DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 367 637 SP 035 078

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TITLE Perceptions of Beginning Teachers in an Urban Setting: Does Mentoring Make a Difference?
PUB DATE Feb 94
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Teacher Educators (74th, Atlanta, GA, February 12-16, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Attitudes; *Beginning Teacher Induction; *Beginning Teachers; Elementary Secondary Education; *Mentors; Needs Assessment; *Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation; *Teacher Attitudes; *Urban Education; Urban Schools

ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the effectiveness of a mentoring program in which 18 experienced teachers were released from teaching duties to act as full-time mentors for 10 new teachers each in an urban school district. Analysis of data gathered via surveys of and interviews with beginning teachers, principals, and mentors indicated that: (1) teaching in a large urban school district was problematic because of feelings of insignificance and isolation, late hires, changes of teaching assignments after hire, and placement in fields inconsistent with training or experience; (2) the most often stated need was for assistance in gaining knowledge of district and building policies and procedures, followed by the needs for resources, a clearer definition of what was expected of them, and more feedback on how they were doing; (3) almost all teachers who worked with mentors acknowledged gaining some benefit; (4) high school and specialty teachers were more inclined to be disappointed with a "generalist" mentor; (5) mentored teachers tended to seek out help from more people, more often, and for more needs than did nonmentored teachers; and (6) teachers identified as being "at risk" regarding retention included new teachers between the ages of 31 and 35, middle school teachers, whites, and those hired on short notice. (Contains 15 references.) (JDD)

Perceptions of Beginning Teachers in an Urban Setting: Does Mentoring Make a Difference?

Research Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of
the Association of Teacher Educators
Atlanta, Georgia
February, 1994

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Over the years, many studies of teaching have documented the difficulty of initiation into the profession (Lagana, 1970; Gelman and McGoldrick, 1980; Ryan, 1980). Because of the stressful nature of the job for which they are unprepared, beginning teachers are most at risk for leaving the profession (Huling-Austin, 1990). Teaching in large, urban settings is seen as even more stressful as documented in a higher turnover of teachers in their early years (Haberman and Rickards, 1990). In response to this problem, mentoring programs which pair beginning teachers with experienced teachers have proliferated across the country.

Various formats for these programs have emerged based on the constituency organizing the program, the perceived needs of the beginning teachers, and the resources available. Some programs are university-based while others are sponsored by local school districts, regional educational service agencies or state departments of education (DeBolt, 1992; Furtwengler, 1993; Huling-Austin, 1990). Considerable variation also exists with respect to other elements of mentoring program such as mentor qualifications, incentives, selection and training of mentors, the pairing process, definitions of mentor roles and responsibilities and the intended outcomes of the program. During the past twenty years in which mentor programs have been more available to teachers, the focus of programs has expanded from merely offering assistance for beginning teacher to include aspects of career-long professional development, teacher empowerment, school reform and peer supervision. Although recent studies of mentoring question the ability of mentoring activities to enhance the skills of beginning teachers, because of the structure of schooling and the nature of teaching as an occupation (Schlechty and Whitford, 1989; Little, 1990; Ashton, 1992), reports of beginning teacher surveys have noted the importance of colleague support in job satisfaction and sense of efficacy (Freiberg, 1992; NCES, 1993).

This research examines one mentoring program which attempts to meet the specific needs of beginning teachers in a large, urban school district. Information gathered from a variety of sources is used to describe the environment for beginning t eachers in the district and to identify any effect working with a mentor might have for novice teachers. This study seeks to answer the

following questions:

1. What are some of the difficulties or problems which beginning teachers encounter and which of those might be specifically related to work in an urban setting?
2. Which problems regarding teaching, professional development, or personal concerns require beginning teachers to seek out help from others and from whom do they seek that help?
3. How do the attitudes and actions of teachers who worked with mentors compare with those who did not?

Structure of the Program

The format of the mentoring program which was studied is unusual in several ways. First, a great deal of research on mentoring and mentoring programs went into the decision to create a district-wide mentoring program. While several of the schools within the district already had some type of mentoring program, the district believed it needed to make a greater commitment to the needs of beginning teachers. This was followed by a negotiated agreement between the district and the teachers' union to use a portion of the negotiated salary increase to fund the program. The agreement called for the release of 18 experienced teachers from their teaching duties to act as full time mentors for ten new teachers each. It also established a representative mentor board to select participants, oversee the program, trouble shoot problems as they emerged, communicate with various branches of the district, and evaluate the program. The board is composed of teachers, union officials, principals and district administrators.

