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ABSTRACT

Mentoring programs for beginning teachers are designed to retain good teachers by providing them with psychological support and instructional assistance and introducing them to the cultures of the school and the district. Being a mentor also figures prominently in veteran teachers' professional development. An examination of the literature reveals that veteran teachers frequently characterize working closely with beginning teachers as a source of new ideas about curriculum and teaching. Mentors report that mentoring has forced them to be reflective about their own beliefs about teaching, students, learning, and teaching as a career, and provided them with opportunities to validate the experience they have gained over the years. Prospective mentors, however, need early training and ongoing support as mentors. A major pitfall for mentoring programs is failing to understand the role of mentoring within the broader context of beginning teacher induction; e.g., it is inappropriate to view the primary role of mentors to be the remediation of weak teachers. Moreover, if beginning teachers are not adequately committed to teaching, mentoring may actually lead them out of a teaching career rather than into one. (Contains 19 references.) (ND)

Promises and Pitfalls for Mentors of Beginning Teachers

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Promises and Pitfalls for Mentors of Beginning Teachers

The opening of the school year marks an important event for millions of students and their teachers. Getting teachers off to a good start is just as important as getting students off to a good start, and the benefits are undeniable. Efforts to minimize the sometimes lonely and traumatic "sink or swim" experiences of beginning teachers and to maximize conditions that permit them to become effective teachers quickly are well taken. The experiences of teachers during their first few years of work are powerful and influential in setting a direction for teaching that is played out in subsequent years. Without systematic efforts, undesirable, temporary measures seized upon by new teachers to make it though the year--or even through the day--may become permanent characteristics of their work.

In response to the needs of beginning teachers, mentoring programs have become increasingly common. These programs are sponsored by a variety of organizations, including individual schools and school districts, consortia of schools (e.g., Cooperative Educational Service Agencies in Wisconsin and Education Service Centers in Texas), state departments of education, and colleges and universities (Ganser, Koskela, Allen, Eirich, Nerad, Rissmann-Joyce, & Sobocinski, in press). They are designed to meet a variety of goals, including retaining good teachers, providing them with psychological support and instructional assistance, introducing them to the cultures of the school and the district, and meeting state licensing requirements (Gold, 1996).

Formal mentoring programs and other types of systematic assistance for beginning teachers emerged in the early 1970s and have tripled since then (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996). Mentoring programs are likely to expand over the next decade due to three factors that

will result in a large influx of beginning teachers: an increasing number of children entering American schools, a growing proportion of teachers who will be retiring, and continuing efforts to reduce student:teacher ratios (Bradley, 1996; U. S. Department of Education, 1996).

The increased need for mentoring is occurring simultaneously with a broad reconceptualization of how best to promote the professional development of teachers. No longer are stand alone, quick fix workshops viewed as adequate. Today's staff development activities for teachers aim to create schools as learning communities, not only for the pupils whom they serve but also for the professionals working in them (Jenlink, Kinnucan-Welsch, & Odell, 1996; National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, 1996; Sprinthall, Reiman, & Thies-Sprinthall, 1996).

This new vision of staff development recognizes that being a mentor is a unique role for veteran teachers that figures prominently in their own professional development and career (Fessler & Christensen, 1992; Freiberg, Zbikowski, & Ganser, in press). This makes mentoring an even more desirable professional activity, beyond its part in providing beginning teachers with a more humane and professionally sound induction into teaching than a "trial by fire" that serves neither new teachers nor the students they teach. Understanding the benefits of mentoring for beginning teachers is important, but recognizing the promises--and the pitfalls of mentoring--for the experienced teachers who elect to serve as mentors is equally important since mentoring depends on their willingness to serve as mentors.

Veteran teachers frequently characterize working closely with beginning teachers as a source of fresh, new, cutting-edge ideas about curriculum and teaching. Mentors often characterize what they learn from new teachers as more immediately accessible and useful in their

work than much of what they learn through graduate courses or typical inservice activities and workshops (Ganser, 1997a). In many cases mentors and beginning teachers function as peer coaches as they simultaneously implement innovative strategies in their respective classes.

