

The Role of Mentoring in Teacher Quality and Retention



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A severe and persistent national shortage of teachers has greatly compromised the quality of teaching in today's schools. This is especially troublesome at a time when students face an ever-growing demand to master challenging standards. Many students are being taught by teachers who are not certified or who are teaching in subjects outside their expertise. As a result, we are seeing the current emphasis on *teacher quality* spear-headed by the federal government and professional organizations.



The most relevant source for a definition of teacher quality comes from federal law, which focuses on credentials and content expertise. For example, the *No Child Left Behind Act* requires that there be a "highly-qualified" teacher in every classroom by the end of 2005. The act authorizes a number of programs to recruit, certify and place teachers in "high-need" schools (primarily through alternative routes to certification initiatives).

However, given the diversity of student backgrounds in most schools, high-quality teaching also should be about competence to teach diverse student populations.

Dr. Abelardo Villarreal, director of the IDRA Division of Professional Development, states: "Achievement gaps between minority students and White students are primarily attributed to teacher quality. For example, 40 percent of variance in student test scores in reading and math is attributed to teacher quality" (2003).

Roland Tharp, the director of the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE), states, "The need is less for highly qualified teachers than for teachers who are highly qualified to teach students on both sides of the achievement gap - mainstream students and of cultural, language and racial minorities" (CREDE, 2004).

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development also points out that teacher quality should be cognizant of the needs of communities with ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged children.



There is no doubt that high quality teaching is influenced by the lack of teachers and by the presence of teachers who are teaching out of their field. In all classrooms, teacher inexperience and lack of accurate pedagogical knowledge make it difficult for students to receive sound instruction. Inexperience and lack of specific knowledge about students' varied cultural backgrounds and languages certainly compromises quality teaching of English language learners.

An additional threat to quality is the inability to retain new teachers in the profession once they are recruited, trained, and placed in schools. Retaining new teachers anywhere is a serious problem. However, keeping teachers who have come to the field through alternative route certification programs, as has occurred for more than 10 years, exacerbates the retention problem.

The typical alternative certification program recruits degreed individuals from other

professions and transitions them into teaching through a “fast-track” certification program comprised of about four courses and a concurrent one-year teaching internship (Feistritzer and Chester, 2004).

While alternatively-certified teachers have demonstrated content expertise and commitment, there is still a special challenge to keeping them in the profession because the pedagogy critical to being a good teacher is often short-changed by the limited number of courses they have taken and the demand for their immediate on-target classroom performance.

For new teachers of English language learners, the unfamiliarity of the school environment and the demand to simultaneously address the language situation and academic requirements adds to the challenge of retaining these teachers.



Research and practice tell us that supporting new teachers in their first years of teaching is where the focus should be if we want teaching quality and retention. Studies have shown that well-designed mentoring programs lower the attrition rates of new teachers.

John Holloway reports a particular case where 20 percent of mentored teachers taught a second year citing feelings of success as a result of mentoring (2001). He also cites a comparative study of mentored and unmentored new teachers in which there was an attrition rate of 18 percent for unmentored teachers and only 5 percent for mentored teachers.

For a number of years in Texas, the State Board of Educator Certification has supported a *Beginning Educator Support System* initiative intending to reduce a 30 percent teacher attrition occurring during the first five years of teaching. After three years of experience in supporting new teachers, this state agency concludes that an emphasis in supporting teachers during their first years in the profession should dramatically affect retention (SBEC, 2002).

Experience with mentoring in the classroom has demonstrated that this type of new teacher support can promote quality in the new teacher’s instruction and also motivation to make teaching a life-long career.



Mentoring occurs any time someone seeks to learn from someone else who has experience in the topic for learning. This means that anyone - pre-service, novice or experienced teachers - can have mentors. However, mentoring in teaching is especially important for new teachers during their induction year (induction is the process of joining a profession; in education it is typically the first year of teaching).

Barry Sweeny defines mentoring during induction as follows: “Mentoring during induction is a complex and developmental process which mentors use to support and guide their protégé through the necessary early career transitions which are part of learning how to be an effective, reflective educator and career-long learner” (2001).



The Intercultural Development Research Association presently operates two alternative certification projects funded by the Transition to Teaching Program of the U.S. Department of Education. The Bilingual Education Collaborating Alliance (BECA) and the Texas-Teacher Excellence for All Students (T-TEAS) are designed to increase the number and quality of

bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) teachers in Texas schools with high numbers of English language learners.

The projects support certification through accelerated teacher certification routes that provide intensive teacher preparation of about one year in duration and specialized classroom support during the candidate's first two years of teaching. As in other alternative certification programs, these have two components: coursework and a concurrent one-year teaching internship in a bilingual classroom in the school district that has agreed to hire the recruits as first-year teachers.

