

EXAMINING THE MENTORING EXPERIENCE OF TEACHERS*

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Abstract

This descriptive research study examines the perceptions of former graduate students from Governors State University's Educational Administration Program regarding the quality and quantity of their mentoring experience and their suggestions for mentoring implementation. The research questions are: 1. What is the percentage of teachers who receive mentoring during their first year? 2. How is mentoring assigned to first year teachers? 3. What are the perceptions of teachers regarding their mentoring experience? Email solicitations were sent to 250 former students to request their participation. Participants were directed to the www.surveymonkey.com site where they were asked to respond anonymously to 8 quantitative questions and 2 qualitative questions. The sample for this research study consisted of 97 participants.

1 NCPEA Publications



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2 Sumario en español

Hay investigación en abundancia con respecto a la importancia de programas de mentorizar de maestro apuntó a mejorar desempeño de maestro y el maestro apoya. A consecuencia de descontento público con la educación pública y debido a requisitos de NCLB, mentorizar estado-puesto bajo el mandato ha sido aplicado en muchos estados. Estas situaciones formales que mentorizan que aparea nuevos a maestros con maestros de veterano han sido diseñados para aumentar apoyo de maestro facilita colaboración entre colegas y promueve a profesional y crecimiento personal. Sin embargo, Feiman-Nemser y Schwill (2004) indica que algunos programas que mentorizan son miopes y enfermo-concebidos, difícil de vigilar y casi imposible evaluar. Nuevos maestros a menudo tienen mentor-iguales inadecuados, y porcentajes bajos de nuevos maestros son observados por o tienen conversaciones con su mentor acerca de las actividades de centro de enseñar (Kardos y Johnson, 2010).

NOTE: Esta es una traducción por computadora de la página web original. Se suministra como información general y no debe considerarse completa ni exacta.

3 Introduction

There is a wealth of research regarding the importance of teacher mentoring programs aimed at improving teacher performance and teacher support. As a result of public dissatisfaction with public education and due to NCLB requirements, state-mandated mentoring has been implemented in many states. These formal mentoring situations which pairs new teachers with veteran teachers have been designed to increase teacher support, facilitate collaboration among colleagues and promote professional and personal growth. However, Feiman-Nemser and Schwill (2004) point out that some mentoring programs are short-sighted and ill-conceived, difficult to monitor and almost impossible to evaluate. New teachers often have inappropriate mentor-matches, and low percentages of new teachers are observed by or have conversations with their mentor about the core activities of teaching (Kardos and Johnson, 2010).

According to Varney (2009), voluntary and mandated mentoring build the productive capacity of people and organizations, but voluntary mentoring, transpired through informal communication can enhance the development of the whole person. Danielson (2002) emphasizes that structured support should consist of far more than just a buddy system: emotional support, though critical, is not sufficient for improving teaching capacity and pedagogical skills. A structured induction program focused on instructional skill is essential. And when teachers receive such support they are more likely to remain in the profession; the attrition rates for teachers with mentors is far lower than it is for teachers without such a program. According to Barlin (2010), programs seeking to address this issue have integrated mentoring into the district's larger learning goals and human-capital strategies. They try to ensure that all messages, tools and strategies aimed at supporting teacher development are consistent and aligned. When this is done, new (and in fact all) teachers are better able to make sense of the various layers of information they receive, to understand clearly the expectations being placed on them, and to develop a personal road map for improvement consistent with a single, unified vision for quality teaching.

There is a wide range of definitions for mentoring that vary based on the context in which mentoring is implemented as well as the interpretation of the process.

Mentoring is described by Smith (2007) as a particular mode of learning wherein the mentor not only supports the mentee, but also challenges them productively so that progress is made. Kwan and Lopez (2005) describe mentoring as a relationship and a process. Mentoring has also been described as a nurturing process in which a skilled or more experienced person teaches, sponsors encourages and counsels a less skilled or

less experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter's professional and/or personal development (Anderson & Shannon, 1988).

In a paper written by Searby (2009), an unnamed student was reported as saying "I learned that mentoring is a reciprocal learning relationship in which the mentor and mentee agree to a partnership, where they work collaboratively toward achievement of mutually defined goals that will develop a mentee's abilities, knowledge, and/or thinking."

