

In Classroom Mentor Teachers: An Addition to Mentor Teachers



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Abstract

There have been numerous studies done on the impact that mentor teachers and new teacher induction plans have on the new teachers' success in the first couple of years. A lot of these studies were done in an attempt not only to determine how to attract good teachers, but to retain them. It is our hope in this article to also determine if by having a classroom coach and teacher mentors in place, we can mold these new teachers into a strong cultural fit. This article looks at what impact an inside-the-classroom coach would have in addition to the benefits previously obtained from having mentor teachers that teach their own classes. Recent retired teachers and administrators serve as great untapped resources and have the time available to spend in the classroom while the traditional mentor teachers have their own classroom responsibilities and are unable to give the new teachers their undivided attention for a longer period of time. The school in this study, the Middle Bucks Institute of Technology (MBIT), has a two-year induction plan utilizing the skills of three mentor teachers and one classroom coach to provide support to five new teachers. Two of the mentor teachers are each assigned to mentor two new teachers and one mentor teacher is assigned to mentor one new teacher. The new classroom coach circulates among the classroom of the five new teachers during instructional time to observe and advise.

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As you prepare for your first day and each day, when your students enter and you encounter their attitudes, ranging from eager, enthusiastic anticipation to uncomfortable, uncertain apathy, recall the powers you have within...from poet to philosopher...and present yourself to those students as a person worthy of the noble title...Teacher -Trish Marcuzzo

Background

Teaching is one of the few professions that throw their new employees into the trenches of labor with very little on the job training. Postsecondary institutions provide student teaching as a pre-service teachers, but this provides little comfort when you are standing in front of 20 high school students waiting in anticipation. . What do you do first? Do you talk about how your class will be managed, discipline, get to know your students, assess where they are, begin chapter one, have them write what they did over their Summer hiatus? Hopefully, with the help of a classroom coach, a mentor teacher and a caring supervisor, the new teacher will have a plan in place. There are many objectives stemming from a strong new teacher induction plan to use as a road map with the mentor teacher serving as the navigator. Danielson & McGreal (2000) define the responsibilities of mentors as helping new teachers to:

- Meet the procedural demands of the school
- Receive moral and emotional support
- Receive access to other classrooms to observe different models
- Gain knowledge about new materials, planning, curriculum, and teaching methods
- Obtain strong classroom management and discipline procedures
- Develop an understanding of diverse classrooms
- Engage in self-assessment and reflection
- Experiment and develop new ideas and strategies

(p. 95)

These are all very important tasks and strategies for a teacher mentor. Many of these can be addressed outside of the classroom environment, but at Middle Bucks Institute of Technology (MBIT), we wanted to enhance this process by placing a classroom coach into the classroom during instructional time. This, of course, can only be done by using an instructor who is not currently committed to his or her own classroom. However, we needed to be sure that this instructor has the experience to mentor in real time. Before entering the school year, we considered two options, a retired teacher or an administrator who has previously supervised teachers. MBIT was very fortunate to have the opportunity to hire our retired Cosmetology teacher, Ms. Elizabeth Crilley, who was able to start immediately upon the onset of the 2012-2013 school year as our classroom coach. Ms. Crilley taught at MBIT for over 30 years, served as both a mentor teacher and a lead teacher for Temple University's Lead Teacher Program. Ms. Crilley was an adjunct professor for Temple's new teacher Vital Program where she taught new Career and Technical Education (CTE) teachers. This classroom coach position would be compensated from funds allocated in the Perkins grant slated for professional development (Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Act of 2006, 2010, p. 3). In addition to our classroom coach, our mentor teachers are Mr. Paul Carney, the Welding Program teacher, Mr. John Fala, the Public Safety Program teacher, and Mr. Christopher Tully, the Multimedia Technology teacher. Mr. Fala and Mr. Tully are both lead teachers as well at MBIT and are instrumental in developing the new Career and Technology Advocacy Group initiative (CTAG - Career and Technical Advocacy Group, 2011, p. 1). Mr. Carney is a first-time teacher mentor who began his teaching career at MBIT in 1991.

It should not be the intention of any induction plan, mentor teacher, or supervisor to punch out cookie cutter type teachers who fit a certain mold, but it should be the goal to bring out the teaching personality particular to that new teacher's teaching style.

Every teacher who succeeds in teaching develops a mature teaching style unique to him or her. This style encompasses three major threads: the cognitive thread which is the knowledge base from which he/she works; a skill thread, which comprises the repertoire of skills the teacher develops, and an affective thread, which sums the outlook from which the teacher views what he/she does.

