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## “Who is Here to Help?” Exploring Informal Teacher Mentorship: A Call for Study

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## “Who is Here to Help?” Exploring Informal Teacher Mentorship: A Call for Study

### Abstract

The high attrition rates of teachers in the initial phases of their career is a well-documented problem that school districts around the United States have been grappling with for decades with limited success (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Ingersoll, 2003). The COVID pandemic has also increased the attrition of experienced teachers with 55% of teachers reporting that they are more likely to leave the profession before reaching retirement age than they were before the pandemic (Jotkoff, 2022). Mentorship programs that place new teachers with experienced teachers is one solution that school districts in one state have implemented to increase early career retention. Current models of teacher mentorship have had minimal success in reducing new teacher attrition and increased attrition by experienced educators is leading to a loss of institutional wisdom. In order to stem the rising tide of teacher attrition, it is necessary that we expand our supports for new teachers and learn from informal teacher mentorship relationships that have emerged organically in our schools.

### Keywords

Teacher Mentorship, Induction, Teaching Stages

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## Introduction

While a myriad of factors impact a child's experience in school, the quality of the educators they work with has a substantial impact on their academic achievement and lifelong success (Chetty et al., 2011). Unfortunately one-third of new teachers leave the profession within three years and one-half quit the profession before the end of year five (Billingsley, 2004). The high rate of teacher turnover has a negative impact on the quality of instruction delivered and comes at an annual cost to U.S. public schools of 7 billion dollars per year (Amos, 2008; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). The COVID 19 pandemic has intensified this problem with up to 55% of all teachers reporting that they are more likely to leave the profession before reaching retirement than they were before the pandemic (Jotkoff, 2022). Traditionally the highest rates of teacher turnover have been among teachers with zero to three years in the classroom, but since the start of the COVID 19 pandemic, there is an uptick in turnover among experienced teachers. The introduction of new challenges, especially comprehensive distance learning, have resulted in an increasing number of districts seeing experienced teachers opting for retirement (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021). To some extent, this reaction is consistent with the *conservatism* and *disengagement* described in Huberman's (1989) model of the professional life cycle of the teacher, the net result of the two streams of teachers leaving the profession is 567,000 fewer teachers in the United States than there were just three years ago when the pandemic began (Kamenetz, 2022).

The shortfall in teaching staff could not be coming at a worse time, especially in low income and racially segregated districts, where 75% reported a deficit in staffing (Yarrell, 2022). Students in these districts' academic growth has been disproportionately negatively impacted by the switch to comprehensive distance learning and pre-existing inequities in educational access have been worsened (Bailey et al., 2021; Carver-Thomas et al., 2021). The U.S. education system is losing educators at a time when students, and especially those who already face structural disadvantages and inequity, need more support than ever before. Students are showing significant learning loss across the academic spectrum and need more concentrated support to re-engage in the socio-cultural dynamics of in-person schooling (Larsen et al., 2022; Schult et al., 2022). Without a systemic change in how we support and retain both new teachers and experienced teachers, it is unlikely that schools will have the staff necessary to meet the increasingly complex needs of their students.

### Why Teachers are Opting Out

Currently, once a new teacher has completed their induction program and has become part of the licensed staff, there is nothing that organizationally distinguishes them from their colleagues with decades of experience except the pay scale and teaching assignment. Teachers are conditioned to pour their energy into their students, and their professional relationships with their colleagues are deprioritized because of isolation and time constraints. The teaching profession, especially for career classroom teachers, provides little recognition outside of the psychic reward that a teacher receives from working with their students. External acknowledgements, like pay raises, motivational perks, or increased responsibility over larger portions of the company, are not part of a classroom teacher's professional experience. An educator's sense of professional success is directly linked to the satisfaction they feel working with their students and their feelings of satisfaction are inseparable from the academic and socio-emotional victories of their

class (Lortie, 1975). Outside the classroom, teachers are rarely affirmed for the effort they put into their craft and the lack of recognition can lead to teacher burnout (Agyapong et al., 2022; Gavish & Friedman, 2010; Terry, 1997). Exhausted, underappreciated, and disconnected, experienced teachers begin to look for and consider other opportunities that recognize their efforts and leave the teaching profession. Add the stress and pressures of the existential threat that the COVID pandemic created and it is easy to understand why more and more experienced teachers are prioritizing their own well-being and seeking employment opportunities outside of education (Santos & Miguel, 2021).