Whether the mentor program is mandated or voluntary, it appears the overall goal of teacher mentoring is to foster a relationship of ongoing support, collaboration and the development of knowledge and skills that translate into improved teaching strategies. Effective mentoring also includes the establishment of long and short-term goals, an atmosphere of trust and well-defined roles and responsibilities for both the mentor and the mentee. Effective mentors are described in the literature as reflective coaches who assume an inquiring role toward practice, modeling reflection and analysis on their own teaching and assisting beginning teachers to do the same (Dever, Hager, & Klein, 2003; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Peterson & Williams, 1998). Effective mentors provide emotional support, establish trust and respect, and have strong interpersonal skills (Hawkey, 1997; Jones & Pauley, 2003; Lee et al.; 2006; Loeffler, 2004).

It is the purpose of this study to examine, understand and appreciate the mentoring experience from the perspective of the mentee and obtain relevant suggestions that may impact policy decisions.

4 Data Collection

Prior to the collection of any data from the participants regarding their mentoring experience, an application was filed and approval was granted from the Institutional Review Board at Governors State University to use student online responses for this research. Former graduate students were solicited and invited via email to participate in an online research study regarding their teacher mentoring experience. The former students were selected due to their prior enrollment in Governors State University's Educational Administration Program. The purpose of this research study was to gather information aimed at answering questions regarding the percentage of teachers who received mentoring during their first year of teaching, how mentoring was assigned and what were the teachers' perceptions of the mentoring experience.

The proposed sample for this research study were former graduates of Governors State University's Educational Administration Program. An email from this researcher to 250 proposed participants consisted of an informational letter that described the research study. The email also contained a Letter of Informed Consent for the participants. Participants were requested via this researcher's email to access the www.surveymonkey.com² to provide demographics regarding their gender, age, grade level of school and number of years teaching. Participants were also asked to respond anonymously and electronically to 8 quantitative questions and 2 qualitative questions.

4.1 Protocol Questions

1. Were you provided with a mentor when you began your teaching position? If the answer is yes, please answer all 10 questions. If the answer is no, please proceed to question number 10.
2. Did you have any input regarding the selection of your mentor?
3. What was the job title of your mentor?
4. Was your mentor familiar with your content area?
5. Did you have any input with your mentor regarding the agenda of your meetings?
6. Did you have any input with your mentor regarding the frequency of your meetings?
7. How many times per month did you meet with your mentor?
8. How many years did you receive mentoring?
9. Please briefly explain your mentoring experience.
10. What suggestions regarding mentoring would you consider implementing if you were the school principal?

²<http://www.surveymonkey.com>

The identities of participants in this study were not known to the researcher or any other person. There were no identifying files related to the participants that needed to be destroyed or deleted. A total of 97 participants responded to this research study.

5 Data Analysis

The demographics of the participants were 23.7% male and 76.3% female. The age range as indicated in Table I is represented by 30.9% of the participants being over the age of forty and only 4.1% of the participants being between the ages of 21 and 25. The data reported 38.9% as the largest group being in the age range between 31 and 35.

Table 1
Age Distribution

Age	Response %	Response #
21 – 25	4.1	4
26 – 30	21.6	21
31 – 35	38.9	28
36 – 40	14.4	14
Over 40	30.9	30

The higher percentage of teachers were teaching at the high school level with only a 5.3% difference over the teachers working at the elementary school level and a 14.7% difference over teachers working at the middle school level. (See Table II)

Table 2
Grade Level of Teachers

Grade Level of Teachers	Response %	Response #
Elementary School	34.7	33
Middle School	25.3	24
High School	40.0	38

The teachers in this study with the greatest amount of teaching experience were teachers who have been teaching between 6 and 10 years. These teachers represented 35.8% of the sample. A little less than a 6% difference constituted the next largest group indicated that 29.5% of the teachers had been teaching between 2 and 5 years. The combined total of these 2 largest groups points out that over 65% of the teachers in this survey have less than 10 years of teaching experience. (See Table III)

Table 3
Number of Years Teaching

Number of Years Teaching	Response %	Response #
2 - 5	29.5	28
6 -10	35.8	34
11-15	20.0	19
Over 15	14.7	14

6 Protocol Questions and Responses

1. Were you provided with a mentor when you began your teaching position?

Of the 97 teachers in this study, 78.5% (73) reported having received mentoring during their first year. A total of 21% (20) teachers reported having received no mentoring during their first year and 4 participants did not respond to this question.

