
Retaining Urban Teachers: The Impact of Mentoring

Felicia Saffold

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

This study explores urban teachers' perception of their mentoring experience in an alternative urban teacher education program. Fifteen teachers who had been teaching in urban schools for at least three years participated in focus groups. The findings support the need for continuing the development of new teachers through utilizing mentors in the induction years. The mentoring relationship is of primary importance in developing self-confidence, competence, and collegiality during the first year.

Over the next ten years more than two million new teachers will join the teaching profession. Many will come from alternate route programs. These programs allow individuals who typically (but not always) possess an undergraduate degree in a field other than education to participate in a shortened training and/or on-the-job learning experience that leads to full certification. McKibbin and Ray (1994) stated that the purpose of developing nontraditional alternative certification programs is to offer a way to expand the pool of qualified teachers with individuals who might not otherwise become teachers. Shoho and Martin (1999) reported that participants in nontraditional alternative programs are more likely to be older, a member of a minority group and male, who have had past experiences in other occupations. Nontraditional students tend to remain in their own communities, once certified, and have a better knowledge of the local culture and makeup of the community (Eifler & Potthoff, 1998).

Mentoring has a special importance in alternative certification programs because the teachers have little or no prior coursework or field experiences. However, the mentoring amount and quality differs across programs. The task of supporting this remarkable number of new teachers has generated widespread interest in mentoring, since high quality induction and mentoring programs have been reported to increase teacher retention and to improve the quality of their teaching (Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1993; Odell & Huling-Austin, 2000).

Currently, 28 states require school districts to offer induction programs and eight more states plan to implement similar programs in the next few years (Sweeney & DeBolt, 2000). Such programs provide an array of assistance to new teachers, ranging from help with policies and procedures, to guidance on classroom management, to feedback on instructional strategies and other aspects of professional practice. They

also connect new teachers to a network of colleagues and resources, and reduce the isolation that too often characterizes teachers' early professional experiences.

Most often, the central strategy within these programs of support is mentoring by a veteran teacher. Most of the research that seeks to investigate the practice of mentoring focuses on the programmatic and administrative aspects of mentoring, or defining the qualities of good mentors (Carmin, 1988; Kram, 1986; McIntyre, Hagger, & Wilkin, 1993; Rowley, 1999). The literature, however, does not clearly specify those aspects of mentoring that facilitate building skill and self-confidence in new teachers, which may impact their decision to stay in teaching. As Feiman-Nemser (1996) pointed out, "The education community understands that mentors have a positive effect on teacher retention, but that leaves open the question of what mentors should do, what they actually do, and what novices learn as a result" (p.1).

This article goes beyond the published work on this topic by reporting the inner core of the mentoring process. Drawing on results of an exploratory case study of the Compton Fellowship Program, an alternative teacher certification program, this study documents how first year urban teachers who worked with mentors described the impact of the mentoring experience on their development as teachers and how it influenced their decision to remain in the teaching profession. Current research reports on the critical need for recruiting, training, supporting, and retaining emergency credentialed teachers in urban districts. So for the purpose of this study, the researcher focused on one such program in the Milwaukee Public Schools.

Program and Setting

The preparation, recruitment, and retention of teachers is an on-going problem for school districts across the country to varying degrees. However, urban districts are facing unique challenges due to increased student enrollments, reductions in class size, and accelerating retirements (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Archer, 1999). Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), located in the southeastern section of Wisconsin, is no exception to the problem.

Two very important areas, however, are considered when viewing the problem in MPS. First, attrition data shows that 50% of the new teachers (1-3 years of service) in MPS will leave the district within three to five years of being hired. Second, hiring and retaining teachers of color is another on-going problem in MPS. Approximately 20% of MPS teaching staff are teachers of color, compared to approximately 80% students of color. Several partnership programs, which focus on preparation and recruitment of teachers of color, exist in MPS. This article focuses on one such program.

A collaborative effort among MPS, Marquette University, Alverno College, and Lakeland College resulted in the development of the Compton Fellowship Program. The program is grounded in the INTASC standards and it uses fulltime mentors to help Compton Fellows to meet the standards. The purpose of the program is to offer a high quality teacher preparation program to approximately fifty individuals a year who have completed a bachelor's degree in an accredited institution, but who have not completed a certification program.