Isolated in their rooms, new teachers become primarily focused on their day-to-day classroom choices (Ostovar-Nameghi & Sheikahmadi, 2016). Studies have indicated that over the course of a career, the satisfaction that a teacher receives from working with their students diminishes, and educators can begin to question their decision to become a classroom teacher (Rasberry & Mahajan, 2008; Zamir, 2018). Feelings of isolation are an early predictor of teacher attrition (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Buchanan, 2010; Le Maistre & Paré, 2010). Over time, without other psychic rewards to augment the job satisfaction that teachers receive from their students, teachers can begin to experience depersonalization and a disconnection from their students and colleagues caused by the emotional stress of meeting the various needs of their students on their own (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Depersonalization, in turn, decreases the psychic reward teachers receive from working with their students which can lead to higher rates of teacher burnout and attrition. Being dependent on interactions with their students as the primary source of job satisfaction can impact a teacher's relationships with other teachers, intensifying a teacher's feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction with their professional life (Fernet et al., 2012). Without explicit systems in place to counteract these forces of isolationism, teachers will simply close their doors, focus on their students and not take advantage of the institutional wisdom and support that is already present in their school colleagues. These feelings of isolation and disconnection are glaring symptoms of an education system that does not adequately foster strong professional relationships between teachers. To address this systemic limitation, it is worth exploring ways to increase collegiality amongst teachers and to make supportive learning relationships part of a school's institutional identity.

### **We Need to Do More to Support New Teachers**

Teacher isolation is a predictable result of our current systems of new teacher induction. While formalized induction programs for new teachers has become common practice in schools, with over 91% reporting receiving induction support to ease their onboarding, the form this support comes in varies widely (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Shockley et al., 2013). Most commonly, induction programs are focused on a checklist of teacher practice that emphasizes accountability rather than growing as a professional (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006). This accountability approach assumes that a new teacher is a “finished product” that simply needs to be shown the expectations of the job, and it is up to the teacher to meet those expectations. Teachers early in their career are evaluated by observation throughout their probationary period by administrators who rate them based on generalized rubrics and their own experiences as teachers (Qi et al., 2018). In order to be successful and to survive this probationary period, new teachers are encouraged to shed their “newness” as quickly as possible, to demonstrate to the administration that they are competent enough to be left alone with their students. This induction process and evaluation system can lead new teachers to no longer identify as learners; to ask for support and

guidance from their more experienced colleagues is seen as an admission of failure, thereby increasing their isolation. Teachers that are insulated from their colleagues rely more heavily on the externally prescribed learning outcomes rather than tailoring their lessons to the specific needs of their students (Gorski, 2017; Le Maistre & Paré, 2010; Westerman, 1991). Left unaddressed, a school's staff can become disconnected from each other, and professional growth stifled. New teachers feel overwhelmed and struggle in silence. Experienced teachers feel career stagnation, disconnection from their students and begin to consider other career options (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022). The question becomes, how can we develop a system to connect new and experienced teachers in a way that nurtures them both as professionals?

