Perceptions of a Statewide Mentor Program for New Itinerant Vision Professionals

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Structured abstract: *Introduction:* Mentoring is valuable for the retention of new teachers. This article describes a model statewide mentor program for new itinerant vision professionals who work with students from birth to age 22. The results of a recent survey of satisfaction are reported, along with implications for the field. *Methods:* The protégés who participated in the statewide mentor program completed an electronic satisfaction survey. Of the 76 participants who had been assigned a mentor during the 2011–12 academic year, 56 responded (74%). Both quantitative and qualitative questions were included in the survey. The quantitative questions were analyzed using percentages, and the qualitative data was analyzed and put into themes using the data analysis process of triangulation. *Results:* Seventy-one percent of the participants reported having had more than 10 interactions with their mentors over the previous year. The topics most frequently addressed with their mentors were performing evaluations (89%), locating resources (84%), and writing goals and objectives (79%). The most helpful mentoring techniques that were used included guided problem-solving techniques (70%), effective listening (68%), and the provision of teaching materials (57%). The majority of the protégés (82%) thought that their mentors had definitely contributed to the quality of their teaching. The top stressors for new vision professionals were related to organization and time management, evaluations, and collaboration with others. *Discussion:* The results of the survey demonstrate that the mentor program had a positive outcome for the participants as new educators. It also provided information on the stressors faced by these new vision professionals. *Implications for practitioners:* This article can serve as a model for other states that are interested in developing a mentor program for new itinerant vision professionals, and can serve as a guide for personnel preparation programs to address further the areas that the protégés identified as those in which they felt the least competent.

Mentoring new teachers has been shown to be one of the best ways to support them during their first year on the job (Billingsley, 2004) and a significant component in keeping new teachers from leaving the field (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). New special education teachers are more likely to stay

in the field if they feel supported and part of the educational community in which they work (Billingsley, Griffin, Smith, Kamman, & Israel, 2009; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). The retention of new teachers is critical, and school districts have been shown to reduce the costs of replacing new teachers by retaining the ones they hire (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). Recruiting and retaining qualified teachers is one of the biggest challenges that the field of education faces.

Mentoring is typically defined as a relationship between an experienced and a less experienced person in which the mentor provides guidance, advice, support, and feedback to the protégé (Kerka, 1998). It is a separate process from university supervision, internship, and practicum teaching, and mentors are not expected to take on an evaluative role. Mentoring can include both coaching to improve protégés' instruction and support in becoming integrated into the educational system by increasing the protégés' understanding of policies and procedures, and it is often the emotional support provided by mentors that is the most meaningful to new teachers (Hirsch et al., 2009). New teachers in both general and special education have reported feeling overwhelmed during their first year of teaching (MacDonald & Speece, 2001). However, they often feel hesitant to seek help from their administrators or others who may evaluate them (Billingsley, 2005).

Having mentors who teach students with characteristics similar to their own students helps new teachers the most (Whitaker, 2003). For example, Whitaker (2003) recommended that mentors be chosen on the basis of a rigorous high-quality selection process conducted by veteran instructional leaders who know the characteristics of high-quality mentors and the kinds of mentors who are needed for a specific type of teacher. Mentoring is an important part of the induction of new teachers, but it is not the only support that is needed. Other parts of induction should include professional development, orientation, and reduced caseloads (Hirsch et al., 2009).

With the shortage of special education teachers, understanding how a successful mentoring program works will assist in the recruitment and retention of new teachers (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004). The current and anticipated future shortages of new professionals in the field of visual impairment with the increase in retirements by baby boomers supports the need for an effective mentoring program as new educators enter the profession (Ambrose-Zaken & Bozeman, 2010; McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004). "Providing mentors to teachers of students with low-incidence disabilities (e.g., visual impairments) is particularly challenging given that one teacher may serve an entire region or state" (Billingsley et al., 2009, p. 5).

