

# **An Investigation of New Teacher Mentorship**

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## **Abstract**

This study investigated standard practices used by mentors participating in a new teacher mentoring program that encourages identified teachers to remain in the teaching profession. School districts nationwide spend time, money, and human resources addressing the significant turnover rate and the recruitment of highly qualified teachers. This study provides valuable insight into how mentors view their relationship with their mentees, and how they see the mentoring program. The study demonstrates that even though new teacher mentors work with limited resources and are constrained by rigid policies, they provide a particular type of expertise to beginning teachers.

*Keywords:* novice teacher, teacher attrition, teacher retention, common mentoring practices, a culture of collaboration

## Literature Review

### Background

The United States is facing a national teacher shortage that is projected to grow substantially in the coming years, as school systems are faced with the challenge of maintaining a high-quality teacher workforce for all students (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Beginning teachers are susceptible to end of the year release or leaving the teaching profession because they are more likely than their veteran colleagues to struggle with classroom management, lack of professional support, or they are assigned to low performing students (Anthony & Kritsonis, 2006; Campbell, 2017). Kini and Podolsky (2016) stated that both teacher inexperience and rates of turnover negatively impact student learning, which means that students attending schools with high turnover and few experienced teachers are at an educational disadvantage. When teachers do not feel supported, “more than one-third of teachers leave the profession within the first five years” (Callahan, 2016, p. 6).

The number of first-year teachers who leave the classroom to pursue other careers has consistently risen each year (Jonson, 2002; Kelchtermans, 2017). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) reported national teacher attrition rate of about 8% annually, and research shows that the number of teachers leaving each year accounts for close to 90% of annual teacher demand. Bartell (2005) suggested that an effective mentoring program could reduce high attrition rates among beginning teachers. Mentoring has been used for centuries as a means of handing down tradition and support (Moberg & Velasquez, 2004). In education, mentoring is described as a relationship in which mentors provide new teachers with “structure and support during a new teacher’s transition to the demands of the classroom and school environment” (Gagen & Bowie, 2005, p. 42). “Mentoring is a common strategy for transformative professional, professional, personal, and organizational development. By creating a supportive culture, mentoring can provide the environment for transformative learning to occur” (Campbell, 2017).

In the early days of mentoring, specialized training was not required because it was believed that an effective teacher would make an effective mentor (Cullingford, 2006). However, the form of mentoring has progressively evolved and become more complex (Bartell, 2005; Hudson, 2012; Ingersoll, 2004). The need for mentoring programs is well documented in the literature (Callahan, 2016; Grossman & Davis, 2012; Ingersoll, 2001; Solis, 2004) and, approximately 33 states mandate a form of mentoring support for new teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Will (2017) reported that in the United States 86% of new teachers supported by a mentor teacher in the first years of their career will remain in the classroom, while 71% of those without mentors leave the profession. A mentoring program is one of the most essential things a district could do to hold on to good teachers and groom them to be even better (Dillon, 2008; Izadinia, 2015). An effective and quality mentoring program “can help novice teachers survive their stressful beginning and emerge as confident and successful team players” (Mauer & Zimmerman, 2000, p. 4).

### Teacher Attrition

Teacher attrition is problematic and refers to the need to prevent good teachers from leaving the profession (Kelchtermans, 2017). Teacher attrition and retention are among the most significant education challenges across the nation and have been the focus of many researchers (Dove, 2004;

Jonson, 2002; Kelchtermans, 2017; Phillips, 2015). Reeves and Lowenhaupt (2016) indicated that teacher attrition remains one of the most elusive problems in the education system. In this age of high accountability in schools, the problem of high teacher turnover is even more damaging to the education system. Research has shown that attrition has a significant and negative effect on student achievement (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017).

As noted by Özoglu (2015), teacher attrition has direct adverse effects on student achievement, the commitment and performance of the teachers who stay, curriculum and related planning, the administrative process, and the general atmosphere in the school. Henry and Redding (2018) calculated the loss of teaching days when a teacher leaves to be approximately 32 to 72 teaching days, which has a direct adverse effect on student achievement. Towers and Maguire (2017) cited that a low sense of belonging, dissatisfaction, lack of efficacy, and limited opportunities for professional development correlates with teacher attrition.