Each participant is assigned to a Compton Fellowship mentor, a veteran MPS teacher, who is released full time to coach the fellows. At the end of the year, the fellows are required to successfully defend a portfolio demonstrating their knowledge and competency of the INTASC standards. Upon successful completion of the program, teachers are guaranteed a contract in MPS and recommended for grade 5-8 certification by one of the three randomly assigned participating colleges.

At the time of this study (March, 2001), 136 fellows had successfully completed the Compton Fellowship Program and 124 (91%) were still teaching in MPS. The question remained as to what extent the mentoring relationship impacted the fellows' decision to remain in teaching. The purpose of this study, then, was to illuminate fellows' perspectives on the impact of their mentoring experience on their decision to remain in teaching.

Method

A descriptive, exploratory case study was used to study mentoring in the Compton Fellowship Program. This method is used when one wishes to "shed light on a phenomenon, be it process, event, person, or object of interest to the researcher" (Leedy, 1997). The exploratory case study draws on data for fellows in the first three cohorts to complete the Compton Fellowship Program (1996-1999). Research by Haberman and Rickards (1990) and Odell (1990) have reported that within the first three years of teaching 50% of urban teachers leave the profession. Therefore, for this study Compton fellows were selected who remained in teaching in MPS for at least three years.

The study was driven by the following research question. How does mentoring positively influence teacher retention? A survey was used as a guide to construct focus group questions. It was only used to get some general information about the fellows' perceptions of working with a mentor teacher. It was sent out to 85 former Compton Fellowship graduates in an effort to get their perceptions on the mentoring experience. Some descriptive statistics will be shared from it.

Teachers who responded to the survey were invited to participate on a voluntary basis in one of two focus groups. The focus group discussion is particularly effective in providing information about why

people think or feel the way they do (Krueger, 1994). The interviews included six open-ended questions designed to elicit detail about the nature of their experiences as first year teachers and the support (or lack of support) they received from their mentors. Fifteen participants were involved in the focus group sessions.

Data Analysis

The researcher used a constant comparative method of data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Data were continuously compared with each other and units of data were sorted into groupings that had common themes. As the data were analyzed and compared, the information was coded. As more data were collected, further comparison of the information was coded.

Once all the data were collected, they were analyzed and synthesized allowing both positive and negative findings to be substantiated or reviewed. The data were then searched with particular attention to anomalies, to alternative explanations, or to competing conclusions. The process of developing categories was one of continuous refinement. Excerpts were selected to capture the context and support conclusions so that readers might judge the transferability of the meaning and interpretation of the data.

Results

Analysis of Compton fellow graduates' perceptions of their first year experiences with a mentor generated specific aspects of the mentoring role that contributed to the fellows' satisfaction with the mentoring experience, which may impact new teacher retention. They included three major categories: (1) building self confidence in teachers, (2) developing competence in beginner's ability to teach, and (3) engaging with collegial networks to support teaching.

Building Self-Confidence in Teachers

Survey data showed that 84% of the fellows reported that their self-confidence increased as a result of having a mentor. The way confidence was built amongst the fellows varied but two areas were mentioned most consistently in the focus groups: emotional support and professional support. To illustrate the emotional support one fellow said:

That first year was rough! My mentor listened to me cry, watched me fall apart, and then helped me to get on my feet again. I wouldn't have made it if I had to deal with everything by myself.

Another fellow shared a similar experience. She explained:

I'll still be teaching for quite some time. My mentor boosted my confidence in teaching. When I said it was too much, she said I could do it. When I said I'm never coming back, she said I'll see you

tomorrow. She gave me that pat on the back that I needed when no one else was around.

Other fellows explained that they didn't really need the "pat on the back." They wanted their mentors to offer them professional support. In this regard, fellows said that modeling in the classroom was beneficial:

My mentor literally took me by the hand and used baby steps with me. She would do a one on one lesson with me so that I could see exactly how the lesson was going to be taught. Then, she would teach the lesson to one group of my students. The next hour I would teach the lesson and she would watch me. We did this for about a week. This routine really helped me to develop some effective teaching strategies. Eventually, I gained confidence in my ability to teach.

Lack of sufficient professional and emotional support is believed to be a primary challenge for beginning teachers (Chubbock, Clift, Allard, & Quinlan, 2001). All the participants interviewed indicated that interaction with their mentor resulted in improved feelings about themselves in relation to teaching. Their self confidence was improved and they believed that was a factor in them staying in teaching. Support for new teachers is now known to be crucial to their retention and professional success (Odell and Huling, 2000).