The state of Texas has addressed the need to support new teachers of students with visual impairments through a unique statewide mentor program that is coordinated by the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI) Outreach Program. This program was initially recommended by a team of stakeholders who were determining statewide needs for the education of students with visual impairments requested by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) in 1994 and 1995. In 1996, a state advisory committee, the Personnel Preparation Advisory Group, was established to develop a collaborative

framework for personnel preparation in visual impairment for the state. In 1998, the Education Service Center—Region XI received a three-year contract from TEA to train, support, and employ 50 new orientation and mobility (O&M) specialists and 100 new teachers of students with visual impairments to address the shortage of personnel in schools. A mentor program for all new teachers of students with visual impairments and O&M specialists was part of this initiative, and the TSBVI Outreach Program was charged with the creation and coordination of this program. In 2002, the Texas legislature designated discretionary funding from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to the TSBVI to support professional preparation for teachers of students with visual impairments and O&M specialists. Funding for the mentor program and partial funding for the two university personnel preparation programs in visual impairment in Texas have been provided through this allocation since 2002, with state general revenue funds added in 2009 as a result of rising tuition costs. This state support has significantly increased the number and quality of new vision professionals throughout the state over the past 10 years, thereby more effectively meeting the needs of students with visual impairments in Texas (Dignan, 2012).

Statewide mentor program model

Structure

The mentor program employs a full-time (nine-month) coordinator of mentors who selects and trains mentors, matches mentors with protégés, organizes mentor centers, tracks the relationship between mentors and protégés and adjusts these teams if needed, collects contact logs of the mentors and protégés, and determines the protégés' continuing eligibility for mentors. The coordinator collaborates with Texas Tech University (TTU) and Stephen F. Austin State University (SFASU) in matching newly certified teachers of students with visual impairments and O&M specialists with mentors as they are hired in school districts throughout Texas. The coordinator also collaborates closely with vision consultants from the state's 20 regional education service centers to locate newly hired individuals in their respective regions. See Figure 1 for the structure of the mentor program.

The mentor coordinator tracks the progress of entrants in vision programs and matches them with mentors when they begin teaching students with visual impairments. The typical scenarios include individuals who are hired with a probationary certificate while continuing their course work or individuals who are doing their internships or practicums at the end of their programs. Mentors are also provided for teachers of students with visual impairments and O&M specialists who are reentering the field after a lengthy absence and for individuals who are new to the Texas school system. If a match is made between a mentor and a newly certified teacher, the match lasts approximately two to three years. Many new teachers of students with visual impairments are working under a probationary certificate (renewable for up to three years) as they complete their vision course work. State law in Texas requires the provision of a mentor during this probationary period.

