Creating Conditions for Strong Mentoring

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In this article, the author identifies best practices for mentor selection, pairing, education, and implementation of mentoring programs for new teachers. These best practices include careful selection of mentors with strong communication and collaborative skills, mindful matching of mentor to mentee, mentor education that includes a focus on reflective practices, strategies to deal with philosophical differences between the mentor and mentee, and release time and financial incentives for new teacher mentors. The author compares this research to current state mentoring policies, noting that while in many states the lack of structural and financial supports for mentoring lead to a misalignment of research and practice, states that do provide these supports show promise in promoting strong mentoring practices.

Keywords: Mentoring, mentoring programs, new teachers, mentors

Introduction

A teacher's first year has been characterized as the most difficult time in their entire career (Gavish & Friedman, 2010). Representing nearly 10% of the current U.S. teaching force (NCES, 2018), new teachers face unique challenges upon classroom arrival, including feelings of inadequacy, unfamiliarity with the school environment, and little professional and personal support (Gavish & Friedman, 2010). About eight percent of teachers leave each year, with two-thirds leaving for reasons other than retirement. At the same time, increasing enrollment as well as the reinstatement of classes and programs cut during the Great Recession means more teachers are in demand (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2016). These current conditions necessitate fostering conditions for new teachers' success and retention.

Mentoring programs, or systems of assigning a more experienced teacher to assist and guide a new teacher, first became a popular strategy to improve the teaching profession during the 1980s (Feiman-Nemser & Carver, 2012), and researchers began studying mentoring outcomes in 1990 (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009). Since then, many studies examining the mentoring relationship have found that mentoring can increase new teacher retention (Adoniou, 2016; Callahan, 2016; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Leimann,

Murdock, & Waller, 2008; Shwartz & Dori, 2016; Sparks, et al., 2017). In a 2015 federal analysis, beginning teachers assigned a mentor were significantly more likely to remain in the profession than those without a mentor (Godrik, 2016). As teacher attrition stunts new teachers' professional growth and disrupts student learning (St. George & Robinson, 2011), it is evident that policymakers at the state and local level must find ways to retain new teachers.

Mentoring can help cut the high teacher attrition costs to districts (Hobson et al., 2009) by keeping attrition rates low. It costs districts on average over $14 thousand dollars to replace one teacher, while annual costs of recruiting, hiring, and training new teachers nationally are estimated between $3.4 million and $4.3 million (Synar & Maiden, 2012). Mentoring also supports beginning teachers' instructional practices, thereby increasing student achievement (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Zembytska (2016) argues that empirical investigation of the effects of mentoring practices could even improve performance and reduce emotional burnout, both common problems in the profession.

Numerous studies demonstrate that new teachers attribute mentoring to their decisions to stay in the profession (Adoniou, 2016; Andrews, Gilbert, & Martin, 2007; Hobson, 2009; Resta, Huling, & Yeargain, 2013). In a 2014 survey by the National Network of State Teachers of the Year and the American Institute for Research, over half of new teachers listed "access to a mentor" as the largest impact on their teacher efficacy (Godrik, 2016). Mentoring lowers feelings of isolation and increases confidence, self-esteem, and professional growth (Hobson et al., 2009). Clark (2012) explains teacher education often fails to sufficiently prepare candidates for the classroom. Mentoring supports these inexperienced teachers, bridging the gap so that they may begin to teach autonomously.

Even though many studies examine the mentoring practice, the area still suffers a dearth of empirical research (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015). One of the reasons for this is the difficulty of disentangling the effects of mentoring from all the other kinds of assistance new teachers receive (Hobson et al., 2009), such as comprehensive induction programs that may also provide the following supports: orientation for new teachers at the beginning of the school year, ongoing professional development tailored to the needs of new teachers, and monthly meetings with other new teachers in the district with a veteran teacher designated as coordinator. Much of the research presents anecdotal evidence about the significance of mentoring for both mentees and mentors, but few empirical studies are available (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015; Le Maistre & Pare, 2010).

Current Research & State Policies

In this article, I describe the research that has emerged in the last 10 years describing best practices for mentor selection, pairing, education, and implementation of mentoring programs in schools. I then compare this research to

current state mentoring policies, noting that while in many states a lack of structural and financial supports for mentoring lead to a misalignment of research and practice, states that do provide these supports show promise in promoting strong mentoring practices.

Choosing Effective Mentors

St. George and Robinson (2011) define a mentor as an experienced teacher who assists, collaborates with, and guides beginning teachers. The mentor should meet the beginning teacher's professional needs as well as provide expert advice in curriculum and instruction (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010; Hobson et al., 2009; Resta et al., 2013). In addition, mentors familiarize beginning teachers with their new roles, including the specific context of the school (Adoniou, 2016; Leimann et al., 2008). The mentor's charge does not end with professional support; the mentor also assists with personal needs, such as supporting the mentee's feelings of belonging and reducing stress (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010; Leimann et al., 2008; Resta et al., 2013).

