Mentoring Teachers In Prison Education – Experiences In Three Correctional Facilities In Belgium

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Abstract

This study on the experiences in three correctional facilities in Belgium suggest that a specifically developed mentoring program for new teachers in prison education will contribute to the quality of their practice, not merely their retention in a special environment as a correctional facility. Moreover, the experiences of the last five years of the Taxandria cvo Turnhout shows that an ongoing, comprehensive mentoring program could go a long way toward achieving the broader potential of mentorship in prison education. This program builds the instructional leadership of experienced teachers who serve as mentors and engage all educators in ongoing professional development and program innovation--toward the ultimate improvement of the correctional programs.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In de early 1980s the need for mentoring beginning teachers emerged as a professional development strategy for several goals. One goal focuses solely on teachers who are just entering the profession, while two others extend the benefits of mentoring to other educators in the school and district community. Mentorship promises potential benefits in at least the following three areas (Little, 1990):

• New teacher induction - to help transition beginning teachers into the classroom and acculturate them to the specific setting in which they will work.

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• Career enhancement - to provide an avenue for leadership, public recognition, and reward for skilled veteran teachers who serve their institutes as mentors, professional developers, and/or contributors to curriculum and instructional improvement.

• Professional development and program innovation - to build capacity for their institutes program innovation and to guide local education reform.

As local initiated teacher mentoring programs have been implemented and refined over time, the first two of these goals have proven to be interrelated. Most veteran teachers who serve as mentors to new teachers are recognized by, and in some cases receive tangible rewards from, their institutes. The level of career enhancement for most mentor teachers, however, appears to be limited. Most mentors receive the gratitude of their proteges and other peers, but few receive more than a modest monetary stipend. Those who do experience career advancement find it in administrative positions—not teaching. In sum, Little suggests that, unlike mentoring in business and industry, mentoring in the field of education "neither promises nor is premised upon an advancement incentive, but rather on other dimensions of work that contribute to career satisfaction" (Little, 1990).

A positive effect of teacher mentoring on the third goal, building capacity for local professional development and program innovation, is even less readily apparent in institutes which are active in prison education. Theoretically, the development of new and more effective classroom and collegial practices by teachers involved in a mentoring relationship can be diffused throughout their school and beyond. That is, through mentoring activities, both the novice teacher and mentor gain understandings and concrete skills that will benefit their students and can be shared with colleagues. Expertise in specific areas of curriculum and instruction can, for example, enable them to help grade level team members implement a district-adopted early reading program more effectively, or improve their academic department’s practice of using cooperative learning. To date, however, research shows that few mentoring programs exhibit the mission or devote resources necessary to connect the program to these broader purposes of ongoing professional development and school improvement (Feiman-Nemser, 1999).

2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This research wants to indicate that professional development of teachers in prison education occurs in several levels that extend, for most, well beyond their first year in the profession. The results must prove that a teacher’s development develops from an initial period of survival and discovery, through a time of experimentation and consolidation, and finally to a point of mastery and stabilization.

3 METHODOLOGY

Two major kinds of support in this development stage are considered necessary by researchers and practitioners: psychological support and instruction-related support (Feiman-Nemser, 1999). Both categories of support have been found critical for new teachers who come to an array of new responsibilities with little time and few resources to direct toward transitioning into those responsibilities. In essence, "teaching is the only profession that requires beginners to do the same work as experienced teachers" (Tellez, 1992). In the vast majority of schools, a beginning teacher carries a full teaching schedule while:

• adjusting to the school facility and routines,
• becoming oriented to district policies and procedures,
• becoming familiar with the specific curriculum and school- or district-adopted instructional strategies, and
• establishing for the first time his/her own classroom management structure and procedures.

Psychological support by specially trained coordinators inside the prison. They are addressing the most immediate personal and emotional needs of teachers new to the classroom, especially because they are alone during the lessons with the inmates. This kind of support centers on protecting the new teacher from isolation by providing him or her with moral support and suggesting ways in which to balance the unfamiliar demands and expectations of the inmates, the gardes en the institute at large.
Instruction-related support by the mentors of the Taxandria cvo Turnhout. They are addressing the beginning teacher's need to navigate her or his way through multiple tasks and problems that, in the future, will be seen as standard activities associated with teaching but, at first, are important hurdles for the novice. This kind of support focuses on the nuts and bolts of teaching with focus on correctional programs, from locating materials and other resources available in the prison, to organizing classroom space, to adding to his or her still-limited repertoire of instructional strategies.