Of the approximately 400 new hires in the first year of the program, selected teachers new to the district and with fewer than five years teaching experience were offered the services of a mentor starting in January for the rest of that school year. Due to the limited number of mentors available, selection of beginning teacher participants was made based on designated school sites. During the second year of the program, mentors worked the entire school year and only with new

s with no prior teaching experience. Also during the second year, four mentors worked exclusively with graduate interns from a nearby university.

Methodology

To get a more complete perspective on the effects of mentoring on beginning teachers, a three person research team gathered data from various sources from January 1992 to June 1993. Methods (see listing below) used to collect were both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Analysis System (SAS) and qualitative data were analyzed for emergent categories following the principles of Loftland and Loftland (1984) and Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Data Sources

1. Beginning teachers were surveyed in May of 1992 and May of 1993 with the same 59-item questionaire. Returns were 164 of 346 (47%) in 1992 and 186 of 389 (48%) in 1993.

2. Three focus-group interviews were conducted with beginning teachers who had worked with mentors during the January to June 1992 period. These were divided into groups of 6 teachers with one group made up of middle and high school teachers, one of elementary teachers and one of special education and elementary teachers. These interviews lasted for 60 to 75 minutes and followed a prescribed set of discussion topics.

3. Principal surveys were conducted in May of 1992 and May of 1993. In 1992, a 19-item survey resulted in 104 returns out of 146 (71%) and in 1993, a slightly shorter 17-item survey had a return of 81 of 146 (55%). Follow up telephone interviews with 18 principals took place in June 1992.
4. Interviews with mentors were conducted in February 1992 and May 1992. Every mentor was interviewed at least once and six were interviewed on both occasions. Open-ended surveys were sent to all mentors at the end of the 1992-1993 school year and 9 responded.

5. Interviews of ten representative members of the mentor board was conducted in May 1992. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

Results

Respondents in both years were similar in demographic characteristics such as gender, race and age. However, there were considerably more elementary teacher respondents in the 1993 survey than in 1992. Percentage of returned surveys was also fairly similar for both years although a smaller share of mentored teachers returned surveys in 1993.

insert Table 1 here

New teachers were also very similar in 1992 and 1993 regarding their preparation for teaching, with the vast majority indicating that they were trained at an institution that would be considered to be in an urban setting. The 1993 survey, though, indicated a larger proportion of first year teachers among the new hires (44% in 1993 versus 39% in 1992). Both groups of respondents indicated that, in general, they felt prepared to teach in an urban setting. Those rating their preparation to teach in an urban setting highest were older (over 45 years old) and non-white beginning teachers. Non-mentored teachers rated their preparation slightly higher than mentored teachers in the 1992 survey. Since no respondents in the 1993 survey refused the services of a mentor, and all mentored teachers were in their first year of teaching, the difference in ratings of satisfaction with preparation may have to do more with prior experience than with their schooling for 1992 respondents.

insert Table 2 here

Several factors other than the urban aspect of the district are listed by teachers explaining

why teaching in a large school district is problematic for some teachers. The size of the district, based on the large number of people hired in a given year and total number employed by the system, often creates feelings of insignificance and isolation for new teachers. This is intensified by situations such as late hires, changes of teaching assignments after hire, and placement in fields inconsistent with training or experience. In 1992 nearly half the respondents (49%) indicated that they were hired less than 8 days before the beginning of school, with some hired after the first day of school. Also, well over half (65%) of 1992 respondents indicated at least one change in their teaching assignment since being hired. The normal stress of a change in jobs combined with last minute changes can be overwhelming, especially for teachers whose prior background in very different from the urban culture they are entering.

Most beginning teachers anticipate that discipline and classroom management will be the most difficult problem they will need to deal with (Ryan, 1980; Freiberg, 1987). However, results of both surveys indicated that other aspects of teaching proved to be more problematic. While there is some difference in the rankings among teachers from different levels of schooling and between the cohort groups each year, in general the same needs were expressed by all teachers. The most often stated need was for assistance in gaining knowledge of district and building policies and procedures. The lack of any written "handbook" containing such information was cited by many teachers in their comments. A second high concern was lack of resources available to teachers. Since many of the teachers were in their first year of teaching, they had not accumulated a file of resources and had to rely on others for materials or information regarding where materials and resources could be found. The other two frequently named needs were similar. Teachers stated a high need to have a clearer definition of what was expected of them and that they needed more feedback on how they were doing. A breakdown of priority needs by subgroups is shown in Table 3 below. The areas where teachers indicated that they received the least amount of help from others was regarding policies and procedures, role expectations, resources for instruction as well as methods of instruction, and organization and planning of curriculum and instruction. However, teachers indicated that in 25 to 30% of the

cases of high need, they received no assistance in dealing with their problems.

