MENTORING MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS: RESEARCH SUMMARY

By: Micki Caskey and Karen Weller Swanson

The purpose of this research summary is to discuss mentoring as career-long professional development of middle level teachers. Mentoring can support developing pedagogies, curricula, culturally responsive teaching, and navigating the educational landscape. Mentoring can start at different stages to meet teachers' needs and to impact their efficacy. While professional development is, many times, a day or two; mentoring is an on-going, teacher-directed learning environment that directly impacts the classroom.

Middle grades teachers have a typically collaborative working environment. Middle grades teachers not only work on grade level professional learning communities within their content area, but also collaborate with their team teachers including math, science, English and social studies to design academic and social and emotional learning for students. Because many teachers are prepared for either K-8 for elementary school or 6-12 for secondary school, those in the middle grades can benefit from mentoring to understand young adolescent development and middle school pedagogical approaches.

Scholars contribute three statements relevant to the discussion of mentoring and middle grades teachers (see Bishop & Harrison, 2021). First, middle grades teachers need to be prepared to work with young adolescents as well as their content area. Second, many middle grades teachers hold elementary or secondary certification, not middle school certification. Third, professional development for middle grades teachers needs to be "job-embedded, extending over a sustained duration, and is built on a model of ongoing coaching, feedback and reflection." (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 49).

Mentoring

Mentoring is a process of supporting growth and learning occurring between a less experienced person (mentee) and more experienced person (mentor) within a specific context (e.g., job, school). Given its contextual nature, no singular definition of mentoring seems to fit every situation, mentee-mentor pair, or group (Dominguez & Kochan, 2020). Yet, researchers find consensus across definitions that "mentoring is a developmental relationship" (Dominguez & Kochan, 2020, p. 10)—one that changes over time. More recently, scholars suggest that mentoring is "relational and developmental," serves career, psychological, and social functions, and includes "phases and transitions" (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021, p. 20).

In education, traditional mentoring has entailed a structured format of seasoned veteran teachers meeting with newly minted teachers to discuss predetermined topics such as behavior management and daily lesson planning. However, traditional mentoring has lost traction, and alternative approaches to mentoring (e.g., relationships, programs) have emerged (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021, p. 19). According to Mullen and Klimaitis (2021), mentoring is not "a passive undertaking, therapy, a one-way street, a cure-all, a bandage that metaphorically binds a wound, or a one-time intervention to fix a problem" (p. 30). Rather mentoring is grounded in adult learning theory in which the mentor is "an advanced practitioner and scholar who is genuinely interested in the success of their protégé" (Swanson & Caskey, 2022, p. 8). Mentoring is also developmentally focused, and encompasses methods including coaching and induction.

The benefits of mentoring for the mentee are many. According to Morzinkski et al. (1996) and Pololi et al. (2002) the positive outcomes include socialization into the profession, support in thinking about and designing a career plan, choosing appropriate career activities and the development of collaborative relationships.

Multiple Stages of Mentoring

Teachers grow professionally at varied rates and through multiple junctures in their careers. A "new teacher" comes in many different types of packaging. For example, a new teacher may be in their early 20s and newly graduated from college, which was the traditional concept. However, due to multiple routes to certification a "new teachers" might also be a teacher candidate who did not go into teaching directly and are now (after five to 10 years) joining the ranks but new to teaching. There are also many second career professionals (career changers) who are earning certification while they are teaching (see Morettini, 2016).

Mentoring is a central and enduring component in teacher education. Scholars and practitioners agree that effective mentoring can lead to improved classroom practices (Mathur et al., 2013; Sowell, 2017) and teacher retention (Maready et al., 2021; Morettini, 2016; Renbarger & Davis, 2019). Although mentoring policies, programs, and practices vary widely, "mentoring is widespread and becoming more so" (Polikoff et al., 2015, p. 95). Based on her research with middle school teachers, Sowell (2017) identified three effective practices: (a) building a relationship for foster trust and respect for the mentorship, (b) guiding teachers to improve classroom management and develop classroom environment that supports learning, and (c) guiding teachers to improve their instructional practice using co-teaching, modeling, or planning strategies.

In teacher education, mentoring occurs at multiple stages across a professional teaching career (Irby et al., 2020) including preservice, early career, and mid-to-later career. In preservice education, mentoring happens during the clinical field experience with the cooperating or mentor teacher and university supervisor guiding, encouraging, and supporting student teachers' learning. During the early career years or the induction phase—mentoring takes place between the more experienced teacher and the beginning teacher. After these initial teacher education phases, mid and later career mentoring transpires in the form of continuing professional development.