Developing Competence in a Beginner's Ability to Teach

The survey data revealed that 95% of the fellows believed that their teaching competence was improved because they had an opportunity to work with a mentor. In the focus groups, the fellows described specific ways that their mentors helped to develop their teaching competency. Most of them mentioned how their mentors feedback helped them to develop their skills while others focused on how their mentor was helpful in establishing classroom routines and helping them to create and implement better lesson plans.

Several fellows made comments related to the value of getting feedback on a regular basis. Observations and feedback promoted critical reflection that aided professional skill development. One fellow said, "My mentor was always in my classroom and she really challenged my thinking about instructional strategies. She was honest with her feedback and she really moved me forward." Another fellow commented:

In the beginning my class was driving me nuts! I didn't know what to do. My mentor came in and observed me and gave me some immediate feedback. He suggested that I put something on the board like a journal writing assignment or a brainteaser that the kids could work on each day while they waited for me to start class. It made a big difference with my classroom management! That's when I started to believe that I had the ability to teach.

Another fellow offered a different perspective on the topic. "My classroom ran smoothly, but I really wasn't teaching in a way that I felt

good about.” She admitted that she needed a lot of help creating and implementing effective lesson plans:

My mentor didn’t just look to see if I wrote a lesson plan; she sat down with me and we talked about what I was doing and why I was doing it. Often times, she would ask me to videotape a lesson and then we would walk through the tape together.

Another fellow drew attention to the fact that while she didn’t give her mentor all the credit for her staying in teaching, she did give her credit for improving the quality of her teaching. She explained that her mentor helped her to try new strategies that reached beyond the traditional textbook curriculum. When her students wouldn’t write in class, her mentor suggested that the students write letters to the local television station about its cancellation of a popular television show. “The students had plenty to say and I was finally able to teach them how to write a business letter.”

The aspects of teaching competency in which the fellows considered their mentors to have had the greatest influence were: providing feedback, establishing good classroom routines and providing assistance in lesson planning. The importance of the teacher mentor in helping achieve this level of competency is that they can help new teachers translate their academic knowledge into meaningful instruction. Consequently, improving the quality of teacher performance is a viable and important strategy for increasing teacher satisfaction and retention of teachers who can effectively teach in diverse urban contexts.

Engaging with Collegial Networks to Support Teaching

Collegial support fostered experimentation and risk taking. One fellow emphasized, “I had a very positive first year because of my mentor teacher. She would schedule a weekly meeting with all of her fellows. This was a very positive experience because it allowed us to share together and learn from each other.” Another fellow echoed this response:

Sometimes my mentor would set up a meeting with her group of fellows as well as the other new teachers in the building. Eventually, it became easy for us to share our struggles, concerns and successes in the classroom. If I didn’t have this group, I may have quit.

Yet another fellow explained that his mentor coordinated meetings with him and other support staff like the librarian and the learning coordinator. “It is amazing how many people in your building can really help to make your load easier. My mentor taught me to work smarter not harder.”

McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) found that teachers’ professional orientation is a function of their social and professional relationships with other teachers. Relationships with mentors and other colleagues were critical during the internship year for the Compton Fellowship graduates.

Their stories emphasized that their learning and retention in teaching was linked to their personal and professional relationships with their mentor.

Conclusion

Studies like these can tell educators and policymakers a great deal about the impact of mentoring on new teacher retention, especially as it is carried out with beginning teachers who have not participated in a traditional teacher preparation program. It is not uncommon for studies of mentoring to focus on retention rates. The numbers, however, do not tell the entire story. Individual stories shed light on the complexity of teachers' decisions to stay in the profession. This study provides some evidence that having a mentor was a critical factor for the Compton fellows as they reported on their first year experiences.

It would seem reasonable to consider that if school districts, especially urban ones, could select and train mentors who had an in depth understanding of teacher development, professional teacher standards, strategies for classroom observation and a variety of coaching techniques, then they could prepare beginning teachers for more than resilience in schools but nurture their development at the start of their careers. The stories of these urban teachers who have completed at least three years of teaching and who have chosen to remain in the profession in challenging urban settings offer personal perspectives that can inform decision-making about program development.

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