Like cooperating teachers, mentor teachers emphasize that assisting a beginning teacher promotes self-analysis of their own work. They are frequently called upon to make explicit to the beginner what has become automatic over the years in terms of procedural matters (arranging for a field trip), curricular matters (the need to teach Topic A before Topic B), instructional matters (selecting groups for a cooperative learning project), and classroom management matters (dealing with the last class period of the day). Similarly, mentors report that mentoring forces them to be reflective about their own beliefs about teaching, students, learning, and teaching as a career. Once a trusting relationship has been established, beginning teachers encourage their mentors to reflect on their work and experiences by asking repeatedly, "But why . . . ?"

Being a mentor enables a veteran teacher to establish a special relationship, certainly professional and often personal, with a novice teacher just entering the profession or an experienced teacher new to a school. When reasonable care is taken to select mentors and to pair them with beginners (Ganser, 1995a), this bond typically continues long after the formal program ends. The "connection" between mentors and protégés is a key feature in promoting the school as a learning community of professionals. Moreover, teachers whose preparation for mentoring includes learning about the predictable needs of beginning teachers inevitably find many ways to assist newcomers, even if they are not formally assigned to be their mentor.

Mentoring also serves experienced teachers by providing them with opportunities to validate the experience they have gained over the years. They have much to offer newcomers to

their profession and mentoring gives them a way to do this. Mentoring gives beginning teachers special access to a veteran teacher's craft knowledge, expertise, and wisdom, but it also gives veteran teachers a way to "pass on the torch" of their experience to incoming teachers, thereby completing their careers.

Not surprisingly, achieving these promises of mentoring as a professional activity does not happen by magic. It requires planning and special efforts by school leaders. If the promises of mentoring are predictable, so too are the potential pitfalls. Mentoring is a specialized and complex role for a teacher. To assume, for example, that good or even outstanding teachers will be successful mentors without any special training and support is unfounded. This is especially true if the goals of mentoring extend beyond offering emotional support to providing instructional and curricular assistance. In addition, the teachers most likely to volunteer to serve as mentors are usually very active professionally and the demands of mentoring may require them to be freed from some of these other activities.

Even with the best of intentions, prospective mentors need early training and on-going support as mentors. With a history of more than twenty years, studies of mentoring have produced a rich and useful professional literature regarding the knowledge and skills associated with effective mentoring. Without access to this information, mentors are greatly disadvantaged.

To optimize the benefits of mentoring, mentors should be familiar with what is already known about teacher development, stages of teacher growth, and the predictable needs of beginning teachers. Less obviously, they also should know about adult development and adult learning since as mentors they function as adult educators, a role similar but not identical to being a school teacher. Finally, as someone helping to induct a beginning teacher into an organization

known as a "school," mentors should also understand schools as complex organizations with social and workplace norms, sanctions, and history.

In addition to knowing about beginning teacher development, adult learning, and schools as organizations, mentors also should receive training in skills that are not typically part of teacher preparation (Ganser, 1996a; 1996b). Although mentors can readily transfer many of the communication skills that are part of teaching to the mentoring situation, they should also have an opportunity to learn about and develop conferencing skills. Mentors also benefit from assistance in becoming skillful in the systematic observation of teaching so that they can provide beginning teachers with information about their teaching that is non-evaluative, non-threatening, and responsive to their needs. If mentors are intended to influence how beginning teachers teach and not just to provide them with support and encouragement, their preparation should also include training in such techniques as peer coaching or cognitive coaching (Educational Leadership, 1996).

In successful mentoring programs, mentors are provided with regular, systematic support throughout the year, not just during the early training phases. As a new role for teachers, mentoring-in-practice results in questions and concerns that are not evident in mentoring-in-theory. Convening mentors periodically for guided discussion and problem-solving, preferably led by experienced mentors, helps teachers to come to terms with their new professional role and to enhance their effectiveness as mentors.