(Bruce & Miller, 2007, p. 11)

Being a classroom mentor watching, observing, listening, sharing, taking it all in and finding the best approach to assist a new enthusiastic teacher is a great responsibility. The struggles and burdens they have with learning the standard operating procedures of the school coupled with preparation of their daily lessons can be likened to childbirth. A teacher's classroom management style may either create an environment that will encourage growth and wellbeing or possibly insecurity and dismay. At MBIT teachers engage students in meaningful industry-related activities for 2 hours and 45 minutes a day for 182 days a year over a 3-year period. Due to the extended time our teachers spend with the same population, it is extremely important that teachers establish environments that reflect those of our industries. New teachers should create a classroom culture with high expectations and encourage students to achieve at their personal best. Teachers, individually, have his or her own delivery system to achieve these goals. Mentors can only open a "tool box" and give newer teachers strategies and ideas that have worked over time; and in a given situation may work for them as well. For this reason, the first

day of our induction plan focuses on modeling strategies that assist in creating a personalized environment.

The initial meeting between the mentor teachers and the new teachers begins by having the mentor teachers introduce themselves to the new teachers. Unlike a traditional introduction of name, content area and years in education, the mentor teachers described their passion for teaching, their reasons for leaving their trade to become an educator and the reward they receive from being a professional educator. This sets the stage for new teachers to reciprocate in telling their “story.” As each teacher describes their time in the industry, their reasons for becoming an educator and the goals they hope to achieve, the mentor teachers begins the journey of personalizing a plan to assist each teacher reaching their maximum potential.

The game’s afoot. As the new school year starts, the excitement and enthusiasm is shared with administrators, lead and mentor teachers as well as our new staff. As mentors, we have found, and our new teachers will soon learn, teaching is not always what you think it will be. Much of your time and energy is absorbed in the preparation and planning and other outside the classroom functions. All are important aspects of the career but none supersede your role and responsibilities to your students in the classroom. The excitement builds as the first day approaches. Both veteran and new teachers anticipate their first few minutes with their new classes. Mr. Fala, provided this story soon after the first day concluded.

As the busses were pulling up outside on the first day of school I waited with one of our new teachers. I asked him, “Are you nervous?” He looked at me and answered, ”What do you think?” I smiled, laughed and put my hand on his shoulder and responded, “How do you think they feel?” His concern suddenly changed from worrying about his first day to being concerned for his students on their first day. In the years that I have been teaching

the rules of the game may have changed from year to year but the prize has always remained the same. We both shared a teaching moment!

Just as wonderful as it is to see the successful turnaround of a student who was defiant become a leader in your classroom, so is the feeling of seeing a new teacher successfully lead a classroom to success. This occurred with one of our new teachers who worked diligently, thoughtfully, and patiently to bring about change and success. It's like watching a building being constructed from foundation to rooftop. The changes taking place are positive and the development of classroom management skills is building an atmosphere that is more conducive to learning. The teacher is the CEO and the treatment in the class is consistent, fair and respectful of them at all times. There have been changes in the classrooms from suggestions that have been made from the "tool box". It is a work in progress and with technology I'm only an email away.

It is our opinion that the role of a mentor teacher has developed over the years. What was once a dissemination of ways to be successful, we now see the role as helping the new teachers find what works best for them on an individualized basis. We have found that the in-service days and meetings leading up to the new school year can create a feeling of polarization and, at times, incompetence. This is where teaming up with a positive role model is essential. Recalling our first days as a teacher when we sat and listened to others and heard stories about how they accomplished great things, we came to realize that we do not want to overwhelm our new teachers in the same way. We don't want to approach them with a, "see what I can do" attitude, instead, take a, "let me help you see what you can do" attitude. We try to work to their strengths instead of telling them about our own.

Each mentor took different approaches to orienting the teachers to their new environment and respectfully each new teacher took what they wanted from what they shared. Several teachers took advantage of their prep time to watch veteran teachers start their school year. Mr. Tully opened his classroom to those new teachers and reflected upon what they saw at the completion of each session. He explained in meetings that this reflection of his own teaching practices was not only beneficial for the new teachers, but was equally beneficial for him. “It’s not often that teachers can share and reflect on things that just happened in their classroom; both positively and negatively. It was great to hear a fresh perspective on what he practiced in his classroom,” he explained. It was also beneficial that Mr. Tully was able model to the new teachers how to constructively receive criticism, as this was the role of the classroom mentor.