Though best mentoring practices do bear similar characteristics to best teaching practices (Orland-Barak & Hasin, 2010), not all good teachers make good mentors (Bullough, 2012; Hobson et al., 2009). Mentors teach to a different audience: they facilitate adult, not adolescent, learning. As a result, mentors must encourage reflective conversations meant to empower their mentees (Godrik, 2016). Though the following traits can be found both in exemplary mentors and exemplary teachers, the two groups use different techniques.

Mentors should be positive, supportive, and empathetic (Hobson et al., 2009). In addition, the mentees should perceive their mentors as trustworthy, approachable, and flexible. Mentors need excellent communication skills (Leimann et al., 2008) as mentors must make visible the implicit factors underlying classroom practices (Hobson et al., 2009). When a mentor talks about pedagogical knowledge, they must connect theoretical issues to their mentee's practices (Orland-Barak & Hasin, 2010). Additionally, the mentor must be willing to form a collaborative relationship with their mentee (Adoniou, 2016). Effective mentors take into account the beginning teacher's needs, get to know the beginning teacher's pedagogical conceptions, and use this knowledge to design goals together (Hobson et al., 2009) and needs to be able to handle a complex relationship that encourages open dialogue but also allows the mentee autonomy in their classroom (Parker, 2010).

Acting as a mentor also increases certain desirable qualities in the experienced teacher. Mentors tend to be more reflective and analytical of their own teaching (Hobson et al., 2009; Le Maistre & Pare, 2010; Resta et al. 2013). Mentoring helps mentors develop professionally (Hobson et al., 2009). These

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benefits extend to the school community as a whole, creating a culture of caring (Resta et al., 2013) and learning (Le Maistre & Pare, 2010).

Mentor-Mentee Pairing

Matching mentors to mentees is a significant factor in effective mentoring. Administrators should assign mentors to new teachers at the start of the school year (Godrik, 2016) so that mentor and mentee can establish a relationship early. Strong pairings are done with care, though. Lozinak (2016) argues administrators need to make prudent decisions in pairing mentors with mentees, as mentoring is most effective when considerations about how the two will match are taken into account. Assigning new teachers to random mentors leaves too much room for personality and pedagogy misalignments (Adoniou, 2016). The pairing should take into consideration the beginning teacher's strengths and weaknesses so the pair can get along on a personal and professional level (Adoniou, 2016; Hobson et al., 2009). Furthermore, administrators should ensure mechanisms are in place for alternative pairing when necessary (Hobson et al., 2009). Without these mechanisms, beginning teachers with challenging mentoring relationships tend to seek out informal mentors on their own (Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010), taking time away from their classrooms and adding stress.

In addition to taking care in matching personalities, administrators should consider proximity and availability when pairing mentors with mentees, as both increase mentoring relationship quality (Polikoff, Desimone, & Porter, 2016). Parker (2010) found new teachers with a mentor in the same building were less likely to transfer to another school than those without. Research also shows mentoring is much more effective when the mentor and mentee teach in the same grade level or subject area as the beginning teacher (Clark, 2012; Godrik, 2016; Hobson et al., 2009). These factors allow the beginning teacher to learn within the context of their new role.

Unfortunately, mentoring policies across the U.S. generally do not reflect the best practices described in the literature on mentoring. Only 30 states describe criteria for mentor eligibility. Though 29 states require some type of support for new teachers, just 16 allocate funding for teacher induction. As for time allotment, only 23 states encourage or require release time for mentors, with 12 states establishing a minimum amount of weekly mentor contact time (Godrik, 2016). By and large, state policies do not reflect the best practices for mentoring that have recently emerged from the research.

Best Practices for Mentor Education and Program Implementation

Much like how pairing without care negatively impacts the process of mentoring, so does assigning mentors without any preparation. Mentors without mentor education tend to model mentoring on their past experiences alone,

rendering them unable to provide adequate support when novel situations or relationship challenges arise (Hobson et al., 2009; Resta et al., 2013).

Mentoring is effective only when it meets certain criteria (Polikoff et al., 2015). The most effective mentors receive mentor education (Clark, 2012). Hobson et al. (2009) note mentoring sometimes focuses too much on classroom management and teaching of subject matter content, leaving reflective practice behind. Mentor education develops mentors' reflective skills, thereby increasing the likelihood they will develop the same quality in their mentees (Steinke & Putnam, 2011). In addition, studies show significant gaps between mentors' perceptions of their roles and new teachers' expectations of mentor roles (Trevethan & Sandretto, 2017). Mentor education supports the establishment of a shared vision of mentoring that mentors can impart to their mentees. It can also provide mentors with needed skills to deal with distance between pedagogies, a common mentor-mentee relationship dilemma (Adoniou, 2016; Aspfors & Fransson, 2015).