Recruitment targets both English-dominant and bilingual career-changing professionals, and recent college graduates in fields other than education who want to enter teaching and have a specific interest in bilingual education. The projects, in collaboration with area universities, assist school districts in the south, southeast and central Texas regions. About 200 teacher candidates (or interns) currently are participating, or have recently completed, their programs of certification with BECA and T-TEXAS support.

A distinct objective of IDRA's Transition to Teaching projects is to provide specialized support to teacher candidates during their internship year and one year beyond this, specifically to influence their retention as bilingual teachers in the district of employment.

In one participating central Texas school district, BECA and T-TEXAS have given teacher support through specific mentoring. This has yielded success in helping teachers manage their first and second years of teaching and in motivating them to make teaching, specifically in bilingual education, their life-long careers. The success of mentoring in this district can be attributed to its well-established new teacher support system that facilitates collaboration between the district and the "teacher preparation partner programs" serving the district, such as BECA and T-TEXAS.

The mentoring and support for teacher candidates of the IDRA projects supplements the new teacher services already provided by the school district. The district's new teacher support and mentoring program is coordinated through the professional development department. Its services are geared toward all first-year teachers, whether they are certified via a traditional certification program, emergency certification, or alternative certification.

The program is research-based. Its features reveal an awareness that, to be successful, a mentoring program must have focus and structure (Holloway, 2001). Key features of this sample district's program include specific mentoring and support structures as follows.

- Pairing a veteran teacher with a novice teacher. The veteran teacher in a mentoring role provides support through model lessons, assistance in lesson planning and classroom management, and observation and formative feedback of lessons.
- Teacher buddy. Veteran teachers new to the district are paired with established teachers who help the new teacher understand the district campus culture.
- New teacher support group. A lead mentor teacher, with the help of the principal, organizes support groups. Book studies are a creative means of collaborating for new learning.
- Grade-level team or content-area team. Grade-level or content-area teachers meet to provide support in ways similar to mentor teachers or instructional coaches.



The design for mentoring and supporting BECA and T-TEexas teacher candidates provides relevant activities to extend the new teacher services of the school district and, at the same time, promote the specific goals and philosophy of the projects. It capitalizes on the services of experienced bilingual education practitioners, especially retired teachers and instructional leaders, to address the specific needs of the project participants. In delivering services, the projects are guided by the understanding that to create the best bilingual or ESL teachers, it is first and foremost necessary to make them excellent foundation (mainstream) teachers. To that foundation can then be added the competencies of effective bilingual teachers as described by state and national standards.

Mentoring, therefore, focuses on strengthening both of these dimensions of teaching to help new teachers become highly qualified bilingual and ESL teachers. Following are the goals set for mentoring:

- Supplemental mentoring and support for each bilingual teacher intern to provide direct assistance in the classroom;
- Support the teacher in the classroom with minimal or no pull-outs, on a weekly or bi-weekly basis;
- Mentor on how to be an excellent bilingual teacher, focus on teaching challenging content in the two languages; also on typical first year concerns; and
- Provide additional support through *pláticas* (group discussions) to link interns to other bilingual teachers and professionals (such as Alianza, another of IDRA's bilingual teacher preparation programs) as a means of encouragement, guidance and further learning.



The mentoring and support provided to date by BECA and TTEexas has had impact on both teaching quality and retention. The impact achieved can be attributed to the combined effort of the BECA and TTEexas mentors (retired instructional leaders and teachers), project staff, the school district cadre of professionals in the professional development department, the bilingual education department, and the schools.

For example, new teachers addressed gaps in knowledge and skills relevant to bilingual education. Even though their coursework covered pedagogy in bilingual education, the short duration of courses and an overload in content, left many gaps in the interns' discovery of what is cutting-edge in bilingual education. Through classroom observations, model teaching and sharing of resources, mentors (consultants and IDRA staff) were able to fill these gaps.

The program built on the confidence of the most recent college graduates and foreign-educated teachers. New teachers who very recently graduated from college and/or who are new to the culture of U.S. schools lacked confidence in their classroom management skills and ability to related with students. Through the three-hour block classroom visits and the networking and new learning afforded through *pláticas* series of group discussions, these interns have built confidence in their ability to teach and "work the system" of their respective schools.

Many teachers, particularly bilingual teachers who are native-English speakers, expressed a desire to learn more than their school had to offer in teaching Spanish and culture to their children. This has been addressed primarily by giving teachers professional development books and web site resources for both teaching and assessing in Spanish.

These projects to expand and improve current educator preparation programs have created both shorter routes to certification and academically rigorous training experiences. By doing this, English language learners are benefiting by having sufficient numbers of qualified and motivated teachers. Ultimately, the impact will be seen in student achievement, particularly among English language learners and minority students.

For more information on [BECA](#) and [T-TEAS](#), contact IDRA (210-444-1710).



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