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insert Table 3 here

Teachers were asked to rate their first year in the district as excellent, very good, good , fair or poor. The vast majority of teachers both years rated their induction year as good or better (73% in 1992, 85% in 1993) with high school teachers having the highest ratings both years and non-white teachers rating their year better than whites (though not statistically significant different in either case). Comments listed by teachers on the survey frequently showed no relation to the rating given. For example, a very negative comment about the district or about the teacher's experience during the year may have been written by a teacher who rated his/her year as very good or even excellent. Conversely, teachers who rated their year as poor sometimes made very positive comments, blaming themselves for distresses perceived.

In comparing mentored and non-mentored beginning teachers, surveys indicate similar needs, problems and stressors. However, two significant differences between the groups emerged from the data. First, even though teachers' opinions on being mentored ranged from those who thought mentoring was merely a formality to those who thought it was life-saving, almost all teachers who worked with mentors acknowledged gaining some benefit from the association. High school and speciality teachers were more inclined to be disappointed with a "generalist" mentor because of the lack of specific knowledge in the mentored teacher's field. A significant difference in teachers' ratings of their first year was found in the 1992 data ($p < .05$) with mentored teachers having a more favorable rating. Although no significance between mentored and unmentored teachers was found in the 1993 data, the results may be confounded by the fact that all mentored teachers that year were first year teachers while other new hires had some teaching experience coming into the district. Teachers with experience generally seem to have a bit more realistic picture of what the year would and should be like and therefore have a better means of judging the experience. Interestingly though, the 1993 respondents rated their year

higher than the 1992 respondents (85% rated good or above in 1993 compared to 73% in 1992). This may reflect working with mentors for the entire year in 1993 rather than only the second semester as in 1992 or it may reflect a Hawthorne effect..

The second difference that found between the mentored and non-mentored teachers was their respective networks for assistance. Obviously, mentored teachers had a ready source of help, and they indicated that they called on the mentors to address all of the concerns listed on the survey. Mentors were most helpful in providing encouragement and facilitating communication among educators in the district as well as providing information and resources for instruction and classroom management (60% or more of respondents reported receiving help from a mentor in these areas). However, mentored teachers also reported seeking help from other teachers, principals, learning or district coordinators and "buddy" teachers. Non-mentored teachers reported seeking help primarily from other teachers, especially those having the same teaching assignment (only encouragement and colleague communications was over 60% in assistance received). They also went to building principals for assistance in some cases. However, the mentored teachers tended to seek out help from more people, more often and for more needs than the non-mentored teachers.

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insert Table 4 here

Based on different subgroups' responses to the need for assistance and the actual help which was received, several groups can be identified as being "at risk" regarding retention. This factor was determined by adding the mean of needs rankings (with 1 being low and 5 being high) and the mean of the assistance rankings (1 being much assistance and 5 being no assistance). Those who were above the group mean of 5.74 were considered "at risk". They are teachers who are new to the profession, especially those who are in the age range of 31 to 35 years old, middle school teachers, whites, and those hired on short notice before or after the beginning of the school year.

Finally, teachers were asked on the survey to predict what they would be doing in five years. Although in both years of the survey about the same proportion of teachers indicated that they intended to remain in teaching, there was a significant ($p < .01$) difference in the year cohort groups regarding their intention to stay in the district. This reflects the higher ratings of the induction year in 1993 and may again be the result of having a mentor for an entire school year rather than just the second semester.

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insert Table 5 here

Conclusions

A two-year study of this district mentoring program indicates that teachers do indeed perceive significant and detrimental problems associated with teaching in a large, urban district. With that in mind, it appears that mentoring can make a difference in mediating some of the problems of new teachers by providing encouragement, resources, information and a model of good teaching. However, this study indicates additional results. First, mentored teachers have a mirror in which to view themselves--their progress, their strengths and weaknesses, and their effectiveness--in a realistic manner. Second, mentors open up avenues for communication and encourage teachers to use them. The most important aspect of this communication is for new teachers to know it is acceptable to ask for help. Three, while the actual benefit of mentoring will be different for each teacher, the knowledge that the district is investing in a program that acknowledges the problems of beginning teachers and is attempting to address them seems to create a more positive view of the district. The fact that the program is supported by both administration and teachers further underlines the idea that new teachers are not being forgotten in the shuffle.