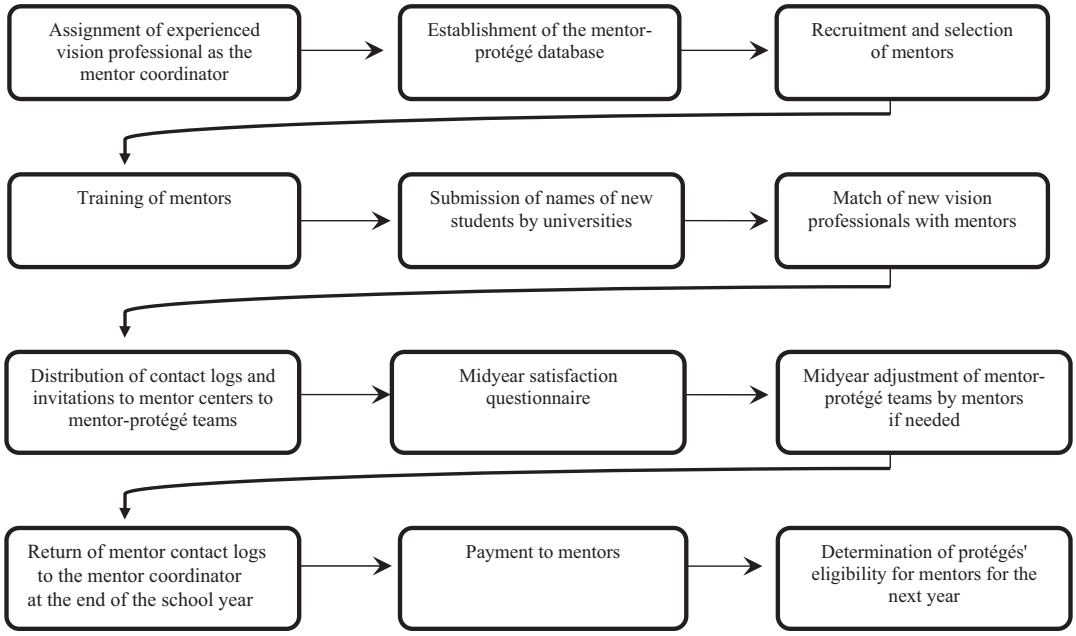

Figure 1. Structure of the mentor program. This chart represents the responsibilities of the mentor coordinator and the flow of the mentor assignment process from August through June of any given school year.

Selection and Preparation of Mentors

Three distinct types of mentors participate in the mentor program: district mentors, statewide mentors, and mentors who are employed by education service centers. District mentors are employed by school districts and special education cooperatives. Statewide mentors are self-employed contractors who travel greater distances to support their protégés. Statewide mentors are used in situations in which a district mentor is not geographically close enough to the protégé to provide high-quality support. The mentors receive either a stipend or credit toward registration fees for TSBVI-sponsored professional development. Currently, there are 255 district mentors, 7 statewide mentors, and 28 mentors who are employed by education service centers. Of these mentors, 232 are teachers of students with visual impairments and 120 are certified O&M specialists (62 are dually certified).

Individuals who are considered for mentoring are typically nominated by vision consultants who are employed by the education service centers. Some are nominated by partner teachers or are self-nominated. All must have a minimum of four to five years of experience in teaching students with visual impairments and must submit recommendations from three sources: their immediate supervisors, vision consultants from education service centers, and coworkers. O&M specialist applicants for mentoring also submit résumés documenting a minimum of four years of instruction in the school system. All applicants for mentoring must collaborate well with their peers and have a

history of attending conferences and professional development programs to ensure that their knowledge is current.

Once they are selected, the applicants for mentoring participate in a 1.5-day training session that is held in Austin once a year. Prior to the face-to-face training, they are required to complete a web-based training course specifically designed for vision mentors. The web course and the first half day of training are based on materials developed by Huling (1998), an expert in the fields of mentoring and teacher induction. Training begins with common problems for first-year teachers, issues that affect the mentor-protégé teams, the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, & Hall, 1987), active listening techniques, identifying stages that the protégés may be moving through, and techniques to support them through these stages. The second, full day of training covers standards of practice for conducting and writing vision-specific evaluations, legal guidelines for vision services in Texas, curricula for teaching the expanded core curriculum, and vision-related resources to share with protégés.

Matching protégés with mentors

The mentor coordinator uses a database to organize information about both mentors and protégés throughout Texas. As new vision professionals are hired, the universities or education service centers provide contact information for them, and they are sent e-mail messages with information about the mentor program. Some new teachers are already familiar with the mentors in their area and may request specific mentors. These requests are typically honored unless the mentors have already been matched. Once matched, both the mentor and protégé are sent e-mail messages with documents attached that will be used to monitor contacts between the two. These matches are made as soon as the new teachers are hired, but typically occur during August and September. In December, the mentors and protégés receive e-mail messages that ask for information related to the number of contacts they have had and if they want to continue to be matched. This mid-year survey is crucial, since there may be some situations in which the mentors and protégés have not been able to meet regularly or are simply incompatible. Follow-up in these instances is done by the mentor coordinator through telephone conversations, and adjustments are made if needed.