4 FINDINGS

As the Taxandria cvo Turnhout starts each 10 weeks with new courses in the tree correctional facilities in Merksplas, Turnhout and Wortel, it is important for the programs in prison to have flexible and well informed teachers. The last five years, the institute had a large number of active teachers in the courses of Dutch, foreign languages, ICT and vocational programs.

Tabel 1 : Number of active teachers of the Taxandria cvo Turnhout in the last five years

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As the numbers of teachers in prison education rises over the last five years, the implementation of a mentoring program faces multiple challenges. This study identifies challenges associated with four major program components: support of mentor teachers, teacher’s schedule, evaluation, and training flexibility.

- **Support of mentor teachers.** Although there is evidence that a great deal of informal assistance to new teachers in prison from veteran teachers occurs, a formal mentoring relationship requires considerably more commitment and effort from the mentor teacher. Even more importantly, mentor teachers need specific skills in how to help novice teachers begin to grapple with deeper-level learnings around the correctional programs and instructional problem solving. The Taxandria cvo Turnhout has addressed this topic with programs for mentor teachers at the University of Brussels and the University College of Ghent.

- **Teacher’s schedule.** One of the problems for mentors is that they are more often constrained than enabled by the organizational circumstances in which they work. Therefore, the Taxandria cvo Turnhout has adapted the mentor’s teacher’s schedule with a minimal direct teaching responsibilities.

- **Evaluation.** The connection between teacher support and teacher evaluation is a controversial one. The Taxandria cvo Turnhout believes that the two processes must be separate and different out of a concern for protecting the formative nature of performance assessment as a critical component of successful new teacher development. In this study the mentoring assistance and performance appraisal of teachers in prison education are related in the local context of the correctional facility considering:
  - What local- or institute expectations for teacher performance exist (e.g., established teaching standards or competencies)?
  - What relationship exists between teacher appraisal and continued employment in the facility?
  - How is teacher evaluation viewed in the institutes culture? How is professional development viewed?

- **Training flexibility.** Just as all inmates are unique, so too are new teachers in prison education. Some come to the classroom with educational and experiential backgrounds that have better prepared them to be solely responsible for their first contact with inmates. Others come with needs for more intensive support. It is thus unlikely that a single set of mentoring activities or a standard progression of activities will be suitable for all new teachers.
5 CONCLUSIONS

The experiences of the mentoring program of the Taxandria cvo Turnhout indicates five important issues that contribute to the quality of teachers in prison education.

- Mentoring must be connected to a vision of good teaching in the same way as outside prison.
- Mentoring must be informed by an understanding of how one learns to teach.
- Mentoring must be viewed as a professional practice, not merely a new social role for experienced teachers.
- Mentors need time to mentor and opportunities to learn to mentor.
- Mentoring is affected by the professional culture of the institute and the correctional environment.

Although the Taxandria cvo Turnhout has focused on a specific population of adults, these conclusions echo several other studies considering the first four of these findings. Almost each study argues that the mentoring of beginning teachers must be grounded in professional knowledge and skill.

The fifth finding, though, might warrant additional inquiry by educators who are concerned about developing and retaining quality teachers in the longer term in prison education. Prison education culture has received more attention since 2007 when the institutes for adult education in Belgium motivated to increase the number of courses in de penitentiaries. This study's finding found correlation among certain types of organizational behavior (e.g., instructional leadership) and inmates success, and the Taxandria cvo Turnhout continues to explore the relationship between the prison environment and the quality of the inmates learning that takes place there.

While some noteworthy research exists, all too often studies on prison education are conducted with unsound methodologies and incomplete data. Areas for future research include:

- Examining the study outcomes of the inmates and compare them with the outcomes of students outside prison.
- Analyzing how services and support (e.g., articulation agreements, case management, career counseling, and job placement) may help inmates use or further their education.

REFERENCES