TABLE 1

NEW TEACHER DEMOGRAPHICS

		1992 (n = 164)		1993 (n = 186)	
		number	percent	number	percent
Gender					
	Male	35	21.5%	33	17.7%
	Female	128	78.5%	151	81.8%
	No response	1	.6%	2	.1%
Race					
	White	130	79.8%	142	76.3%
	Non-white	33	20.2%	34	18.3%
	(African-American	24	14.7%	17	9.1%)
	No response	1	.6%	10	5.4%
Teaching Assignment					
	Elementary	68	41.5%	99	53.2%
	Middle School	52	31.7%	40	21.5%
	High School	18	11.0%	10	5.4%
	Special Education	25	15.2%	31	16.7%
	Other	1	.6%	6	3.2%
Mentoring Status					
	Mentored	77	46.9%	45	24.2%
	Non-mentored	87	53.0%	126	67.7%
	(offered but declined	6		0)	
	No response			4	2.2%
Average Age		33 years		30 years	

Table 2

NEW TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR PREPARATION TO TEACH

	1992 (n = 164)		1993 (n = 186)	
	number	percent	number	percent
College or University				
Urban public	87	53.0%	100	53.8%
Urban private	40	24.4%	46	24.7%
Non-urban public	32	19.5%	35	18.8%
Non-urban private	16	9.8%	12	6.5%
Other	1	.6%	2	1.1%
(possible for more than one reply)				
Prior Teaching Experience				
None	62	37.8%	82	44.1%
Another district	66	40.2%	50	26.9%
District substitute	16	9.7%	30	16.1%
Other district sub	8	4.9%	7	3.8%
Other	8	4.9%	17	9.1%
No response	4	2.4%		
Prior Teaching Setting				
Urban	56	34.1%	28	15.1%
Suburban	39	23.8%	32	17.2%
Rural	41	25.0%	23	12.4%
(possible for more than one reply)				
Preparation Rating (1 to 5 scale)				
Unprepared (1 & 2)	34	20.9%	15	8.1%
Moderately (3)	36	22.1%	41	22.0%
Well prepared (4 & 5)	89	54.6%	130	69.9%
No response	4	2.4%		

Table 3

NEW TEACHERS' IDENTIFICATION OF HIGHEST NEEDS

	1992 (n = 164)	1993 (n = 186)
All New Teachers		
Need 1	Policies/procedures	Policies/procedures
Need 2	Resources/materials	Resources/materials
Need 3	Encouragement	Knowing expectations
Elementary		
Need 1	Policies/procedures	Policies/procedures
Need 2	Encouragement	Resources/materials
Need 3	Knowing expectations	Knowing expectations
Middle School		
Need 1	Policies/procedures	Resources/materials
Need 2	Management/discipline	Knowing expectations
Need 3	Encouragement	Student motivation
High School		
Need 1	Resources/materials	Policies/procedures
Need 2	Student motivation	Individual needs
Need 3	Colleague interaction	Knowing expectations

Table 4

NEW TEACHERS' RATINGS OF ASSISTANCE RECEIVED
BY MORE THAN 25% OF RESPONDENTS

	Source				
	Mentor	Buddy	Coordin.	Teacher	Principal
Area of need					
Colleague	66	28 [26]		66 [69]	30 [30]
Evaluation	42			46 [53]	
Methods	64	26		49 [52]	
Indiv Needs	56			52 [56]	
Motivation	60			36 [56]	
Expectations	43			49 [51]	39 [38]
Policies & Proc.	43			61 [59]	36 [37]
Organization	44			31 [32]	
Manage. & Disc.	66	26		61 [53]	29 [29]
Resources	61		26	51 [54]	
Parents	36			42 [35]	[26]
Encouragement	79	29		66 [64]	46 [43]

Numbers in columns denote percentage of mentored respondents who said they received assistance in this area from this source. Numbers in brackets [] denote percentage of unmentored respondents with the same response.

Table 5

TEACHERS' RESPONSES TO WHAT THEY WILL BE DOING IN FIVE YEARS

	1992 (n = 164)		1993 (n = 186)	
	number	percent	number	percent
aching in the same district	77	47.5%	130	69.9%
Teaching in another district	55	34.0%	30	16.1%
Not teaching	30	18.5%	26	14.0%

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