Preservice Mentoring

Mentoring is a common component in teacher preparation programs. Research shows that mentoring preservice teachers during their clinical experiences (practicum and student teaching) is a customary and established practice (Hobson et al., 2012; Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021). According to Canipe and Gunckel (2020, "Working with mentor teachers is a hallmark experience of preservice teacher education" (p. 80).

The quality of mentoring also matters. Research indicates that "the quality of mentoring is among the most crucial factors in teacher preparation" (Sorensen, 2012, p. 208). During their full-time clinical experience (student teaching), "preservice teachers spend significant time with mentor teachers" (Canipe & Gunckel, 2020, p. 80). Preservice teachers need to work with mentor teachers who balance the responsibilities of teaching and mentoring (Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021), model stances of advocacy and social justice (Sleeter, 2008), and provide comprehensive support (Renbarger & Davis, 2019). Conversations with mentors help to advance preservice teachers' understanding of their developing practice (Mena et al., 2016).

Mentoring support is integral to the preparation of middle school teachers during their clinical experiences. For instance, in professional development schools, mentoring gives student teachers the opportunity and support to fully participate in the classroom and school community (Harrison & Kennedy, 2016). Similarly, co-teaching models between mentor teachers and student teachers show the benefits of side-by-side mentoring (Hurd & Weilbacher, 2018; Weilbacher &Tilford, 2015). Researchers emphasize not only the uniqueness of middle school teacher preparation, but also the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy and flexibility when guiding preservice teachers to work with young adolescent learners (Kratz & Davis, 2022).

Early Career Mentoring

Early career mentoring is the induction of novice (beginning) teachers into the teaching profession. Some refer to the induction period as the first two years of teaching (e.g., Sorensen, 2012), while others suggest this phase extends up to five years (e.g., Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Induction typically entails "one-way learning around content mastery" and specific outcomes for the novice teachers' development (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021, p. 31). Effective mentoring during induction helps improve teacher practice and can lead to teacher retention (Maready et al., 2021). In fact, mentoring support is "one of the most salient factors in their [teachers] decision to remain in the classroom." (Morettini, 2016, p. 270),

Mentoring during the early career years is complex and varies widely. First, novice teachers begin their teaching career in a "dynamic contextual landscape…[which] influences their development and practice and dictates professional expectations" (Kutsyuruba et al., 2019, p. 86). Second, the types of mentoring practices, models, and programs vary by school, district, and region. Because mentoring usually takes place at the classroom and school-level, schools "must provide support beginning teachers to improve performance and retention" (Polikoff et al., 2015, p. 77). Third, the effectiveness of mentoring is variable. "The most effective induction programs include mentoring, coaching, and feedback from experienced teachers in the same subject area or grade level as the novice teacher" and "the opportunity to observe expert teachers," as well as reduced workloads and extra classroom assistance" (Podolsky et al., 2017, p. 23). Finally, the development of relationships with mentors is highly valued and seems to contribute to the novice teachers' well-being (Squires, 2019).

Mentoring early careers teachers for the realities of middle school teaching is critical. Induction programs help to prepare middle grades teachers to work with young adolescents (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Jagla et al., 2018). In the middle grades, comprehensive induction includes opportunities for observing experienced teachers, meeting regularly with mentor teachers, and developing relationships in small communities of practice (Martin et al., 2016). Researchers also note the need for stronger collaboration between preparation programs and school communities to provide a continuum of mentoring support for early career teachers (Cook et al., 2018).

Mid and Later-Career Mentoring

Mentoring for mid and later career teachers takes the form of ongoing or continuing professional development. Positive outcomes of continuing professional development for teachers include:

teachers' self confidence in taking risks, as well as their ability to make a difference; willingness to continue professional learning; ability to make changes to practice; deeper knowledge and understanding of subject and pedagogy; and use of a wider repertoire of strategies and ability to match to pupil needs. (Cordingley & Buckler, 2012, p. 221)

Additionally, research shows that professional relationships grow through mentorship and rely on extended dialogue about classroom practice (Cordingley & Buckler, 2012).