### **The Promise of Teacher Mentorship**

Mentorship programs that place new teachers with experienced teachers into mentorship dyads: the pairing of a new teacher with an experienced teacher for the purpose of supporting the new teacher's transition into their new role, is one solution that school districts have implemented to increase early career retention. In the state of (blinded), the (blinded) Beginning Teachers and Administrators Mentorship Program (XXX) began in 2007 and ended in 2019. According to the (blinded) Department of Education (XDE), the (blinded) Beginning Teachers and Administrators program began when the (blinded) Legislature passed House Bill 2574 authorizing XDE to establish a beginning teacher and administrator mentoring program. It was designed to support activities related to an evidence-based mentorship program for beginning teachers and administrators (Davis & Ryerson, 2019). The XMP provided funding, training and support to districts across the state to develop their own new teacher mentorship programs. As a result, some school districts created their own programs where teachers step out of their classrooms and are assigned to act as a mentor to all of the teachers who are in their first year with the district (*New Teacher Mentoring*, 2022). The mentor works in concert with the schools' administration and instructional coaches to then take over supervision and support of the new teacher as they enter into their second year. After the second year, the teachers no longer receive formal mentorship, and it becomes up to the individual to seek out additional support if they feel it is needed. Unfortunately, most studies into teacher development and competency show that a teacher does not begin to develop beyond the survival phase of their career until after their third year and do not often reach the level of an expert teacher within the first decade in the profession (Huberman et al., 1993; Raduan & Na, 2020). The current model of teacher mentorship in (blinded) fails to create lasting mentoring relationships that can sustain new teachers beyond their induction into the program. Alternative models of teacher mentorship that lead to a sustained learning partnership between the teacher-mentor and the teacher mentee could fill the void in new teacher support that currently exists in public schools. Mentoring relationships that originate and are nurtured within a singular educational community have the potential to not only transition a new educator out of their novice status but become a sustaining learning relationship throughout their career. To enhance the sustainability of teacher mentor relationships, the hierarchical and top down approach of formal teacher mentorship needs to be re-examined and more attention needs to be given to mentorship dyads that originated not from assignment but from a mutual decision by both mentor and mentee to learn from one another.

Mentorship dyads have been shown to improve the teaching practice and decision making of mentees, as well as mentors (Mathur et al., 2013). As with most human relationships, the mentoring relationship is most effective when both members respect and value the other.

Roberts (1985) study of professional learning described the relationship where both members are given status and valued as “I, Thou” relationships. Buber (1958) categorizes human relationships as either “I, Thou” or “I, It”. The “I, It” relationships reduce other people to their utility for the individual, reinforcing detachment from others and individualism. “I, Thou” relationships honor both members and through their connection, new understandings are formed. Buber (1958) explains,

“Individuality makes its appearance by being differentiated from other individualities. A person makes his appearance by entering into relation with other persons. The one is the spirited form of natural detachment, the other the spiritual form of natural solidarity of connection” (p. 62).

A more thorough investigation of teacher mentorship, especially on how the decision of the experienced educator to willingly enter a learning relationship, to become a teacher-mentor, could provide insight into how we can foster a “natural solidarity of connection” between new and experienced teachers.

### **A Call for Study: The Informal Teacher Mentorship Dyad**

In order for the mentoring relationship to be a place of knowledge construction, it must be a space where both members have their existence validated; it must be a loving relationship (Gehrke, 1988). What Buber (1958) would categorize as an “I, Thou” relationship, a loving learning relationship is one where both members respect that the other has valuable lessons to teach them and are humble enough to learn from them. In a formal mentorship relationship, where teacher-mentors are assigned to support a number of new teachers teaching a variety of subjects and grade-levels, the relationship between the teacher-mentor and the teacher-mentee can be impersonal and one sided because the teacher-mentor is not positioned to learn from the mentee. The relationship can become impersonal as the teacher-mentor becomes focused on the new teacher’s performance against a set of general criteria of teacher efficacy provided by the district (Parylo et al., 2012). Mentoring relationships that develop informally in a shared context and prioritize the relationship have shown to have a greater positive effect on the retention of the new teacher than those based in an external coaching model (Hallam et al., 2012). Unfortunately, without a clear way to systematize or propagate these informal relationships, their existence often comes down to chance. To enhance the growth of both the new and experienced teacher, a closer examination of the mentoring relationships that have developed organically between two teachers is needed. Learning from the experiences of teacher-mentors who developed meaningful relationships with their mentees that lasted beyond the mentees’ induction period could provide important insights in how two teachers can grow as professionals through the mentorship dyad. The recruitment, development, and retention of quality teacher-mentors has the potential to have an even greater institutional benefit to a school than simply retaining new teachers (Mullinex, 2002). Soliciting reflections of career-long educators who made the choice to become a teacher-mentor in their career could help stem the tide of experienced teachers that are leaving the profession. In order to maximize the quality of education that students receive and to develop and sustain educators in their careers, it is essential that mentorship of new teachers becomes a more common practice in schools. To move towards this ideal, however, it is important to learn from those who made the choice to become a teacher-mentor and how that choice influenced their professional identity.

