

The Impact of Formal Teacher Mentor Training to Scaffold Beginning Teachers in K-12 Settings

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Abstract

Beginning teachers face many challenges as they move from the security of university to K-12 classrooms with students. Through formal teacher mentor training, experienced educators have access to tools and scaffolding skills to increase success and retention of new teachers. This study examined Teacher Mentor Training that was endorsed by the state's Department of Education and offered statewide. The purpose of this study was twofold: to explore the usefulness of materials presented in training Teacher Mentors to work with beginning teachers, and to analyze recommendations for strengthening support for new teachers. This paper examined self-reports through a researcher-designed survey and reflective comment section. Data from eighty-eight trained Mentors were collected after a year of on-site use with the materials in K-12 settings. The results of this study offered clear indication of documents that mentors found useful, as well as suggestions to improve effective support with beginning teachers in their first year in the teaching profession.

Keywords: Teacher mentoring, training materials, new teacher expectations, beginning teacher support

1. Introduction

It is estimated that almost 50% of all new teachers will leave the profession within their first five years in the classroom (NCES, 2012). The impact of this phenomenon has driven state departments of education, teacher preparation programs, and K-12 school districts to increase ways to retain competent new teachers in schools. Identifying expert, experienced teachers to mentor and coach new teachers, and providing the mentors with training and skills in supporting the learning of adult learners have become recommended practices (AACTE, 2010). The teacher mentor is responsible for coaching, observing, co-planning, and sharing information, from school procedures, rules, and expectations to collaborating with the novice teacher to utilize curriculum and pedagogical strategies that meet students' learning needs. Formal Teacher Mentoring Programs offer materials and tools designed to scaffold new teachers during their first year as professionals. Pragmatic feedback from trained mentor teachers provides one method of assessing the usefulness of the training and materials in assisting and supporting new teacher growth.

2. Literature Review

Teachers are considered the most pivotal determinant of student success. An important area of research for teacher preparation universities, school districts, and state departments of education has focused on best practices to support and retain excellent teachers once they are employed at a school as a new teacher.

2.1 Teachers and Turnover

Multiple studies indicate that the single most powerful factor on student achievement is the classroom teacher (Hattie, Clinton, Thompson, & Schmitt-Davis, 1996; Ballou, Sanders, & Wright, 2004; Rockoff, 2004; Hanushek, Kain, O'Brien, & Rivkin, 2005), yet there is an alarming turnover rate in the profession, especially among beginning teachers. The National Commission on Teaching and America's future (2007) estimated the cost of teacher turnover in public schools at more than \$7 billion per year. According to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, "novice teachers have gaps in skills and knowledge, but also in areas of expertise; they learn alongside experienced teachers in a community of learners that is continually evolving"(2005, p.5).

2.2 New Teacher Expectations

From the date of hire, the school expects that beginning teachers be placed in isolated situations and be able to perform the same duties and deliver the same material as experienced teachers. New teachers are required to deal with common concerns including "classroom management, process management, discipline, and dealing with parents" (Nash, page x). There is growing, general consensus about the need to support new teachers (Moir, 2003, Nash, 2010). Moir (2010) suggests "[with] targeted, tailored support [we can] change the arc of the new teacher's learning curve" (p. 17). Selection of a knowledgeable, caring, enthusiastic, empathic teacher to serve as mentors is key to success for beginning teachers (Breaux, 2011).

2.3 Mentoring Parameters, Partners, Roles

Concepts of the meaning of "mentoring" range from an informal arrangement where a colleague/friend at the school answers questions to a formal arrangement where mentors are identified for their expertise and experience and offer ongoing and sustained support for new teachers (Brock & Grady, 1997). The variation in the responsibilities, the training, the implementation of support programs, and the levels of mentor involvement and roles, range from role model, peer pal, or supporter to coach, sponsor, protector, and mentor (Mertz, 2004). According to Carver (2008), mentoring begins with the school principal, who plays a strategic role to insure that new teachers can focus on their teaching the first year by placing trained mentors with them, and by understanding the dimensions and importance of mentors' work in scaffolding novice professionals.