2. Did you have any input regarding the selection of your mentor?

A total of 100% (73) of the teachers who received mentoring during their first year reported having no input regarding the selection of their respective mentor.

3. What was the title of your mentor?

There were 82.4% (61) teachers who indicated their mentor held the position of teacher while only 4.1% (3) stated their mentor held the position of administrator. The remaining 13.5% (10) teachers listed their respective mentor under the category of "other" rather than teacher or administration.

4. Was your mentor familiar with your content area?

The percentage of teachers who reported their mentor was familiar with their content area were 84.9% (62), while 15.1% (11) reported their mentor was not familiar with their content area. A total of 23 teachers did not respond to this question.

5. Did you have any input with your mentor regarding the agenda of your meetings?

A total of 56.2% (41) of the teachers pointed out they had input with their mentor regarding the agenda of their meetings. Teachers who reported they had no input regarding the agenda totaled 43.8% (32).

6. Did you have any input with your mentor regarding the frequency of your meetings?

There were 45.2% (33) teachers who reported having had any input with their mentor regarding the frequency of their meetings while 54.8% (40) reported having no input with their mentor regarding the frequency of their meetings.

7. How many times per month did you receive mentoring?

The reported data indicated the number of times per month each teacher received mentoring: 42.5% (31) teachers received mentoring once a month; 23.3% (17) teachers received mentoring twice monthly; 6.8% (5) teachers received mentoring three times monthly; and 27.4% (20) teachers received mentoring more than 3 times a month. At least 24 teachers did not respond to this question.

8. How many times per month did you receive mentoring?

The data also indicated the number of years each teacher received mentoring: 60.3% (44) of the teachers received mentoring for only one year; 34.2% (25) teachers received mentoring for 2 years; 2.7% (2) teachers received mentoring for 3 years; and 2.7% (2) teachers received mentoring for more than 3 years. There were 24 teachers who did not respond to this question.

9. Please briefly explain your mentoring experience.

Of the 73 teachers who reported having received mentoring, 64.4% (47) indicated having had a satisfying experience while 35.6% (26) expressed a degree of dissatisfaction with their mentoring experience.

Many of the teachers who had a satisfying mentoring experience reported that their mentors were supportive and attentive to their needs. Some of their verbatim comments included:

- I could not have made it without her support and encouragement
- He was a great support for any questions I had
- My mentor was attentive to my needs
- She was supportive and had wonderful suggestions that made my first year successful
- I had the support of the entire cluster
- She was open to freely give me support that would help build my lessons in the classroom
- She was always there for me when I needed any kind of help in the classroom
- The supervising teacher was there to answer any questions and also make suggestions for improvement in my teaching

Additional components of satisfying mentoring experiences included having a mentor who was familiar with the content area, had frequent meetings with the mentee, and mentor and mentee having the same planning period. Comments from teachers in these areas included:

- My teacher was a master teacher in my content area
- I met with my mentor on a weekly basis and we had our schedules arranged so we could have the same planning period
- My mentor and I had the same planning period and we taught 2 different sections of the same class
- My mentor was another math teacher who was approachable and very helpful
- I was assigned a mentor who visited frequently and offered suggestions.

Participants who indicated dissatisfaction with their mentoring experience reported a myriad of reasons that ranged from the mentors' lack of concern to the unavailability of the mentor. The verbatim responses included:

- My mentoring experience was very unstructured
- I did not receive the needed teaching support
- My mentor was from a different campus and on a different schedule
- It was very unsupportive, unorganized and non-caring
- I taught 10th grade world history and my mentor was a kindergarten teacher who was terrible
- I was mentored by a teacher who taught in another building which made it difficult for us to meet
- We never met for guidance and feedback
- My mentor was not familiar with my subject area
- It would have been more helpful if my mentor was in my building
- We had little chemistry and our teaching styles were very different
- She needed to be in my content area
- My mentor was assigned to me and she did not want to mentor me.

