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A Mentoring Process to Support Teachers' Growth and Retention

David Bell

Earl Thomas

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Collectively studies on the impact of mentoring programs have provided empirical evidence that it has a positive impact on teacher retention (Ingersoll and Kralik 2004). The National Education Association cites several key reasons for requiring teacher mentoring, such as, recruitment, retention, and overall improvement of teacher practices. Essentially, a school or school district that can retain more of its teachers will positively affect teacher morale and student achievement.

As educational consultants one of the pressing needs that we find administrators often recognize is the need for mentoring new and veteran teachers. Despite their concerns mentoring is often not part of the school system or it is executed in a haphazard manner. For example, when principals are asked to describe the current teacher mentoring system they often report that they just assign new teachers with veteran teachers who are willing to take on an additional responsibility. This suggests there is a lack of attention given to the importance of the quality relationship that must be established between mentor teacher and new teacher protégé. Most importantly, there appears to be a lack of attention given to the process for supporting and mentoring new teachers.

Support for New Teachers

According to Fidele and Haselkorn over the next decade America will need to hire approximately 200,000 K-12 teachers annually because of rising student enrollment (as cited by Menchaca 2003). Because of the increase need for teachers it is essential that schools have in place a mentoring system that will support teachers' growth and retention. Nelson (2004) expressed not only understanding the larger context of education as being important (the social cultural and political understandings) but having an ongoing supervised experience is linked to the success of all teachers. Thus, understanding the cultural aspects that impact teaching and learning are vital for teacher success and retention.

Based on our collective experience working with principals who seek to establish a mentoring system within their school, we suggest the following. Teacher mentor programs should be well planned, provide opportunities for mutual dialogue, establish shared goals, provide opportunities for mutual observation and reflection.

Mentor Program Planning

Critical to an effective design and execution of a mentoring system, is the planning that must be conducted by all stakeholders. Stakeholders may include administrators, board members, teachers, internal consultants, and/or district supervisors who have a vested interest in teacher growth and retention. It is our experience that these individuals are essential in identifying and understanding nuances that impact the overall delivery and effectiveness of the teacher mentoring system. Such nuances may include the number of new teacher recruits, teacher experience in the classroom, student needs, and culturual background. These individuals play a pivotal role in identifying and communicating the current school environment with respect to how school personnel support each others growth and development. They also act as change agents, identifying experienced teachers who can serve as

mentors to support the growth and development of protégé's.

Introduction of Mentor Process

Malcolm Knowles, the American father of adult education, offers a process of adult learning that we have adapted in supporting teacher growth and retention. The process is based on the assumption that mentor and protégé(s)' are equal partners in the mentor experience. The quality of the mentor experience should be intensive and ongoing. According to the National Conference of Teacher Quality (1997) a minimum of 45 contact hours are needed per school year to complete effective teacher mentor/protégé activities. Within the 45 contact hours there are opportunities for dialogue, shared goal setting, mutual observation, and mutual refection. Thus, the following elements shape an effective mentor/protégé process.

Mutual Dialogue

Mutual Dialogue is an experience that includes mentor and protégés engaging in meaningful one on one dialogue while discovering each other's uniqueness, strengths, needs, and resources. For example, if a protégé' reveals that professional development in classroom management strategies are a need and the mentor is unable to address the need, the mentor seeks out resources that will support the protégé with getting their need met. During mutual dialogue each partner shares his or her uniqueness and special attributes (e.g. artistic abilities, hobbies, interest, and etc.) which serve as synergy for building a mentor/protégé relationship.

Furthermore, mutual dialogue experiences include opportunities for mentor and protégé's to engage in large group discussions that often reveal uniqueness, strengths, needs, and resources as a group. For example, mentors and protégé's must engage in activities that will develop group cohesiveness. Activities can include strengths bombardment, which affirms individual uniqueness, creates a sense of belonging, and develops trusting relationships. A trusting relationship is critical as mentor and protégé's develop shared goals that will guide future activities.

Shared Goal Setting

Once the mentor and protégé' has developed open dialogue and trust they are ready to create shared goals. This activity includes documenting the goals and outcomes to be achieved that address mutually identified areas needing improvement. We recommend that no more than 2-3 goals should be established within a school year. Keeping in mind the National Conference on Teacher Quality (1997) suggest a minimum of 45 contact hours a year be devoted to mentor activities. Thus, establishing more than 3 goals in an academic school year may compromise the quality and outcomes of the mentor program. The goals should be documented, rank ordered according to need, achievable, observable, and measurable. Mentor and protégé rank order each goal by assigning a value of 1-3 (1= somewhat important, 2= important, 3= essential) as it pertains to the protégé's growth and retention. Once goals have been rank ordered the next step is to determine if the goals are achievable, observable, and measurable. As shown, Table 1 list inappropriate and appropriate goals that may impact a protégé's development.