Given the need for mid and later career mentoring, researchers and policy analysts cite implications and offer recommendations for practice and policy. Regarding practice, "administrators could identify and develop expert teachers as mentors and coaches to support learning in their particular area(s) of expertise for other educators" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. vii). Whereas policy makers need to ensure and "provide flexible funding and continuing education units for learning opportunities that include sustained engagement in collaboration, mentoring, and coaching, as well as institutes, workshops, and seminars" Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. 9).

Mentoring is essential for middle school teachers' continuing professional development. In the middle grades, critical elements of high-quality professional development for teachers includes collaboration, relevance, shared decision making, and healthy school culture (Bickmore, 2014). Notably, effective middle grades professional development "… incorporates active learning, integrates models of effective practice, and supports collaboration between and among educators" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 49). The overarching key to successful mentoring is the shift from the mentor doing all the talking to the mentor and mentee bringing their questions and experience to a mutually beneficial relationship.

Mutually Beneficial Relationships: Dialogue and Practice

Mentoring has recognizable outcomes for the mentee; however, research has identified that mentoring also can be beneficial for the mentor. Drawing on the extant literature, Hudson (2013) reported that mentoring can have "professional benefits and positive impacts…for the mentors and mentees" as well as "for schools, education systems and associated communities" (p. 772).

Hudson (2016) reported once a mentoring relationship is underway, meaning that both participates are comfortable have professional conversations "attributes such as attentive listening, displaying a sense of humor, having empathy and asking questions…" (p. 33) contribute to building a productive mentoring relationship.

Additionally, Hudson (2013) studied how mentors (n = 101) perceived their mentoring of pedagogical knowledge in three disciplinary areas (i.e., literacy, numeracy, science). He found that mentoring acts as professional development "across the pedagogical knowledge practices in each of the subject areas (literacy, numeracy and science) not only for the mentees' development but also for their own development" (p. 780). More evidence that mentoring grown both the mentee and mentor.

A systematic review of the literature showed that mentors (i.e., specialists) "introduced new knowledge and/or skills and they employed a repertoire of support mechanisms to help embed learning and bring about changes in teachers' practice. In particular, the specialists helped teachers connect the wider evidence base, underpinning theory for new practices, and knowledge about the ways in which pupils learn and develop in response to such approaches" (Cordingley & Buckler, 2012, p. 217). These skills require dedicated professionals who have a growth mindset and an empathic approach.

Mentor Selection and Preparation

The quality and skill of the mentor is critical to the success of the mentee and their collaborative relationship (Hobson et al., 2009). Thus, research shows that the selection and training of mentors warrants careful consideration (Hobson et al., 2009; Weimer, 2021). For example, when recruiting teachers to mentor those new to the profession, it may be wise to select mentors rather than rely on teachers' self-nominations. Even if a teacher is great with students, they may not have the skills to teach their peers. The choice of mentors can be based on teacher evaluations, peer-nominations, or level of individual professional development. According to Weimer (2021), the potential mentor must have

…at least 5 years teaching experience; understand the challenges of teaching and classroom dynamics; be skilled, effective, and reflective teachers with evidence of effective instructional practice and classroom management strategies; be respected as competent educators by peers; and, committed to their own professional development. (p. 21)

The preparation and development of mentor practices and processes leads to mentoring effectiveness and success (Weimer, 2021).

The desired attributes also include a depth of understanding of the curriculum, instructional strategies and assessment choices used in the district. The mentor must also be articulate about the school climate, school policies and procedures and also the diversity and equity of the students and community. The personal qualities of a mentor are also important. The mentor must be patient, open, willing to build a trusting relationship, be organized and have a strong sense of efficacy, be honest, positive, flexible and collaborative. Mentors should be good listeners, and able to hold multiple perspectives while learning and supporting a new teacher.

The role of the mentor is to be a model. Therefore, pairing the mentor and mentee takes due diligence. Criteria to consider include grade level, content area, proximity such as room placement, and schedule time to meet. When observing a mentee's classroom the mentor can provide judgement-free feedback while using effective questioning strategies. The long-term goal is to support the mentee to create their own reflective practice. Continuous mentor training includes "mentor learning communities, collecting student data and analyzing it with the mentee, assessing and supporting teacher growth and effectiveness" (Weimer, 2021, p.6)

When mentors are sufficiently prepared for their role, they report "satisfaction, confidence, effectiveness, self-efficacy and help enhance novice teacher effectiveness" (Weimer, 2021, p. 3). Given that mentoring relationships are best designed with intention, collaborative time, reflective practice and training, the goal is that teachers new to the profession internalize the positive culture of teaching and also learn to manage its demands.