10. What suggestions regarding mentoring would you consider implementing if you were a school principal?

The participants who experienced positive and supportive mentoring made suggestions that were aligned with their respective experience, while participants who expressed dissatisfaction with their mentoring experience made suggestions that would impact experiences similar to experiences they cited as being unfavorable. Suggestions were also included from participants who did not receive mentoring. Their suggestions include:

- I would love a mentoring system in place to support new teachers
- New teachers would be involved with choosing the mentor and the entire process-duration, amount of time at meetings and topics
- I would make sure all new and seasoned teachers participated in a mentoring program
- I would suggest that the mentor/mentee are compatible
- New teachers would have a mentor selected from one of my best most experienced teachers
- There would be specific guidelines about the minimum meetings and topics for the mentor/mentee

- I would use strong veteran teachers with at least 10 years experience
- There would be ongoing consultation with the mentor and mentee regarding expectations
- Assign an experienced teacher with a record of success to be mentor
- There would be a better selection of mentors and mentor training
- I would take the personality of the mentor and new teacher into consideration
- I would focus on the relationship of the mentor and new teacher
- I would require documentation from both the mentor and mentee regarding their meetings
- I would assign an experienced mentor to the new teacher for at least 2 years
- Only mentors who were fully willing to be mentors would be assigned
- Ensure the mentor and mentee were of the same grade level and discipline
- Give new teachers an opportunity to meet with several possible mentors before selection
- Allow the mentor and new teacher to have the same planning period
- Be supportive as possible to both mentor and mentee
- There would be consideration of personality and teaching styles for the mentor/mentee experience
- Schedule meeting dates and time and topic for discussion
- Provide teachers an option of how often they meet. Eliminate mandatory number of meetings
- Give mentors at least 3 days outside of their classrooms to be with mentees in their classroom

7 Research Questions and Analysis

What is the percentage of teachers who receive mentoring during their first year?

Participants' responses indicated 78.5% received mentoring during their first year of teaching. Unfortunately this number points out that a little over 20% received no mentoring during their first year of teaching.

Ingersoll and Smith (2004) have reported that 15% of all beginning teachers leave teaching by the end of their first year. According to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2003), 33% of all teachers leave the profession in the first three years of teaching and 50% leave within the first five years of teaching. This phenomenon of early departure from the profession is due in part to the absence of effective mentoring practices. The quality of an effective mentoring program for new teachers has both long and short-term positive impact on retention, skill attainment, disposition, personal growth and allocation of financial resources.

Research has consistently reported that new teachers who are mentored early in their career are more effective teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Everton and Smithey, 2000; Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Humphrey *et al.*) and are more likely to remain in their school or in teaching longer than those who are not mentored (Humphrey *et al.*, 2000; & Smith and Ingersoll, 2004). This seems to support the literature that teachers who do not receive mentoring during their first year are at risk for early resignation, failure of being retained or limited teaching effectiveness.

How is mentoring assigned to first year teachers?

Of the 97 participants, only 73 received mentoring during their first years. All 73 teachers reported having had no input regarding the selection of their respective mentor. The practice of making mentoring assignments without any mentee input runs contrary the implications reported by Patton (2002) of the practices of the Urban Mentoring Program (UMP) located in northeastern part of the United States. The practice of the UMP indicate mentoring cannot be forced, but must be based in a trusting relationship created by two willing participants. Mentoring does not work when the mentor is directed to help a particular mentee, but only when the mentee welcomes and even seeks out the help of the mentor. Trust is essential, and must be protected by assuring the confidentiality of all communication between the mentor and the mentee. For this reason the mentor cannot be involved in the evaluation of the mentee or report confidential conversations to the mentee's principal.

In a study by Eby *et al.* (2000) of negative mentoring experiences, it was reported that mentor skills (or lack of them) and personality mismatches were the main causes of negativity in traditional relationships

in which the mentor was assigned to the mentee through a top-down process. Armstrong *et al.* (2002) has reported that a forced coupling can fuel discontent, anger, resentment and suspicion.

School districts that do not take the necessary time to be thoughtful and accountable in the selection process often create a negative impact on the mentoring process, the mentoring relationship and the new teacher's desire to remain at the school or even in the profession (Newton *et al.*, 1994; Kilburg, 2002). According to Gordon and Maxey (2000), the criteria for selecting mentors include approachability, integrity, ability to listen, sincerity, willingness to share time, enthusiasm, teaching competence, trust, receptivity, positive attitude, openness, commitment to the profession, experience in teaching, tactfulness, cooperativeness and flexibility.