The heart of effective mentoring is the time that beginning teachers and their mentors spend together. They are generally far less interested in extrinsic rewards than in being provided with at least some time released from other obligations to engage in central mentoring activities

(Ganser, 1995b). Beginners and protégés need time to discuss the beginner's experiences and to engage in collaborative problem solving and goal setting. To include classroom observations as a mentoring activity requires time for the classroom visitor. Limiting the time available for mentoring activities to shared lunch and planning periods ignores the original purposes for which they were intended. What can reasonably be expected of mentoring is significantly related to the amount of time available for mentoring, time that can be provided by substitute teachers, by administrators willing to take over classes, or by colleagues who are willing to help out by covering classes or by including the students of the mentor or beginning teacher in their own classroom activities.

Perhaps the greatest possible pitfall for mentoring and especially for mentors is failing to understand the role of mentoring within the broader context of beginning teacher induction. For example, Huling-Austin (1990) wisely points out that the success of beginning teachers depends on the teachers themselves, workplace conditions, and induction support. Indeed, beginning teachers bring to their work varying degrees of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for good teaching. It is inappropriate to view the primary role of mentors to be the remediation of weak teachers. Moreover, if beginning teachers are not adequately committed to teaching, mentoring may actually serve to lead them out of a teaching career rather than into one. At the same time, mentoring is very appropriate for even the most well-prepared and promising beginning teachers as a means for bringing them "up to full speed" even faster and more completely than might otherwise be the case.

Well prepared and talented mentors may have little influence on central features of beginning teachers' work assignments (e.g., number of preparations, types of courses, schedule,

duty assignment, "floating" or "carting" between several classrooms). Taken together, beginning teachers themselves and their working conditions may exert greater influence on their occupational health and well-being than anything mentors can offer. Accordingly, the resignation of a new teacher, so often devastating to a mentor, may be the result of conditions over which the mentor has no control.

The challenge for educational leaders interested in maximizing the benefits of mentoring is to ensure that school and district personnel--teachers, administrators, support and clerical staff--understand the role of mentoring as one part of beginning teacher assistance. Without educating everyone about mentoring, the interaction of beginning teachers and the other professionals with whom they work can be negatively affected. For example, teachers may incorrectly view a mentor as a "fit it" person.

The mentor-protégé relationship is a special one, to be sure, but it does not replace the other professional relationships that beginning teachers have with their principal, family leader, or district curriculum specialist. More importantly, having mentors does not negate the professional obligation of other teachers to assist newcomers in making a smooth transition from outsiders to insiders as they begin a career that may span several decades. Mentoring programs complement but do not replace other forms of beginning teacher assistance, including orientations, special meetings or workshops for new teachers, and regular staff development activities. Finally, what reasonably can be expected of mentoring depends on the resources allocated to it in terms of such things as mentor training and released time for mentoring activities.

Beginning a new job is usually difficult but even more so in teaching, a profession that generally assigns the same and often more difficult responsibilities to novices than to experienced

teachers. Although it is certainly true that some of those who leave teaching move into administration, counseling, library media work, and other education specialties, many of those who leave teaching are highly qualified individuals who were unsupported at the critical start of their career.

Being a beginning teacher is a powerful personal and professional experience, and beginning teachers readily use metaphors and similes to describe the experience. Their comparisons include balancing on the edge of a steep cliff, bungee jumping, driving 60 miles per hour down a strange highway at night, and traveling in a foreign land without knowing the language (Ganser, 1997b). In a similar fashion, mentors use metaphors that are equally powerful and revealing as they compare mentoring to close interpersonal relationships (e.g., parent, child, spouse), variations of teaching (e.g., coaching), problem prevention/emergency services (e.g., 24 hour automobile towing services, safety net for a trapeze artist), providing directions (e.g., a directional compass, leading an expedition over familiar territory), and promoting growth and development (gardening, making a custom garment) (Ganser, 1994).

Under the right set of circumstances, mentoring is a productive professional activity that helps new teachers and provides experienced teachers with a unique way to contribute to their profession. At its best, mentoring also fosters a professional relationship among teachers and other school professionals that is the mark of a learning community and that ultimately results in improved teaching.

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