## **The Problem of Experienced Teachers Leaving the Profession**

The current global pandemic has exacerbated staffing shortages and increased the number of experienced teachers leaving the profession (Miller, 2021). In March of 2021, 42% of teachers declared that they had considered leaving the profession during that school year, and there was a 6% increase, from 24% to 30%, in those that thought they would not be in the profession in five years time (Zamarro et al., 2021). A recent National Education Association survey measuring the impact of pandemic conditions on the professions found that 86% of teachers reported that they have seen more educators leaving the profession or retiring early since the 2020 pandemic began (Walker, 2022). The story in our state's school districts reflects the experience of districts across the country. The teaching profession is facing a staffing challenge that is unprecedented, and while efforts are being made to increase recruitment of new teachers to fill those positions that have been vacated, the loss of human capital of experienced teachers will inevitably have long term negative effects on student learning (Goldhaber & Theobald, 2022; Rice, 2010; Torenbeek & Peters, 2017). Higher rates of teacher retention amongst both new and experienced teachers also allows schools to take on long term work towards greater social equity and justice. Williams, Perskey, and Johnson (2018) found that schools with an experienced staff and strong collegial relationships were less likely to exclude Black students than schools with more novice staff and a less supportive culture. Yet schools with predominantly children of color have teachers who are more likely to be in their first years of teaching. A consistent staff also supports the development of an inclusive school climate for Black and Brown students, which has been linked to higher academic and social emotional learning outcomes (Jones et al., 2020). Fostering a shift to more culturally responsive practice takes time, and high rates of attrition in the staff make this pedagogical shift difficult (Barnes & McCallops, 2019; Prater & Devereaux, 2009). The institutional knowledge, the array of strategies to support diverse learning needs and the strong connections to the school community that experienced teachers bring to a school inevitably has a negative impact on our public education system and its students. Helping more experienced teachers to stay connected to their individual schools, and the profession, through engaging in a professional learning relationship like the teacher mentorship dyad could help to reverse current trends in experienced teacher attrition.

## **What We Know About Formal Teacher Mentorship and New Teachers**

Mentorship dyads are most effective when they are established as professional learning relationships rather than an additional part of the performance evaluation system of a school district (Bressman et al., 2018). Mentoring programs that involve evaluative aspects with a possibility of judgmental or even negative consequences are harmful to building relationships based on mutual trust and confidentiality (Daresh, 2007). A lack of judgment allows for the teacher-mentor to support the teacher-mentee in a formative way without adding an additional pressure to the start of a new educator's career. Unfortunately, as funding and support for mentoring programs has fluctuated, the limited time assigned teacher-mentors have with their teacher-mentees often results in the relationship being one sided and hierarchical. The teacher-mentors feel pressure to provide new teachers with the skills they need to meet curriculum expectations and state testing requirements, rather than seeing the relationship as one that is collaborative and mutually beneficial for the professional growth of both the teacher-mentor and the teacher-mentee (St. George & Robinson, 2011). Mullen (2016) contended that mentorship is

“a framework for theorizing developmental relationships in which people with experience and expertise invest time in those who are less experienced, responding to critical needs and enhancing the capacity for growth, productivity, and achievement”(p. 12). This model frames the mentoring dyad in terms of how it supports the practice and career of the teacher-mentee and does not acknowledge what the teacher-mentor can learn from the teacher-mentee (Bullough, 2012). Reconceptualizing the mentoring dyad as a learning partnership has the potential to exponentially increase the impact of the relationship for both mentee and mentor. Mullen (2016) contends that when mentoring is framed as a partnership, it creates “Climates of thoughtfulness extend beyond learning skills and strategies, encompassing critical and creative thinking and reflective inquiry” (p.132). The habits of mind that can be developed in concert between the teacher-mentor and teacher-mentee have the potential to improve the practice and nurture the career of both. In a successful mentoring relationship, teacher-mentors have identified that they have increased their professional competency and collaboration with others colleagues, become more reflective, and felt more able to take on other leadership roles in their schools (Huling & Resta, 2001). Successful mentors remain open to diverse points of view and commit to change themselves in response to experiences within the mentoring relationship (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006). The challenge becomes how can we increase the number of teachers who make the choice to become teacher-mentors in a time when many teachers are feeling greater pressure on their time, increased scrutiny on their curriculum choices and stress from the seismic shock of a global pandemic.

