals in higher education who have been involved in a mentoring program learned political skills, risk-taking behaviors, and communication skills viewed as important to their profession. Researchers concluded that mentoring relationships were critical for developing quality professionals in higher education (Bova & Phillips, 1984). Ganser (1994) reported that principals in public school systems viewed mentors as a helpful supplement to their staffs. They also wanted to be involved in selecting the mentors who worked with beginning teachers.

The primary focus of the research literature, however, has been beginning teachers. Bainer and Didham (1994) reported that mentoring was viewed as an important dimension of support in education. Some research indicates that beginning teachers involved in mentoring programs engage in more conversations regarding teaching than beginning teachers who do not have mentors. Additionally, they are more likely to engage in action research and are more willing to work in collaborative contexts for teacher learning (Stanulis & Jeffers, 1995). Teachers who are involved in mentoring programs were identified as more collaborative in both professional and social context (Powell & Mills, 1995).

Ballantyne, Hansford, and Packer (1995) reported that beginning teacher and mentor journals revealed four major functions of mentoring, including: (a) personnel support, (b) task-related assistance and advice, (c) problem-related assistance and advice, and (d) critical reflection and feedback on practice. In their analysis of mentor teacher component of the North Carolina Beginning Teacher Program, Huffman and Leak (1986) concluded that "Mentor teachers...provided 'positive reinforcement', 'guidance and moral support', 'patience and understanding' and even a 'shoulder to cry on'" (p. 23).

Personal and emotional support is valued by beginning teachers, but mentors also gain a great deal of personal satisfaction from the relationship. Beginning teachers reported that the most important aspect of an induction program was having a mentor because it gave them someone to turn to when problems arose (Huling-Austin, Putman, & Galvez-Hjornevik, 1986). Researchers link the aspect of "mentor satisfaction" to the generativity stage in adult development based on Erikson's theory (Stevens, 1995). Findings from a qualitative study confirm the importance of mutual respect and trust necessary for a successful mentoring relationship (Abell, 1995).

Especially in the early weeks of teaching, beginning teachers value the advice, resources, and ideas that a mentor shares, information about school routines and curriculum content, assessment and evaluation of students, and innumerable other issues and concerns (Ballantyne et al., 1995). It also has been reported that both the curriculum content and instructional methods are significantly influenced by mentors (Harnish, 1994; McNamara, 1995). Beginning teachers reported receiving help from their mentors in 14 areas, according to Huling-Austin and Murphy (1987). Among the most mentioned were: someone to talk to/listen to, locating materials, help with clerical work related to district policies and procedures, lesson planning, classroom organization, and discipline (p. 33). Wilkinson's 1994 survey of 286 first year teachers found that beginning teachers reported assistance with classroom procedures, lesson planning, teaching strategies and methods, and discipline as most helpful to them. Wilkinson also noted that when the teaching situation was more challenging, the beginning teachers wanted more assistance.

An appropriate time for mentoring to begin to focus on critical reflection and feedback on practice is during the later stages of a beginning teacher's first year (Ballantyne et al., 1995). They note that during the second term, most beginning teachers report growing confidence in task- and problem-related areas. This "naturally occurring shift in focus" (p. 302) is from teaching-centered concerns to student-learning concerns and a willingness to take risks regarding teaching strategies and styles.

Problems in Paradise

While research suggests many benefits of mentoring, many individuals continue to express concerns regarding mentors and mentoring. Areas of concern include the lack of definition of mentoring and mentors, the amount and type of training necessary for mentors, and what characteristics mentors need to be successful.

One of the biggest concerns regarding mentors and mentoring is the wide latitude given to how individuals define the two terms. If we are to utilize Homer's guide, many of the current programs implemented do not fit the term of mentor. Often what we see is one individual labeled as a "mentor", when actually they serve as a resource person or "buddy" for new teachers. This occurs when a school or district identifies one teacher to serve as mentor to all beginning teachers in a particular school building. This role, although formally established, has no allocated time for implementation. Therefore, information regarding policies and procedures is relayed, but no personal relationships are established. True mentoring takes time and effort. It is virtually impossible for an individual with his/her own classroom duties to find the time to establish personal relationships with several beginning teachers. Other school mentoring programs pair one experienced teacher with a novice during the induction year. Again, the teachers may or may not have common planning times where a relationship could be established. These are just two mentor program configurations. However, there are as many configurations along the spectrum between these two models as there are institutions or people who develop such programs. Perhaps this is why several definitions for mentor and mentoring are found (e.g. Gehrke & Kay, 1984; Kay, 1990; Little, Galagaran, & O'Neal, 1984).