As we have adapted from Blanchard and Spencer’s (1982) *The One Minute Manager*, one very effective tool that we keep in our “tool box” is making the effort to catch our new teachers doing something right. “We need to catch em’ red handed when we see or hear something positive that they are doing” (p.16). Start their day out on a good note and let it end on a better one! The game may be challenging but we should try to make it fun to play.

Providing practical onsite strategies to enhance classroom management are provided by the classroom coach each week. When appropriate, eye contact was very often a good communicator to indicate a classroom need. Modeling with a student was effective as well. After all a picture is worth a thousand words and the effect it produces even more. After session mini meetings or at times emails with pertinent information to address a situation was the most effective.

Regularly checking in with our Classroom Coach and other Mentors helps target areas that need attention. Some of us may need to humble ourselves as we refer the new teachers to

someone else who may be better suited to help them in a specific area. This is where a team approach is essential to working with new teachers. The combined efforts of the team are far more effective and thought stimulating than the efforts of one. Through these discussions with other Mentors we still find ourselves ‘stealing’ good ideas. By using a team approach, the Mentors also become better Mentors and consequently better teachers. We all have concocted some home brewed methods of dealing with adverse and rewarding situations that we need to share. I have often told the new teachers if you want to stop learning you probably shouldn’t be teaching.

Key Questions

We surveyed the new teachers with various questions around their in-class mentor and their regular mentor teacher and arrived at the following:

- In what ways was the classroom mentor helpful?
 - They helped with classroom management
 - They were able to answer questions as they arose
 - I appreciated their encouragement along the way
- In what ways was the outside of classroom mentor teacher helpful?
 - Helped me to concentrate on what I need to know now.
 - Helped me with classroom setup and classroom management.
- What has worked well for you as a new teacher?
 - “The First Days of School”(Wong & Wong, 2005, Chapter 1)
 - Support from all staff.
- What in the induction plan helped you most?
 - Began building staff relationships

- Gained knowledge about how school operates
- Feeling of support from everyone
- Knowledge of school layout
- Hearing from other first-year teachers
- Are you comfortable with IEPs and support for your students with special needs?
 - Yes, comfortable
 - Not comfortable in the beginning, worked with instructional assistant
 - I treat them like any other kids and handle needs as they arise with support
- What did you need and didn't get?
 - Student behavior referral procedures
 - How stuff was set up on my computer
 - I wanted to know more about policy and procedure
 - Daily grades and how to grade when students are absent
- What are your suggestions for improvement?
 - Program specific instructions for first week of school
 - More time spent with veteran teachers preferably in my department
 - More time getting familiar with program tools and equipment
 - More planning and set up time in the beginning of the year
 - Orientation needs to be longer. Information overload in a short time
 - In-class mentor in my class more during the first week

Creating a community of support for new teachers was the primary intent of the mentoring program. The goal was to provide systematic and sustained psychological and instructional support to new teachers through guidance and orientation intended to increase

confidence and effectiveness of the new teacher. The intent was also to lessen the high level of attrition among beginning teachers. A strong mentor program is especially crucial for CTE teachers who have not participated in an academic preparation program designed for teacher instruction. The CTE teacher is typically a tradesperson with substantial “hands on” occupational work experience and a passion to teach. The CTE teacher needs to rely on their mentor teacher greatly during the first year in the classroom. In a study conducted by Ohio State University, titled *Perceptions of CTE Teachers About teacher Mentoring and Teacher Retention*, a recommendation included “the need for mentors to be assigned during the first year even to those teachers hired late, and well trained as their role, expectations, listening ability and willingness to give time to the new teacher” (Briggs, 2008, p. 90). “A second recommendation from the study was that when at all possible, mentors for Route B (second career) career and technical teachers need to match with their mentees in content knowledge, to be most helpful to the new career and technical education teacher” (Briggs, 2008, p. 90).

Summary

All in all having a classroom coach shared by our new teachers was a positive experience and seemed to be beneficial for the teachers that were lucky enough to have her. Ms. Crilley provided a comfort and a quick resource for those situations that came up that an experienced teacher would easily handle. All the new teachers that participated had many positive things to say about the experiences with the classroom coach, the traditional mentor teachers, and the induction plan. These new teachers, without exception, are thriving, excited to be here, and demonstrate that they really care about their students they teach.

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