Documentation and accountability of mentors

Once they are matched with protégés, the mentors sign a 10-month contract that outlines their responsibilities. The mentors are required to have a minimum of 12 contacts with their protégés during the academic year, document these contacts, and return their documentation to the mentor coordinator at the end of the spring semester. Teachers of students with visual impairments or O&M specialists receive their own unique contact log when the match is made, and contacts are noted on this log. The O&M specialist contact log also tracks the amount of time spent, so that individuals can submit these logs for recertification credits from the Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Education Professionals (ACVREP). Contacts may be in the form of e-mail messages, telephone conversations, video conferences, face-to-face

meetings, or shadowing. If the midyear survey or contact log reveals inadequate contact, the mentor coordinator calls both the mentor and protégé to determine the cause. If the mentor is not able to perform the role for any reason, a change in mentors is made. Mentors who consistently neglect their role are not matched in the future.

Mentor centers

Students enrolled in the TTU and SFASU vision personnel preparation programs and all mentor-protégé teams qualify for a trip to Austin to observe experienced vision professionals at the TSBVI and in the Austin Independent School District (AISD) itinerant vision program. Mentor centers are events that are scheduled three times every academic year. Expenses for protégés and their mentors to attend them, including travel, hotel rooms, and per diem and substitute pay, when applicable, are covered by the mentor program. During a mentor center, the participants spend two days observing experienced teachers of students with visual impairments and O&M specialists working with their students. At the end of the first day, short presentations on children's programs are made by representatives of the rehabilitation state agency. The attendees are also given the option to tour the state rehabilitation center for adults with visual impairments, which is located near the TSBVI campus. Each mentor center begins at 5:00 p.m. on a Sunday for orientation to the campus and to create a schedule of observations for Monday and Tuesday. Observers have the opportunity to visit approximately seven TSBVI classrooms each day, or they may choose to meet AISD teachers of students with visual impairments or O&M specialists at a designated school and observe them there. During the lunch hour on both Monday and Tuesday, the experienced teachers (called "mentor center staff") and the observers eat lunch together in a large conference area to discuss questions that may have arisen during the observation period. Mentor centers are a valuable opportunity for new teachers and university students to learn about a vast array of abilities of students with visual impairments, as well as the teaching methods and materials that are designed to work well with students.

Results of the survey

Participants

In May 2012, an electronic satisfaction survey, including both quantitative and qualitative questions, was sent to the 76 protégés who were currently matched through the mentor program. Of the 76, 56 (74%) responded, 93% of whom had been teaching students with visual impairments for fewer than three years. Of the participants, 52% were already certified as teachers of students with visual impairments, 34% were working as teachers of students with visual impairments with a probationary certification, and 20% were ACVREP-certified O&M specialists. The survey was designed to determine the number and types of interactions between the protégés and mentors, the predominant topics that were covered during their meetings, effective methods that the mentors used with the protégés, the perceived impact that the mentors had on the quality of services the protégés were able to offer their students, and job issues that were the most stressful for

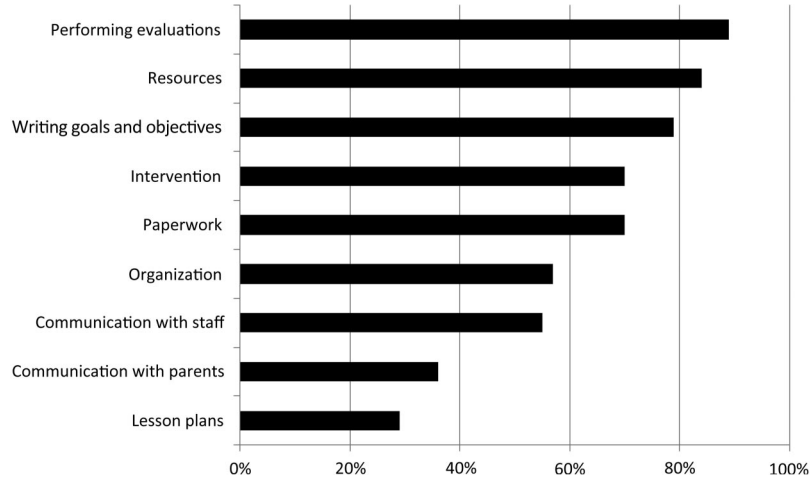

Figure 2. Frequency of topics covered with mentor. The bars represent the percentage of protégé responses to the survey question referring to the topics covered with their mentors. Multiple responses were allowed. ($n = 56$).

the new teachers. The participants were informed that participation in this survey was voluntary and anonymous and that they could choose whether to complete the survey. The study was approved by the TSBVI research committee.