2.4 Formal Mentor Training

There has been a proliferation of formal mentoring programs in the 21st century as a viable way to support new teachers and prevent the 30%-50% attrition rate in the first five years in the profession (Portner, H., 2005; Croasmun, Hampton & Herrmann, 2006, Hobson, Harris, Buckner-Manley, & Smith, 2012). Odell (2006) notes that mentoring is "typically associated with having experienced teachers work with novice teachers to help ease the novices' transition from a university student learning to teach to full-time teacher in the classroom" (p. 203). Breaux (2011) states, "no matter how good your teaching skills may be, mentoring is different from teaching, and it requires structured training" (p.xv).

The New Teacher Center proposes specific areas for direct mentor training and support, including modeling of best teaching practices, understanding of standards, assessment techniques and lesson planning, and delivery strategies, plus the ability to reflect and co-learn. Moir (2003) identifies the unique impact that trained mentors can have on new teachers:

Mentors have an impact on new teachers in ways that no amount of training can. The real-life classroom represents questions that only real-life experience can answer. Mentors help provide those answers...[with] practical, concrete advice; pose important questions to prompt reflection; model teaching techniques in the classroom; observe and offer feedback; and offer another point of view at a time when it is easy to lose all perspective. Their experience helps the novice teacher balance professional development with day-to-day details. (p.3)

3. Background of Study

A writing team from two teacher preparation universities and two districts in a predominantly rural southern state, in collaboration with the State's Department of Education, were charged to assemble a model program that could be disseminated for training in school districts and universities to inform and better equip teacher mentors working with new teachers in their first year as professional educator. Although the State Legislature had mandated new teacher support in the 1970s, but there were no consistent guidelines or materials available for use.

The writing team was charged to gather and train Teacher Mentors across the state with best practices, materials, and information, which were compiled in a manual for them. The training materials focused on three sections: Mentor Information, Beginning Teacher Information, and InTASC Teaching Standards.

Topics addressed under the Mentor Section included definitions of Mentoring, Mentoring Roles and Responsibilities, Types of Mentor/New Teacher Interactions, Mentor Protocol, Mentoring Timeframe (Collaboration log), Communication and Questioning Techniques, Suggested Discussion Starters (questionnaire and checklists), Sample mentor/mentee scenarios, and an Active Mentor Rubric. Ideas were adapted from Edutopia, Santa Cruz New Teacher Center, Michigan Department of Education Office of School Improvement, Mississippi State University Teacher Study Groups, Austin Educational Associates, Mississippi Department of Education Teacher Center, and Grand Rapids Public Schools.

The Beginning Teacher Information Section included the Phases of First Year Teachers, (Moir, 2003), Supporting New Teachers (Scherer, 2008), Guidelines for Helping Beginning Teachers (Gordon and Maxey, 2000), Needs of New Teachers (Odell, 2006), Growth Continuum of New Teacher Development, Brain-Compatible Teaching and Learning (Bailey, 2001, Jensen, 2009), and sample questionnaires to ascertain areas of strength and need.

The section on Teaching Standards/Best Practices provided the InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards (CCSSO, 2011), which outline what teachers should know and be able to do to insure that every K-12 student reaches the goal of being ready to enter college or the workforce in today's world...across all subject areas and grade levels to improve student achievement (CCSSO), and which included definitions and explanations on teacher performance, essential knowledge, and critical dispositions. Additionally, information on the National Board for Professional Teaching Five Core Propositions and What teachers should know and be able to do (1989) provided ready guides on best practices to share with new teachers.

The Formal Teacher Mentoring training consisted of a 7-hour training session where a compilation of best practices, materials, and information was discussed, dissected, practiced, and presented in a resource manual to participants for ongoing reference and use with beginning teachers at their sites.