In the past decade, a growing gap between the supply and demand of teachers has been brought to the forefront of educational conversation, due to the impact of teacher shortage on student achievement (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). There is a need for a high-quality caliber of teachers who can withstand the rigors of standardized testing, stricter accountability, curriculum issues, and budget cuts (Strong, 2006). As teachers are faced with so many responsibilities in the classroom, they start to rethink their career choice. New teachers starting their first year of teaching have a vision of being successful; however, when unexpected situations occur throughout the school year, they become frustrated and leave the profession (Hewitt, 2009). The outcome of teacher attrition often leads to increased workloads among teachers as well as reduces teacher morale within the school (Gallant & Riley, 2017; Towers & Maguire, 2017). Dove (2004) stated, “Teacher attrition is the largest single factor determining the shortage of qualified teachers in the United States and developed and less developed countries throughout the world” (p. 8). Moir (2009) indicated that the loss of new teachers takes an enormous toll on the educational system. According to Nielson, Barry, and Addison (2006), research suggests that mentoring programs can achieve high retention of beginning teachers if the mentoring program is structured, focused on professional development, and collaboration is present.

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to identify standard practices used by mentors participating in new teacher mentoring programs that encourage identified teachers to remain in the teaching profession. This qualitative study investigated participants’ experiences of the mentoring program and used qualitative data collection methods. The following research questions guided the research:

RQ1: What are the common practices used by mentors participating in new teacher mentoring programs?

RQ2: Which common practices used by mentors participating in new teacher mentoring programs are more common?

Data collected from the mentor teachers allowed insight into the personal experiences that may contribute to improving teacher retention. The participants in this study were able to reflect on their experiences through interviews and documents. Interviews allow the focus to be placed on individuals and their perspectives on a specific phenomenon (Ritchie & Lewis, 2008).

This study was conducted in a mid-sized school system, located in east Alabama with a purposeful sampling of six elementary mentor teachers. The county in which the school district is located, is in east Alabama along the west bank of the Chattahoochee River, which forms the boundary between the states of Alabama and Georgia (Encyclopedia of Alabama, 2018). As of 2018, there were approximately 36,435 people with a racial/ethnic composition of Caucasian 49.4%, African American 43.7%, Hispanic or Latino 5.9%, and Asian 0.7%. Eighty-three percent of the population are high school graduates with 19.7% holding a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The school district is comprised of seven elementary schools, one intermediate school, one middle school, one high school, one alternative school, and two pre-kindergarten early learning centers. Patton (2002) described purposeful sampling as "selecting information rich cases strategically and purposefully" (p. 243).

The first criterion used to choose the participants for this study was that all of the participants had to come from the selected school system. All of the participants were from the selected school district and participated in the official mentoring program developed by the state and school district. Elementary teachers were chosen over middle or high school teachers as they are the first teacher that a child encounter. Elementary school teachers play a crucial role in the development of children, as what students learn in their early years can affect and shape how they view themselves and the world. The final criterion used was that all of the mentors had to have a minimum of three years of teaching experience.

Within this study, three sources of data collection were used, which included individual interviews, mentor/mentee observations, and review of the school district's mentoring policies. Interviews were specifically designed to explore the perceptions of beginning teachers, as the role of the researcher does not discover this meaning; instead the researcher interprets and presents the findings (Merriam, 2002). In this study, a life story interview was used as the method of collecting data from participants through semi-structured interviews that included in-depth and open-ended interview questions. The goal was to understand the meaning of the participant's experiences throughout the mentoring program (Kvale, 1996). The topics discussed during the interviews included: the perceived challenges they are faced with while beginning their teaching career, the perceived impact of the mentoring program, and clarifications of the related documents and professional development that was conducted.

The mentoring logs, policies, and program documents were examined for this study. The mentoring logs gave a perspective on how the mentors and mentees interacted with each other during the school year. The mentoring policies provided a better understanding of what is expected of the mentors and mentees while they are a part of the district's mentoring program. Other documents reviewed were the end of the year surveys and mentoring meeting agendas to collect a snapshot of the mentoring program and confirm or refute the interview data collected. Cross analysis was utilized for the interview and included a constant comparative method to generate codes, categories, and themes from the data (Merriam, 1998). Interview transcripts were analyzed through audiotapes, copies of documents, narrative descriptions and to compare responses of each participant. Coding the transcripts allowed the researcher opportunity to look for themes among the participants and check the data according to similarities, and differences. Birkeland and Johnson (2002) stated that new teachers look to their more experienced colleagues for advice and ideas.