Efforts are made to match a protégé to a mentor closest to the protégé geographically to facilitate meetings, preferably within the same school district. During the 2011–12 academic year, 71% of the protégés reported having more than 10 interactions with their mentors, 52% of which were face-to-face meetings, 16% of which were e-mail messages, and 30% of which were telephone conversations. When asked how many face-to-face interactions they had with their mentors, 59% of the protégés reported that they had more than 5 interactions, and 38% reported that they had 1 to 5 face-to-face meetings.

Interactions with mentors

The protégés were asked to select the topics they covered with their mentors. The topics were presented in a list in which multiple responses could be selected, with an opportunity to provide additional entries. The topics mentioned most frequently, including the percentage of responses, are presented in Figure 2. Additional topics mentioned included braille instruction, community resources, and orientation to equipment.

Since the training of mentors is largely devoted to issues related to first-year teachers and the techniques that mentors can use to facilitate open communication and trust, the survey was designed to collect data on which mentoring techniques were the most helpful for the protégés, and multiple responses were allowed. See Figure 3 for the frequency of effective mentoring techniques.

Additional effective characteristics mentioned by the protégés were largely related to the personality styles of the mentors. The examples included being patient, supportive, motivating, and energetic.

The protégés were asked if they thought that their mentors had an impact

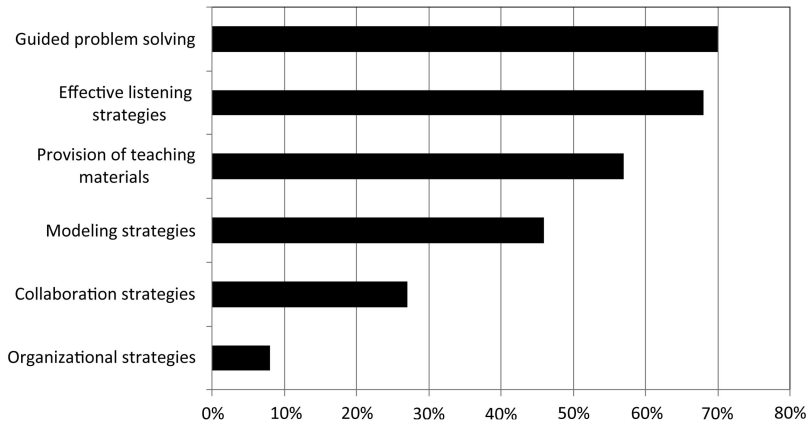

Figure 3. Frequency of effective mentoring techniques. This chart represents the percentage of protégé responses referring to effective mentoring techniques used by their mentors. Multiple responses were allowed. ($n = 56$).

on the quality of services they were able to offer their students. An overwhelming majority answered this question affirmatively, with 82% believing that their mentors had definitely contributed to the quality of their teaching and 16% believing that their mentors contributed to some extent to their teaching quality.

Protégés' job stressors

Even though many new teachers of students with visual impairments are teaching with probationary certifications as they complete their course work, they are expected to perform the same job duties, and often at the same level of proficiency, as experienced teachers. Since the O&M specialists have passed the ACVREP certifying examination and are considered fully certified to teach, they are also expected to function with certainty in all O&M roles and competencies. In an effort to determine the challenges that these new teachers of students with visual impairments and O&M specialists were experiencing, the survey sought qualitative data on stressors that the protégés faced as itinerant vision personnel.