4. Method

With a rich menu of materials and information from which to draw as a result of the Mentoring Training sessions, trained Mentors were asked to collect information and self-assess the usefulness of the training materials, based on their pragmatic experiences with their novice teachers. One hundred and fifty trained teacher mentors working in K-12 schools and currently serving as mentors were randomly selected to document their use of the training materials with beginning teachers. A participant observer approach was suggested to collect information on "naturally occurring behaviors in context" (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, Namely, 2005, p.2), as 'insiders' in activities. At the same time, they were asked to record observations as 'outsiders' that captured 'insights into contexts, relationships, and behavior' (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, Namely, p.15). By completing the anonymous surveys and open-ended responses a year after formal training, voluntary participants provided information on the viability of the training and materials.

Eighty-eight teachers returned the completed instrument. The survey consisted of 15 statements, using a Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, and each with a comment section. The instrument covered statements on the specific materials provided in the training to support the mentoring process (5 items), and perceptual information on the usefulness of the training components and materials used to standardize and support Teacher Mentor work (10 items).

5. Results

The Frequency Table (Figure 1.1) shows the results of the survey based on the responses from the eighty-eight teacher mentors. The table is divided into statements on Specific Teacher Mentoring Tools (5 items), and statements on Perceptions of Information provided to support Teacher Mentoring work (10 items). The Frequency Table embeds the quantitative results, with analysis and qualitative open-ended comments on each statement.

Figure 1.1.

Table 1.1 Frequency Table**Impact of Formal Teacher Mentoring Training on Mentoring Practices**

Statement	n	%
<i>I am a teacher mentor from</i>		
K-3	37	42
4-5	20	23
6-8	12	14
9-12	19	21

Analysis: There is representation of teachers from all grade levels.

Statement	n	%
<i>I use the knowledge of the Phases of First-Year Teachers to support my beginning teacher in word and action</i>		
Strongly Agree	24	27
Agree	61	70
Disagree	2	2
Strongly Disagree	1	1

Analysis: Ninety-seven percent (97%) of mentors agree/strongly agree that they use the knowledge of the Phases of First-Year Teachers to support novice teachers.

Comments: *We discussed the standards and brainstormed ways to meet them through the up and down times. Knowing the Phases was helpful to identify how to best respond.*

We attended the Common Core district training together and have worked together for our formal evaluations.

Statements	n	%
<i>I follow the Mentor Protocol to assess needs, establish a focus, support growth, and promote accountability.</i>		
Strongly Agree	45	52
Agree	38	44
Disagree	4	4
Strongly Disagree	0	0

Analysis: Ninety-six percent (96%) of mentors follow the mentor protocol.

Comments: *I follow the Protocol as best as I can.*
Time is an issue.
I don't remember the Mentor Protocol.
Having steps in how to address issues with my new teacher was helpful.

Statements	n	%
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Based on the Active Mentor Rubric, I consider myself an active mentor.

Strongly Agree	37	42
Agree	49	56
Disagree	2	2
Strongly Disagree	0	0

Analysis: Ninety eight percent (98%) of mentors consider themselves active.

Comments: *I consider myself a great mentor because I care about the person I teach and I care about my profession.*

I do not know what the Active Mentor Rubric is.

The Rubric was a self assessment guide for my work with my new teacher.

Statement	n	%
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The MS Continuum of New Teacher Development from Beginning to Innovating has served as a guide in helping new teachers self assess their growth.

Strongly Agree	17	20
Agree	70	61
Disagree	8	9
Strongly Disagree	1	1

Analysis: Eighty one percent (81%) of mentors use this guide to help novice teachers assess their growth.

Comments: *Whether new or experienced, we are on a learning journey in education.*

Sadly, time to reflect is an ongoing issue.

The Continuum gave us a structure for our discussions on growth from one week to another.

Statement	n	%
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I wear the various mentor hats to include Facilitator, Teacher, Coach, Trusted Listener, Resource, Learner, Advocate, Problem Solver, and Collaborator.

Strongly Agree	53	60
Agree	35	40
Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	0	0

Analysis: One hundred percent (100%) of mentors wear the various hats.

Comments: *Our students need vary greatly but we learn to provide for their needs and provide appropriate assistance.*

We co-teach a class, so we plan our lessons, share assessments, and discuss ideas on a daily basis.

A good mentor must wear all these hats. However, the hats worn most often are trusted listener and resource.