Mentoring for Teacher Retention

The use of mentoring to support and retain middle level teachers is a relevant, current topic (Heynoski et al., 2022). According to Nguyen et al. (2020) "the odds of leaving [teaching] are 51 percent higher for middle school teachers than for elementary school teachers" (p. 9). In other words, induction and mentoring reduce teacher turnover (Nguyen et al., 2020). However, it is also necessary to provide meaningful and individualized support throughout a career as needs and interests change over time.

In the Association of American School Personnel Administrator's recent report, Heynoski et al. (2022) addressed the national teacher shortage and identified five shifts that would improve those considering entering the field or who are already in the profession to stay. They reported that mentoring was woven into the fabric of school structure in multiple ways. These shifts include creating pathways to careers in education, providing educators with more resources, increasing educator pay, supporting employee wellness, and promoting the profession. Mentoring appears six times in this report:

- There is a lack of accessibility, resources and mentoring that affects the school working environment.
- Administrators who manage people also need mentoring, professional development and networking to be effective mentors themselves.
- Consider forming a statewide rather than schoolwide network to connect experienced mentors with novice teachers and provide differentiated programming.
- Recruit diverse teachers and former teachers to be mentors.
- Create specific early mentoring for teachers of color.

These recommendations can help stave off teachers leaving the profession in the first five years of practice.

In addition, the 2022 Phi Delta Kappa surveyed 831teachers and found that "more than three-fourths (76.4%) of teachers surveyed considered leaving their position during the 2021-22 school year" (Marshall et al., 2022, p. 8). The reasons stated for leaving the profession were high workload, exhaustion, low pay and poor student behavior.

Teacher retention is a complex issue, Ronfeldt et al. (2013) found that teacher turnover also negatively affects student achievement. Therefore, providing practical support to teachers throughout their career is relevant because of the eminent teacher shortage. Twenty years ago, research by Harris and Muijs (2003) found that school leadership should include three components related to teacher retention: to model of good teaching, to provide coaching and mentoring, and creation of developmental tasks to improve learning and teaching.

Conclusion

We suggest that one approach to managing the demands of teaching is to build a multifaceted and integrated career. We also find that holding a complex perspective of a professional life can provide a less stressful way of thinking about the work and actually acknowledge the work of teaching. While mentees benefit from improved teaching practices and supportive relationships, mentors feel gratification in developing the next generation of teachers. They enjoy building a network of collaborators and lastly, the ability to share their expertise (Benson et al., 2002). Finally, "Effective mentoring increases teacher retention, develops teaching expertise and confidence, reduces isolation, and fosters beginning teachers' reflection and development (Smith, 2011, p. 316). The investment in mentoring that is intentional, robust and long-term is vital to the success of both teachers and students in the middle grades.

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In this exploratory case study, Sowell took a close look at mentoring novice middle school teachers. She identified three elements that are essential for effectively mentoring middle school teachers: mentoring relationship, supportive environment, and content and context specific instructional strategies. She emphasized the ongoing preparation of mentors related to classroom management, pedagogical practices, and building relationships with beginning teachers. She concluded that effective mentoring can improve beginning teachers' instructional practice and lead to teacher retention.

Swanson, K. W., & Caskey, M. M. (2022). Mentoring dialogue and practice: A transformative experience. *Journal of Transformative Learning, 9*(1), 8–17.

The purpose of this essay was to describe how transformative learning theory, a cognitive apprenticeship model, and a critical reflection practice work together in a mentorship—one that benefits both the novice and seasoned mentor. We noted how all three frameworks rely on dialogue or discourse for creating new and effective practices. We emphasized dialogue between the mentor and novice as well as their teaching practice. We contended that when novice and mentor engage with their colleagues, they deepen their work and expand their perspectives.

Recommended Resources

Bishop, P. A., & Harrison, L. M. (2021*). The successful middle school: This we believe.* Association for Middle Level Education.

Canipe, M. M., & Gunckel, K. L. (2020). Imagination, brokers, and boundary objects: Interrupting the mentor–preservice teacher hierarchy when negotiating meanings. *Journal of Teacher Education, 71*(1), 80–93. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487119840660

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