Mentor education should focus on theoretical, analytical, and reflective skills (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015). Ulvik and Sunde (2013) found mentors tend to be more comfortable with theoretical knowledge than putting this knowledge into practice. Mentor education helps alleviate this discomfort. In fact, Aspfors and Fransson (2015) argue mentor education is most effective when mentors learn mentoring skills and practice those skills at the same time.

Even though most mentoring programs share a general purpose to guide beginning teachers, studies have shown mentoring programs are extremely varied across schools in both content and implementation (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). The variance in programs is due, in part, to the different contexts in all schools across the U.S. (Hammerness & Matsko, 2013). Diverse contexts affect the mentoring quality and style in different locations (Orland-Barak & Hasin, 2010; Pennanen, Bristol, Wilkinson, & Heikkinen, 2016). Martin, Buelow and Hoffman (2016) go as far as to say mentoring systems should be level-based so mentors educate new teachers about the specific needs of their assigned age group. Mentoring must be developed within these existing structures to ensure success (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015).

Mentoring is a complex process – mentors are asked to openly discuss context, pedagogical knowledge, and technical aspects of teaching with their mentees daily (Shwartz & Dori, 2016) while also keeping up a personal relationship. Because of the demands of this process, mentors need designated time to mentor (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015; Clark, 2012). Mentors are often forced to meet outside of the school day or during lunchtime, as being away from the classroom during instructional time can be too difficult (Adoniou, 2016; Le Maistre & Pare, 2010). Yet, Hobson et al. (2009) argue the most effective mentoring happens during the school day, and so advocate the best practice of

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providing additional release time for mentors to fulfill their roles. Some researchers go even further than partial release time, advocating full-release time for mentors so they have optimal flexibility and a greater ability to maximize their roles (Feiman-Nemser & Carver, 2012; Godrik, 2016). The research supports full-release time: Fletcher and Strong (2009) found students with new teachers assigned to full-release mentors were associated with higher achievement gains than those with new teachers with partial-release mentors.

Like time, mentoring programs need financial backing to be appropriately carried out. A mentoring program's funding changes the ways mentors carry out the program (Marz, Lechtermans, & Dumay, 2016). Financial investment can spur real change, encouraging mentors and mentees to follow program procedures (Feiman-Nemser & Carver, 2012). Hobson et al. (2009) argue offering financial rewards or incentives supports effective mentoring, ensuring mentors receive compensation for the time put in, as well as having access to the resources needed to become effective mentors.

Structure, cohesion, and full implementation are all equally important to support mentoring that matters. Simply assigning a mentor or having a mentoring program falls short of effective mentoring (Godrik, 2016; Hobson et al., 2009). In the absence of strong program coordination, the daily demands of teaching take over, causing mentors to neglect their mentoring duties (Resta et al., 2013). Mentors can receive unmanageable workloads, negatively affecting work/life balance (Hobson et al., 2009) and reducing their ability to meet with their mentees. A strong structure ensures mentors and mentees fully carry out mentoring activities (Gaikhorst, Beishuizen, Korstjens, & Volman, 2014) and provides the support intended (Andrews et al., 2007). Additionally, mentoring programs need coherence (Hobson et al., 2009). Feiman-Nemser and Carver (2012) argue when mentoring standards are applicable to guiding beginning teachers' development mentor accountability increases. Finally, many studies advocate ongoing professional development for mentors (Feiman-Nemser & Carver, 2012; Godrik, 2016; Hobson et al., 2009).

Promising Results of State Mentoring Policies Aligned to Research

While mentoring policies across the U.S. generally do not reflect the best practices described in the literature on mentoring, states whose policymakers have implemented state-wide initiatives and financial resources for mentoring programs have shown promising results. In their study of two states (California and Connecticut) and one district (Cincinnati) with strong policies supporting mentoring programs, Feiman-Nemser and Carver (2012) found that these policies led to many of the best practices mentioned in this paper. For instance, California's $3,200 stipend per mentor incentivized these mentors to fully carry out all of their mentorship duties. In Cincinnati and California, where mentors

were given full release from their classrooms, the researchers observed mentors taking time to meet with their mentees both inside and outside of the mentees' classrooms. Conversely, in Connecticut, where the researchers note districts receive less financial support for mentoring programs, mentors had to find time to mentor in addition to their teaching duties, limiting opportunities for meeting and collaborating with their mentees (Feiman-Nemser & Carver, 2012).

Conclusion: Aligning Research and Policy

Mentoring can be an effective tool for supporting beginning teachers and encouraging them to stay in the profession. However, to make mentoring work, mentoring practices must be aligned to the research on best practices. Less than half of U.S. states encourage release time for mentors, and only one third allocate funds for mentoring programs, two of the most promising conditions in the research for strong mentoring programs. Unfortunately, we know bad mentoring can lead to teacher attrition (Hobson et al., 2009). Moreover, beginning teachers who receive effective mentoring are more willing to pay it forward by mentoring new teachers themselves in the future (Resta et al., 2013). Prioritizing the alignment of state mentoring policies with research on best practices is a critical first step to adequately support, retain, and inspire our future teachers.

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