

# Teacher Mentoring as a Means to Improve Schools

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this article is to identify the various reasons that teacher mentoring within schools is beneficial for schools, teachers, and students. Mentoring within schools promotes teacher retention and consistency among educators. Mentoring programs not only increase job satisfaction and help teachers to emerge as leaders within their schools, but also have a positive effect on student achievement and engagement. Teachers work collaboratively with each other as valued team members. When schools implement mentoring programs effectively, the sharing of knowledge between teachers becomes an inherent quality whereby students, teachers, and the school climate benefits.*

Businesses world-wide have adopted various mentoring and induction programs in an effort to help new employees become acclimatized to their jobs. Mentoring programs are meant to help new hires with job expectations, to increase job satisfaction and productivity, and to identify and develop leaders within the organization. Mentoring programs work much the same in education systems, but instead of making money, mentoring programs in schools develop high-quality educators who then promote student achievement. Schools with mentoring programs remain consistent in their transfers of knowledge, help to foster leadership, and promote teacher retention. Instead of working in isolation, educators collaborate and critically assess new knowledge. The shift in teacher collaboration is a welcome change from the isolated practices that educators have become accustomed to, and is a benefit to teachers, students, and school climates.

## Consistency

Schools benefit from consistency, and mentorship can provide new teachers with a level of consistency that may otherwise be overlooked. With mentoring, novice teachers have direct access to the mentoring teachers who can share their knowledge, thus reducing the time that it takes to acquire necessary information. Principals are often too busy at the start of the year to sit down with new staff and go over the many details that are necessary to learn, and therefore rely on their mentoring teachers to assist and guide the new teachers. Mentorship promotes rapid learning (Stanulis & Floden, 2009) and builds a level of consistency useful in all aspects of the day-to-day school practices: student learning, expected behaviours, and the overall positivity of the school's climate.

School climate refers to the quality and character within schools. It is based upon experiences, goals, teaching practices, relationships, and organizational hierarchies within schools (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Nicholas, 2009). When teachers mentor, they teach the novice teachers about the school climate. This transfer of knowledge is invaluable for new teachers who are struggling to remember and conquer many tasks. Jennifer (a pseudonym) discussed how, at her first job, she had no mentor, and there seemed to be no consistent expectations. She would often see teachers purposefully ignore negative student behaviours, claiming that they did not know the procedures. Jennifer felt that the school climate was unruly, inconsistent, and manipulated by the students. Eventually, she left the school and took a job at another school, because she did not think that the school climate was going to change. When teachers feel such negative emotions, they are unable to maintain an ideal level of efficacy (Vesely, Saklofske, & Leschied, 2013). At her current school, Jennifer has a mentor and feels like valued team member, whereby teachers are invested participants who uphold expected

standards. She said that one of the reasons for the positive school climate is the mentors, who guide and teach the novice teachers.

### **Team Teaching**

Many teachers long for connections to their peers. Traditionally, co-teaching and collaborative work was not considered a necessity, which is why there are still professionals who are used to, and more comfortable with, addressing issues on their own and working in isolation (Grillo, Moorehead, & Bedesem, 2011). The pressure that a novice teacher feels can be greatly alleviated by working and team teaching with a mentor (Stanulis & Floden, 2009). Mentor collaboration is learning that is put into practice and benefits teachers and, therefore, students.

Opportunities for teachers to collaborate and team teach are beneficial to students because they provide more balanced instruction and consistencies among educators. By using The Atmosphere, Instruction/Content, Management, and Student Engagement (AIMS) test (Roehrig, Dolezal, Mohan, Bohn, & Pressley, 2001), Stanulis and Floden (2009) measured the effectiveness of teaching practices and found that mentorship creates more balanced instructional techniques, which invariably results in higher student achievements. Through team teaching and collaborative learning, teachers lessen the time required to learn and master new practices, becoming more efficient in classrooms and in their professions. It is difficult for any professional to work alone (Hargreaves, 2009), and team teaching not only enables, but also encourages, teachers to view student learning as part of their ongoing responsibilities (Grillo et al., 2011), instead of sending students on to the next grade and having no continued interest in their subsequent education.

Team teaching is a form of collaboration that enhances teachers' knowledge of instructional strategies, promoting competency and confidence in their profession. The first years of teaching are busy, and the opportunities to team teach with a mentor or other teacher diminishes the amount of time and preparation required to plan units or lessons (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2014). Team teaching provides new teachers and their mentors with chances to observe new teaching methods, learn new skills, reflect upon teaching practices, and motivate each other (Grillo et al., 2011). The learning that takes place is more meaningful to new teachers (Orland-Barak & Hasin, 2010; University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2014), because they are collaborations that the novice teachers are actively shared members of, thus encouraging self-reliance and feelings of confidence among themselves.

### **Leadership**

In the past, teachers were seen not as leaders, but as people who were led by their administrators. Understanding that learning must take place, there has been a change in traditional educational pedagogies and reforms: from institutions to learning organizations (Msila, 2012). Teachers who have opportunities to mentor other teachers emerge as leaders within their professions, thus developing learning organizations and improving their own credibility with their colleagues (HM Inspectorate of Education, 2008). These are the teachers seen continuously developing their own careers (Portner, 2008). Through mentoring, they have acquired levels of ownership and responsibilities in the programming that takes place within schools.