Table 1

Appropriate and Inappropriate Goal

Inappropriate (goal 1)	Appropriate (goal 2)
By the end of the first quarter the protégé will have used and adopted ten teaching strategies that increase student achievement.	By the end of the first semester the protégé will have adopted and used two math manipulative strategies that increase student achievement by 10% when computing two step equations.

previously stated a goal should be achievable, observable and measurable. Goal 2 is appropriate because it provides a clear means of measuring goal attainment. One could simply pre-asses/post assess students math performance to determine if students have achieved a gain of 10% or more in computing two step equations. Additionally, the mentor might observe the teacher's use of two manipulative math strategies that prepares students to compute two-step equations. Based on mentor and protégé discussion a realistic time frame can be documented as having a positive impact on the successful outcome of the goal. However, goal 1 does not state a means of determining a measurable outcome. In our work with mentor teacher projects it takes at least two weeks to effectively determine if a newly adopted strategy was successful in achieving the pre-determined outcome. Thus, using and adopting 10 strategies is highly unrealistic and unlikely to produce positive achievement outcomes for protégés and their students.

Once the goals have been established, the goals should be transferred to a Mentor/Protégé Contract. We highly recommend that a formal agreement be created to document the mentor/protégé outcome(s) and activities. The contract should outline the goals, activities, responsible party, timeline, and evidence of accomplishment. Table 2 represents an example of a Mentor Protégé Contract.

Table 2

Mentor/Protégé Contract

Goals	Activity/Strategy	Responsible Party	Timeline for completion	Evaluation/ Evidence
1)				
2)				
3)				

Signature of Mutual Agreement:

PROTÉGÉ _____ DATE_____

MENTOR_____ DATE_____

Mutual Observation and Feedback

Using the mentor /protégé contract with the identified goals, the initial observations should begin with a pre-meeting with the mentor and protégé to discuss the specifics of what will be observed. During the observation mentors should observe the specific teaching strategies that relate to the mutually identified goals (i.e. wait time, positive praise, and etc.). Mentors should provide immediate feedback on the teaching observation to ensure that the protégé feel supported and can implement the mutually agreed upon strategies. The mentor should refrain from evaluative statements that are judgmental rather than educative. As shown, Table 3 depicts inappropriate and appropriate statements that may impact the protégé's development

Table 3

Judgmental versus Observation Statements

Judgmental Statement	Observation Statement
You did not provide an appropriate transition to prepare students to exit the classroom. In my experience that could get you into trouble.	I noticed that during the transition from music to science the students were given a two -minute warning to begin to put away their musical instruments and move quietly to the science center.

As table 2 suggest a "judgmental statement" begins with a "you" statement and focuses only on what is wrong. In contrast, an "observational statement" focuses primarily on what was observed and makes use of "I" language. At this phase the mentor and protégé may agree that a model can serve to support the protégé in accomplishing the mutually agreed upon goals. The mentor may model best practice through demonstration and dialogue. Eventually the protégé is provided an opportunity to practice what has been modeled. During practice the mentor provides guided instruction and reflective feedback based on their observation of the protégés performance. After feedback and/or modeling have been applied, it is imperative to provide an opportunity for mutual reflection.

Mutual Reflection

Mutual refection requires the interpretation of the events that have unfolded. A decision will have to be made if the goal has been met or additional time is needed to address the goal. At this time goals may be revised or the mentor/protégé may decide to move to the next previously established goal. Therefore, the purpose of this activity is to mutually evaluate the accomplishments of established goals, and applied strategies. Remember the aim is to create future goals and strategies based on the mutual assessment of prior goals and protégé performance. This process may recycle itself depending on the need of the protégé and revision of goals.

Conclusion

Despite principal's concern for teacher development, mentoring is often not a formal process that facilitates teachers' growth and retention. However, mentoring can yield great benefits for teachers by ensuring they have the necessary support systems that foster long-term professional development. Malcolm Knowles suggest there is a process of adult learning that can promote teacher growth and retention. In conclusion, an effective mentoring program should be well planned, built on mentor /protégé relationships, which reflect mutual dialogue, shared goal setting, mutual observation /feedback, and reflection.

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thomas@sxu.edu

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