Statement	n	%
<i>With the new Common Core Standards and State Teacher Evaluation System, I collaborate with my beginning teacher as we learn together.</i>		
Strongly Agree	44	51
Agree	41	47
Disagree	2	2
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Analysis:	Collaboration is strong, with ninety-eight percent (98%) indicating they collaborate with their beginning teachers on the issues of the Standards and the Evaluation System.	
Comments:	<i>It was informative to talk together about the standards and brainstorm ways to meet them, and it was convenient to have them easily accessible in the manual.</i> <i>We attended the common core district training together and have worked together for our formative and summative evaluations.</i> <i>The days of the closed door and working in isolation are over.</i>	

Statement	n	%
<i>I use the 10 Mississippi Teaching Standards (INTASC Principles) in communicating best practices.</i>		
Strongly Agree	28	31
Agree	52	60
Disagree	8	9
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Analysis:	Ninety-one percent (91%) use the 10 Mississippi Teaching Standards/InTASC Principles to communicate best practices.	
Comments:	<i>They are posted in our classroom for continuous use and recall.</i> <i>The best practices discussed were those from me and other teachers.</i> <i>While I do believe that I met most of these practices in mentoring, I did not use the list of standards to use while mentoring. My experiences guided me.</i> <i>The Standards served as a guide for how I talk to my new teacher.</i>	

Statement	n	%
<i>I use the expanded information in the Mentoring Manual on the 10 INTASC Principles to provide resources to my new teacher.</i>		
Strongly Agree	19	21
Agree	55	63
Disagree	12	14
Strongly Disagree	2	2
Analysis:	Eighty-four percent (84%) of mentors use the mentoring manual as a resource for novice teachers.	
Comments:	<i>I made sure that we discussed all guidelines that came into question.</i> <i>I have worked through some of the suggestions and articles in the Principles section as needed, but I did not consistently use the Manual.</i> <i>I used the Mentor Questionnaires and Checklist to help me in interacting with my beginning teacher.</i>	

Statement	n	%
<i>I keep a Collaboration Log to document the interactions with my beginning teacher.</i>		
Strongly Agree	33	37
Agree	36	41
Disagree	19	22
Strongly Disagree	0	0

Analysis: Seventy-eight percent (78%) of mentors keep a collaboration log with their mentor teachers.

Comments: *I sincerely tried to do this accurately, but it is difficult to remember to record each interaction since many times these happen in the hallways and before and after school.*
We often had to go back and document these interactions because they were sometimes spontaneous and necessary.
Documentation is kept of all meetings and turned in to district office every quarter.

Statement	n	%
<i>I use a Mentor Questionnaire and/or Checklist to inform areas of interaction with my beginning teacher.</i>		
Strongly Agree	18	20
Agree	49	56
Disagree	21	24
Strongly Disagree	0	0

Analysis: Seventy-six percent (76%) of mentors use a questionnaire and/or checklist with the novice teachers.

Comments: *It was a good resource but I did not use it often. We interact so much on a daily basis that a checklist and questionnaire is not necessary.*
We created our own documentation (self made) checklist that worked directly with our subject material and school activities. The model was helpful.

Statement	n	%
<i>I use the New Teacher Assessment Questionnaires to inform how I can support my beginning teacher.</i>		
Strongly Agree	12	14
Agree	49	56
Disagree	26	30
Strongly Disagree	0	0

Analysis: Seventy percent (70%) of mentors use assessment questionnaires for support.

Comments: *We created our own documentation.*

We have open lines of communication daily.

There is no need for me or her to fill out a survey or questionnaire. If she needs help, she asks and I frequently go in and ask her how I can help. I feel like if you are doing your job and being an effective mentor, questionnaires and surveys are not needed.