When teachers feel that they are part of a team, they are more likely to be invested in every student's learning, not just the students in their current class. These teachers work well, are passionate about what they are teaching, and are more concerned with student learning than they are about themselves (Hargreaves, 2009). At école Mclsaac School, all of the mentors show the new grades 1-3 teachers how to use the Barton Spelling Program. All of the teachers know the spelling rules and how to deliver the program, and therefore any grades 1-3 teacher

can help any grades 1-3 students, using the same language and methods as their current classroom teachers. Student progress is tracked each term, on a spreadsheet accessible by any teachers in the school. They see positive results because they are consistently working on a program together and are therefore invested in its success.

Teachers who take the time to mentor novice teachers invariably feel revitalized within their own careers. Many mentors report that mentoring not only energizes them, but also helps them to improve their skills (HM Inspectorate of Education, 2008), and reflect on and improve their own decision-making abilities (Mathur, Gehrke, & Kim, 2012). Mentors motivate, challenge, and respond to new teachers, thus enhancing their own professional knowledge and keeping up to date with new developments in education. Mentors encourage new ideas, question the novice teachers, and help them to find effective ways to solve problems (Jones & Brown, 2011; Orland-Barak & Hasin, 2010). Mentoring relationships benefit entire schools (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson 2009), because they are a form of professional development that directly affects the school in which they are taking place. Often, this professional development continues long after the year of mentorship concludes, and fosters enriched feelings for both the mentor and the new teacher.

### **Teacher Retention**

Teacher retention is an ongoing issue in education, particularly for new teachers. In university, B.Ed. students are told that most of them will not last in the profession. New teachers leave universities and collaborative student teaching environments to enter their first years of teaching, which are often described as isolated ones, wherein other teachers are primarily concerned with their own situations. When novice teachers leave their professions, it affects the schools and the educators who remain. Mentoring programs show educators that the assumption that teachers need to go into their classrooms, close their doors, and figure it out for themselves is archaic. Instead, they become more team and process oriented, thus benefitting the students and the school's climate.

There are significant changes to a school's climate when the school is unable, for whatever reasons, to keep teachers in their schools. Retaining teachers in schools is just as important as the process of hiring them. When schools retain their teachers, they keep professionals with organizational knowledge, whereas novice teachers require time to develop essential skills and deliver unfamiliar programs (Stanulis & Floden, 2009). Low retention rates mean that schools continuously have to start over instead of dealing with the larger educational issues they may have (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). More pressures are put on the teachers who remain at the schools, because they are now faced with the task of continuously trying to maintain the implementation of specific educational programs, with no continuity for the following years. Low teacher retention rates create a lack of professional continuity and situations wherein parents do not know teachers and teachers do not know the other teachers, either. Similarly, low teacher retention rates can have negative effects on a school's climate, disturbing staff cohesion and community, which may also result in the disruption of student achievement.

As many as 50% of teachers leave their profession within five years of teaching, at times when they are most likely reaching their maximum influence on student learning (Stanulis & Floden, 2009, p. 112). If new teachers were effectively mentored, they would be more likely to stay in teaching professions, because they would experience more support and better working conditions. Mentoring provides instructional assistance and promotes socialization between novice teachers and the rest of the staff. Stanulis & Floden (2009) found that new teachers who received intensive mentoring remained in the profession, exhibiting a retention rate that far exceeded the national average. Mathur et al. (2012) learned that 39 of the 41 novice teachers who received mentoring remained in the teaching profession. Having a mentor promotes efficacy, alleviates some of the stress of being in a new profession, and encourages teachers to remain in their chosen career.

## Conclusion

Mentoring is meant to help attract, motivate, and develop new leaders in educational systems. In many instances, there are even more benefits attributed to the implementation of mentoring programs. Schools that have mentoring programs have a strong effect on novice teachers, primarily *in the areas of teacher retention, classroom instructional practices, and student achievement* (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). *When teachers work together, there are more consistencies within schools, with a resultant positive effect on school climate, student engagement, and student learning. Teachers feel confident and are more likely to remain in their chosen profession when they have the support of fellow teachers and work with them closely, collaboratively, and as valued team members* (Vesely et al., 2013). *Moreover, mentoring programs help experienced teachers to emerge as leaders and reflect upon their own teaching practices in terms of assisting a beginning teacher. Mentorship challenges the perceived norms in education. Teachers are no longer expected to suffer in isolation, encouraging students to seek help when they need to, but not taking this initiative for themselves* (Grillo et al., 2011). *Businesses implement mentoring programs in order to increase productivity, and therefore revenues. When schools implement mentoring programs, the sharing of knowledge becomes an inherent quality, and the result is an increase in student learning.*

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### **About the Author**

*Miranda Bowman teaches in the Flin Flon School Division. She has taken on various leadership roles in the division, including the creation of a Mentoring Program that has been implemented by two elementary schools and three high schools. Miranda plans to continue to work on staff development and programming.*