It is a crucial element to the mentor-mentee selection process that careful and deliberate matching occurs to maximize the benefits to both the mentee and the mentor.

What are the perceptions of teachers regarding their mentoring experience?

The 73 responses of the participants vary from being very satisfied with their mentoring experience to the other end of the spectrum which was often reported as a horrible experience.

Of the 97 participants in this study, 78.5% (73) of the teachers received mentoring during their first year and 21.5% (20) of the teachers did not receive mentoring during their first year. The percentage of teachers who had positive mentoring experiences represented 61.6% (45) of the 73 teachers. Teachers who had negative mentoring experiences represented 38.3% (28) of the 73 teachers.

Participants' positive responses to the mentoring experience included: being observed frequently by their mentor; receiving useful feedback; availability of mentor on school site; regularly scheduled meetings to discuss concerns of the mentor as well as the mentee; mentor familiarity with content area; mentor was approachable and personable; mentor has same planning period as mentee; mentor and mentee collaborated to establish goals; and the mentor was supportive.

Boreen *et al.* (2000) and Kinlaw (1999) state that good communication and coaching strengthen the collaborative process and reflection, which in turn, contributes to performance and the professional development of both the new teacher and the mentor.

Participants' negative responses regarding the mentoring experiences included: lack of support, structure and effective communication skills; mentor was not available due to off site responsibilities; mentor was unfamiliar with content area; mentor was assigned to mentee without mentee input; mentor seemed forced to be involved; little to no contact with mentor; and mentor attempted to duplicate their teaching style with mentee.

The challenges mentioned by the participants have been addressed in the literature, but their removal from the mentoring process seem rather difficult to accomplish.

When mentoring teams are not given sufficient time to carry out the mentoring conversations that are important to developing relationships, the mentoring experience may be seen as nothing more than a token gesture (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Ganser *et al.*, 1998).

According to Anderson and Pellicer (2001); Shields *et al.* (2004) and Wayne *et al.* (2005), mentoring programs can accelerate induction where teachers are paired with carefully selected mentors. Cohen (2005) and Smith and Ingersoll (2004) assert that teachers are more likely to continue teaching when they receive mentoring from teachers in their subject areas.

A variety of suggestions that were provided by the participants are aligned with many of the effective mentoring practices mentioned earlier in this study. Participants reported the development of regular pre-scheduled meeting dates would provide more structure and consistency to the mentoring process. It was reported that mentees should have more input in the selection process of their respective mentor and the entire process – duration of mentor assignment and amount of time at meetings. The compatibility of the mentor/mentee pairing was frequently mentioned throughout the suggestions. It was suggested the mentor should have the qualities of being an effective veteran teacher of at least 10 years. A constant theme among the suggestions included the need of the mentor to be familiar with the content area of the mentee. It was also suggested that personalities of the mentor and mentee be given consideration during the selection process. The suggestion of having a mentor who works in the same building was also a concern. Lastly, it was suggested that mentors should be formally trained in the area of teacher mentoring prior to becoming

a formal mentor.

8 Conclusions

While many states have initiated mandated teacher mentoring programs, there continues to be gaps in the mentoring process that need to be addressed for amendments. It is important to note mentoring programs differ in infrastructure, focus, and outcomes (Huling & Resta, 2007; Mullen, 2008). Some programs have mentoring training programs while others do not. Some programs assign mentors and some programs allow mentees to have input regarding the selection of their mentor. There are programs which determine the location and frequency of meetings, and there are other programs that allow the participants decide when and where to meet (Huling & Resta, 2007; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; and Jacobi, 1991).

It appears that school districts and school administrators need to find a common ground regarding what is in the best professional and personal interest of both the mentor and the mentee. Appropriate matching of the mentor and the mentee can be more productive when both the mentor and mentee are included in the selection process. This element of appropriate matching also contributes to trust and the building of professional relationships. Time allocation for collaborative planning and meetings are essential to the success of a mentoring program.

Many of the obvious frustrations cited by the participants in this study could be corrected with more thoughtful and deliberate implementation. Appropriate training for teachers to serve as mentors sets the stage for ensuring effective mentors who can provide support, guidance and collaboration to the new teacher.

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