Statement	n	%
<i>The information on brain-compatible teaching and learning has been helpful in working with my beginning teacher.</i>		
Strongly Agree	9	10
Agree	55	64
Disagree	22	25
Strongly Disagree	1	1
Analysis:	Seventy-four percent (74%) of mentors use information on brain-compatible teaching and learning with beginning teachers.	
Comments:	<i>We need more training on this cutting edge research to share with our new teachers.</i> <i>Time is an issue.</i> <i>I did not feel ready to reference this material.</i> <i>The information on how students' brains learn can help me in working with my new teacher to better understand how to teach today's learners.</i>	

Statement	n	%
<i>The information on the Core Propositions for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in the manual provides a way to talk with new teachers about best practices.</i>		
Strongly Agree	13	15
Agree	61	72
Disagree	10	12
Strongly Disagree	1	1
Analysis:	Eighty-seven percent (87%) of mentors believe NBPTS provide information to communicate best practices.	
Comments:	<i>I wish I had these when I began my teaching career.</i> <i>I am an NBCT.</i> <i>I did not have time to access this material with my new teacher.</i> <i>The National Board materials helped me talk about quality teaching by 'beginning with the end in mind'.</i>	

Statement	n	%
<i>I have found the Manual on Teacher Mentoring to be a resource in my work as a Mentor.</i>		
Strongly Agree	18	20
Agree	56	64
Disagree	13	15
Strongly Disagree	1	1
Analysis:	Eighty-four percent (84%) of mentors believe this manual provided a resource.	
Comments:	<i>I have to say that I used my own knowledge and the knowledge of my peers as my greatest resource.</i> <i>With time an issue, the manual was a helpful source for ideas and information to use on an as-needed basis.</i>	

Statement	n	%
<i>The Teacher Mentoring Training provides a framework with usable information as I serve as a Mentor for a new teacher.</i>		
Strongly Agree	23	26
Agree	61	70
Disagree	4	4
Strongly Disagree	0	0

Analysis: Ninety-six percent (96%) of mentors believe that teacher mentoring training provides usable information.

Comments: *I think more of the training should be based on communication skills between mentor and mentee.*

The materials I was given in training were a very valuable resource as I worked with my new teacher.

The training gave us a common understanding about teacher mentoring.

6. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and perceptions of usefulness of the training and materials to scaffold new teachers. According to the survey responses and comments, there was overall consensus that all components were successful in providing materials which assisted teacher mentors in their work with new teachers. The findings supported the importance of formal mentoring training and materials for teacher mentors in their scaffolding with new teachers with common language, parameters, and expectations. Specifically,

1. Formal training provided teacher mentors with a common language and understanding of roles and expectations through relevant, research-based information on the breadth and depth of mentoring.
2. Formal training provided mentors with examples of best practices in teaching to complement their professional experiential base.
3. The materials provided mentors with resources to use with new teachers, although time to adequately utilize the resources was a recurring issue of concern.
4. More training in features of the training is needed, specifically in the areas of communication skills and brain-based teaching.

7. Future Research Options

This study was limited to pragmatic and perceptual responses from trained teacher mentors. Based on the data analysis, it is reasonable to consider that providing experienced teachers with planned, formal training and materials favorably impacted their awareness and ability to mentor new teachers. As a follow up, the researchers will utilize this survey to emphasize the areas where the mentor teachers had 15% or more *disagree/strongly disagree* responses. Specific areas to target at future teacher mentor trainings may include effectively using the resources and examples on the Standards, exploring expedient options for record keeping and time management techniques, practicing more questioning and communication techniques, and focusing on brain compatible teaching strategies.

Future research will allow for a survey of the impact of the mentoring year as experienced and perceived by new teachers, and compare beginning teacher responses with mentor responses. Additionally, it will examine how the 'team' experience of the teacher mentor and new teacher may serve as a bridge to and provide a pilot experience into Professional Learning Communities (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

8. Conclusion

The ultimate goal of Formal Teacher Mentoring is to support new teachers through quality, systematic interactions with trained mentors in order to provide a scaffolding system of best practices for retention of beginning educators. Based on the findings of this study, it is clear that offering systematic training and readily-accessible materials equip teacher mentors with tools that are helpful in meeting the needs of new teachers. By continuously improving the formal training components, materials, and the skill bank for mentor teachers to scaffold newcomers at the beginning stages of their professional journey, the outcome is promising that every classroom will be equipped with a confident, knowledgeable, caring teacher to positively impact 21st century students.

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