### **Formal vs. Informal Models of Mentorship**

There has been extensive research around mentoring dyads in education, but the main focus of that work has been on mentors working with preservice teachers (Haggarty et al., 2011; Hudson, 2013; Lopez-Real & Kwan, 2005). Researchers have explored how engaging in mentorship dyads has impacted cooperating teacher's practice through increased pedagogical reflection. Mentorship dyads between pre-service teachers and their cooperating teachers have been thoroughly examined and this research has established the positive correlation between participation in mentorship dyads during pre-service and increased new teacher retention once they become licensed. Research has also begun to focus on the impact of mentorship dyads on the practice of teacher-mentors. The most comprehensive study was done by Mathur et al. (2013), who found that teachers who had participated in mentoring dyads in special education identified a number of positive impacts to their practice, especially around decision-making. Hudson (2016) has demonstrated the importance of cooperating teachers focusing on building strong and reciprocal relationships to maximize the benefit to their own practice. While their focus was cooperating teachers working with preservice teachers where power dynamics are impacted by the evaluative nature of teacher preparation programs, it does suggest that a mentorship relationship between educators can lead to the professional growth of both members of the dyad. These studies also raise the question, why is such a successful support for candidates who are aspiring to become a teacher abandoned once the candidate becomes a licensed teacher?

Districts that have chosen to make formal mentorship a component of induction programs for new teachers in recent years have led to the development of a variety of organizational models for teacher mentorship. Since these programs are designed and implemented by state and district leadership, they tend to mimic the top-down approach they use to organize the public education system. The most common approach is the coaching model where a trained teacher-



mentor is assigned a caseload of new teachers and the goal is to help the new teacher survive their first year as a professional (Hallam et al., 2012). This organizational structure reflects a reductive conception of the new teacher and focuses on helping them adjust to their challenging new environment, learn routines, instill classroom management and learn some basic pedagogical techniques to achieve their learning goals (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006). In a study of the effectiveness of mandatory induction programs in Connecticut public schools that included this approach to teacher mentorship, Hanita et al. (2020) found that meeting with their mentor was the least adhered to portion of the program because new teachers did not feel that the support they were receiving was meeting their needs in the classroom. In a comparative study of the coaching model and the use of mentorship dyads, Hallam et al. (2012) found that in-school mentorship programs that focused on successfully matching individual mentors with a new teacher resulted in a 92% first year and 64% three year retention rate versus a 58% and 42% rate with a coaching model. Clearly a shared context and a developed relationship are crucial to helping new teachers feel supported in their work. Informal teacher mentorship dyads that have developed organically due to shared context could reveal meaningful insights into how we can best support new educators through a supportive learning relationship.

A review of the research on the mentoring of new teachers also reveals a general consensus that mentorship relationships benefit both the mentee and the mentor (Ehrich et al., 2004). Being mentored benefits new teachers by helping them develop a wide range of skills and competencies in their work and to feel supported at a vulnerable stage of their career (Andrews & Quinn, 2005). For the mentor, engaging in a mentorship dyad has shown to expand a mentor's professional competencies, increase their reflection on their own practice, and improve their job satisfaction (Huling & Resta, 2001). While most studies of mentoring programs have focused on the positive impact mentoring relationships have on the new teacher's practice and retention, little has been done to explore how choosing to become a mentor influences the mentor's professional identity. Percy et al. (2020) contends that new teachers, recently graduated from teacher preparation, bring valuable perspectives to supporting student learning that need to be validated and further developed once they become classroom teachers. Hudson (2013), in a study of cooperating teachers who mentored student teachers, found that:

“the interviewed mentors articulated that mentoring acted as professional development, where they observed mentees' teaching and presented feedback to them by reflecting on and deconstructing their pedagogical knowledge practice” (p. 780).