## Results

This study investigated six participants' experiences of the mentoring program and used qualitative data collection methods to add to available literature. Data was collected through the use of three individual interviews per participant, mentor/mentee observations, and review of the school districts mentoring policies. This technique allowed for constant comparative method to take place throughout the study to develop themes. The participants' names and specific information were either changed or omitted and replaced with a pseudonym. Table 1 is a profile summary of the mentor teachers used in this study.

**Table 1**

*Participants Demographic Profile*

Pseudonym	Current Assignment	Experience	Initial or Second Career	Education
Kathy	1 <sup>st</sup> grade teacher	9 years	Initial	Masters
Vanessa	2 <sup>nd</sup> grade teacher	9 years	Second	Masters
Madelyn	3 <sup>rd</sup> grade teacher	11 years	Initial	Bachelors
Moriah	Kindergarten teacher	17 years	Initial	Bachelors
Theresa	1 <sup>st</sup> grade teacher	6 years	Second	Bachelors
Mecena	6 <sup>th</sup> grade teacher	15 years	Initial	Specialist

The data analysis from the six veteran teachers revealed three major themes: positive relationships, assistance and support, and avoiding isolation in the classroom. Out of the three major themes, the most prevalent theme that emerged from the data was the positive relationships that developed through the mentoring programs. Hall and Hord (2006) described a positive relationship as a meaningful relationship that is established between a mentor and novice teacher from the beginning of their relationship. All of the participants mentioned the importance of establishing a positive relationship with their mentees. Several researchers have supported this notion that teachers who are provided encouragement and emotional support are more likely to remain in the profession (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Wong, 2004). Data gathered indicated that the mentoring program promoted positive culture and climate within the school district. All participants indicated that a meaningful and positive relationship was developed through their mentoring experience. The documents reviewed from the district mentoring program included several activities that addressed building positive interactions and climate and culture within the school district.

The second theme was the benefit of assistance and support that the mentee received from the mentor during their first year of teaching. Billingsley (2003) found that successful induction programs provided not only guidance and curriculum, but also encouragement and strong support. The mentors indicated the ability to help their mentee with day-to-day tasks such as grading papers, lesson planning, record keeping, classroom management, gathering resources and implementing new ideas. Ingersoll and Smith (2004) added that ongoing feedback, guidance and orientation are contributing factors to new teachers' success in the classroom.

The third theme reflected the benefit of having time between the mentor and mentee. Whitaker (2000) and Ingersoll (2004) expressed that when beginning teachers collaborate on a

weekly basis with their mentor, it is beneficial to them. The respondents reported that consistent contact reduced the feeling of isolation during their first year. The mentor discussed that it was a challenge for them to meet with their mentees throughout the day. Many of the mentors were creative with their schedules to help support the new teachers and be accessible. The data indicated that the mentors found benefit in communicating, collaborating and exchanging ideas with their mentee while establishing a relationship between them.

### **Conclusion**

This study provides valuable insight on how mentors view their relationship with their mentees, the connection with their colleagues, and how they view the mentoring program. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) indicated that the teacher mentoring program has many layers; school districts must continue to look for ways to prepare better and support new teachers. The need to retain new teachers has forced school districts to implement induction programs for beginning teachers. Participants of this study revealed assistance and avoiding isolation in the school are critical practices in the mentoring program. Mentor teachers agreed that the structured mentoring program enforced a measure of accountability for the mentees. Fresko and Nasser-Abu Alhija (2015) stated that the relationship between a mentor and mentee is strengthened when emotional support is provided in a non-threatening environment. These findings are supported by Johnson and Birkeland (2003), who contended, “When veterans and novices work together in a nurturing relationship, each gets something of real value from the other; veterans gain energy and novices gain inspiration” (p. 587). If mentoring programs are going to have a positive impact on beginning teachers, then the program must meet the needs of the mentee and mentor.

Based on the research literature for this study, there is a secure connection between teacher success and the mentor and mentee relationship. Positive relationships are critical in fostering successful mentoring partnerships. Experiences of mentors in this study may provide new insights to inform the current practice of mentoring programs. Respondents in this study revealed positive relationships, assistance and support, and time investment were identified as standard practices that are used by mentors that encourage identified teachers to remain in the teaching profession. This research highlighted the need for a supportive mentoring program during their first year in the teaching profession. The development of a mentoring program is critical to the well-being of a new teacher. The teacher mentoring program is just one facet of the induction process that may assist and encourage a new teacher into the education profession.

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