Healy and Welchert (1990) believe a common definition must be established because "without such definitional consensus, efforts to develop a knowledge base relevant to mentorships in education has been haphazard" (p. 17).

Another issue is the amount or absence of training given to mentors. Some school districts have elaborate systems developed for the selection and preparation of mentors. At the other extreme, some do nothing beyond identifying the mentor. Training is an important aspect of any mentoring program. O'Dell (1987) emphasizes that mentor training should be based on the literature about teacher development, beginning teacher problems, effective teaching, supervision, and adult development. Research supports this, as beginning teacher concerns were the area most handled by mentors (Wilkinson, 1994). Kilgore and Kozisek (1988) concluded from their studies that when mentors received no training or compensation, their role was not fulfilled.

Hart (1985) found that teacher mentors were most successful as supervisors when they were trained in supervision. Research indicates that the role of mentoring is difficult to perform and that teachers want more time and specific training before they are comfortable with and competent in that role (Ganser, 1995; Hawley, 1990; Warren-Little, 1988). Thies-Sprinthall (1986) is adamant in her belief that mentor training and follow-up activities are critical to the success of the mentoring program. In a preliminary study, Giebelhaus and Bowman (1997) found that preservice teachers who worked with trained mentor teachers exhibited stronger skills in planning and demonstrated greater reflective and analytical skills about teaching and learning than did those student teachers whose cooperating teachers had no mentor training. Further, they found that although mentor training which included general principles and strategies of supervision produced good results, even better results occurred when the training was coupled with knowledge of and skill in recognizing specific effective pedagogical practices.

Kennedy (1991) describes one program which she found to be highly successful with more than 700 teachers and teacher candidates. Components of this mentoring program included: (a) mentor teachers being temporarily released from their full-time teaching load, (b) mentors received training in the task of mentoring and on-going assistance afterwards to discuss the challenges of mentoring, and (c) preparation and assistance focuses on the goals and purposes of teaching, on academic content, and on how to critically analyze teaching.

Wilson and Ireton (1995-1996) studied the competencies which a master or mentor teacher should possess in order to model, guide, and assist a beginning teacher. Eleven competencies viewed as important to fulfilling the role of mentoring a beginning teacher were identified by mentor teachers. Of the eleven competencies ranked, classroom management was identified as the most important. Other competencies necessary for effective mentor teachers included good communication skills, ability to respond to individual differences, ability to maintain a "close day to day liaison" with the beginning teacher, enthusiasm, willingness to accept constructive criticism, and ability to provide positive feedback. Personal characteristics necessary for successful mentoring relationships are also noted in

the literature. In their list of essential mentor characteristics, Butler (1987) and O'Dell (1987) included the following: (a) successful teaching experience, (b) willingness to commit time, (c) ability to redefine roles as the other teacher grows and develops, and (d) responsiveness. Huling-Austin, Putman, and Galvez-Hjornevik (1986) stated that "The assignment of an appropriate support teacher is likely to be the most powerful and cost-effective intervention in an induction program" (p. 50). More recently, Fletcher (1995) indicates that mentors must have the ability to work as a partner in a shared learning process with another adult. Ballantyne et al. (1995) found mentor teachers who did not have the knowledge of progressive teaching methods or the ability to aid their protégé in critical reflection were not successful in their role. Therefore, attention must be given to the characteristics and selection of mentors.

The Bottom Line

Effective mentoring is highly complex. This is evidenced by the mentoring principles developed and adapted by the Association of Teacher Educators in 1991 (Bey & Holmes, 1992). Three areas are identified and elaborated. These are: the actual mentoring process, the establishment and maintenance of mentoring programs, and the selection and preparation of mentors. Research indicates that there are potential benefits for both individuals involved in a mentoring relationship. However, many issues remain problematic. Many of these problems deal with the definition of mentoring, the role of the mentors, and the selection of the mentors. Schools report that they are unsure about how to resolve these problems (Bradley & Gordon, 1994). If these are the biggest issues in the mentoring process, it is not surprising that schools cannot solve them alone. There appears, however, to be tremendous potential in inducting novices into the teaching profession by using mentors. By working together teacher education institutions and school districts may be able to make mentoring the best possible opportunity for "passing the torch to the next generation of teachers" (Head et al., 1992, p. 5) and realizing America's goal of providing "all students with what should be their educational birthright: access to competent, caring and qualified teachers" (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, as cited in Darling-Hammond, 1996).

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