This type of reflection is not currently built into the daily routines of experienced teachers, who often struggle to clearly articulate the pedagogy behind their praxis (Gajda & Cravedi, 2006). Becoming a teacher-mentor would be a clear way to build reflection into the practice of the experienced teacher while simultaneously increasing the number of new teachers who are in a supportive professional relationship. The forming of strong professional relationships through mentorship has been linked to a reduction in teachers' intention to leave the profession and a greater sense of community amongst both mentees and mentors (Struyve et al., 2016). In addition, being a part of a mentorship dyad can be transformative in shaping the attitudes both new teachers and experienced teachers have about their ability to be in the classroom. Schwan et al. (2020) reported that new teachers gained confidence and perspectives that directly impacted student learning, while teacher mentors felt renewed in their craft and reenergized by being part of a mutually supportive relationship.

## How Mentoring Can Help Experienced Teachers Continue to Learn

Most models of teacher learning in schools fail to deliver effective and meaningful learning opportunities for teachers, especially experienced teachers (Reeves, 2012). Professional development that is delivered from an external organization, not contextualized and supported throughout its implementation has little impact on teacher practice (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006). But to be a successful teacher, it is essential that experienced teachers continue to learn so they can develop and refine their practice. As Zamir (2018) stated,

“Teachers must refresh their knowledge, avoid burnout and repeatedly examine their perceptions of teaching and their desire to make teaching a respected profession. They must develop new approaches to learning, modernize the curricula and update their teaching practices” (p. 158).

Yet the context in which this learning occurs has a dramatic impact on the level of engagement of the experienced teacher. (Mahmoudi & Özkan, 2015) found that experienced teachers consistently reported that they learned most from collaborations with colleagues who shared their teaching context and interests. Unfortunately, the majority of the professional development opportunities provided to experienced teachers are not tailored to their context and framed as a learning relationship (Rodriguez & McKay, 2010). The result is that many experienced teachers reach what Huberman (1989) describes as the *serenity* phase of their career and prioritize routine in their practice over innovation. Resigned to the idea that they no longer have things to learn as a teacher, experienced teachers can soon become conservative in their attitudes about students and become disengaged from the profession as a whole (Huberman et al., 1993). Experienced teachers who have made the choice to serve as mentors, however, have reported directly learning from their mentees and indirectly learning through collaborating with their mentees show the promise of teacher mentorship over other methods of professional development (Lopez-Real & Kwan, 2005). To avoid stagnation of practice amongst experienced teachers, we need to explore models of teacher learning that are contextualized to their experience and based on the current research (Carter Andrews & Richmond, 2019). Experienced teachers remain a vital resource to support student learning and the school community (Alvy, 2005). Reframing professional development so that it is personalized and delivered through professional learning relationships has the potential to help our schools to be agile enough to adjust to the changing demographics and the needs and realities of our students, families, and communities. To ensure that all teachers continue to learn after they have completed their teacher preparation programs, we need to develop a greater variety of professional development opportunities that are grounded, are localized to the context of the school, engage the expertise that is present in the building and lower the resistance to change that can become a quality of teachers later in their careers. Creating favorable conditions that encourage experienced teachers to choose to become a teacher-mentor is a professional development opportunity that could support both teacher retention and continued learning.

### Concluding Thoughts: Foregrounding Informal Teacher Mentorship

Teacher mentoring in a dyad has the power to move beyond simple knowledge transmission to knowledge transformation (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006). To be a force of transformation for both the new teacher and experienced teacher, both members need to see value in the dyad and feel valued in the relationship. By equalizing the power dynamics of the dyad, making it a

collaborative partnership where both teachers are learning together, allows for both to identify as learners (Lopez, 2013). The relationship is not just another competing demand on the time of the teacher but a new source of psychic reward that sustains teachers in their careers (Lortie, 1975). In the current caseload model of formal teacher mentorship, it is practically impossible for the assigned teacher-mentor to form this kind of learning relationship because they have ten other new teachers to support at multiple schools throughout their district. While our current practice helps to support teacher retention, it is not enough. The immediate need to counteract the forces of teacher isolation and attrition necessitate the exploration of alternative informal teacher mentorship relationships. Exploring how meaningful learning partnerships between the informal teacher-mentor and the teacher-mentee that have been fostered developed over time could provide insights into how to make transformative learning relationships between teachers a common practice. New teachers need to know who is here to help, experienced teachers need to feel that they still have more to learn, and students need teachers who can adapt their practice to best support their learning. The informal teacher mentorship relationship could hold the key to meeting these needs.

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