There were 84 comments to the question, "What aspect(s) of your job created the most stress this year?" These comments were grouped into nine predominant themes, using the qualitative data analysis process of triangulation (Krippendorff, 2004). The researchers worked individually to develop categories from the participants' responses and then met as a group to evaluate the categories for emerging themes. They then compared these themes to reach a consensus to ensure more reliable results (see Figure 4).

The three top stressors were related to time management and organization, conducting evaluations, and collaborating with other adults. The most prevalent stressor, time management and organization, included such items as completing paperwork, scheduling, and providing enough time to work with students. The paperwork issues included knowing the correct procedures and having enough time for completion. The next stressor mentioned most frequently was performing evaluations and assessments. Functional vision evaluations and learning media assessments were at the top of this

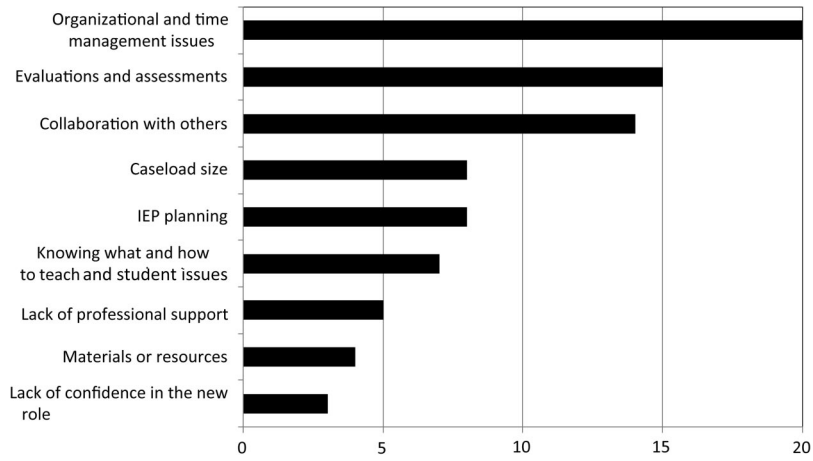

Figure 4. Stressors for new TVIs and O&M specialists. The bars represent the number of responses per stressor expressed by the survey participants. This question was open-ended, and multiple responses were allowed. ($n = 56$).

list, followed by statewide testing, evaluations of students for early childhood intervention services, evaluations of students for O&M services, and "using the CVI range," a functional vision evaluation for children with cortical visual impairment developed by Roman-Lantzy (2007). The third most predominant theme, collaboration with other adults, included communicating with parents, school personnel, and paraeducators. Cooperation with other teachers and acceptance of students in classes were also mentioned.

Discussion

The Texas statewide mentor program for new education vision professionals has been in existence for 15 years. It is unique in many ways and employs an ongoing process of improvement, such as with the streamlining of clerical processes, moving to totally electronic transmission of documents, and adding a midyear adjustment for floundering mentor-protégé matches. The Texas mentor program differs from the majority of mentor programs that focus on supporting classroom teachers. Most mentor programs are based on school campuses or districts, whereas the Texas mentor program is centrally coordinated by one individual who communicates statewide with districts and programs. This centralized coordination contributes to a cohesive model in regard to the training and accountability of mentors. This mentor model is based on research—it uses materials developed by Huling (1998)—and is supported by state and federal funding sources. The program is also enriched by activities at TSBVI and AISD that include observations of experienced teachers who work with a wide variety of students with visual impairments during mentor centers. The Texas mentor program for new vision professionals reflects many of the necessary components related to the induction of new teachers, such as the matching of new teachers with mentors in the same area of specialization, the careful selection and relevant training of mentors, and the mentors' proximity and frequency of support to the protégés (Billingsley et al., 2009), and

meets the needs of new educators in the unique itinerant instructional model.

The protégés' responses to the satisfaction survey lent support for the efficacy of the mentor program as leading to positive outcomes for them as new educators and for their students. The overwhelming feelings of support that these new teachers of students with visual impairments and O&M specialists received from their mentors was evidenced by their responses regarding the impact of the mentors on their ability to provide high-quality services to their students. The mentor-protégé relationship in this program is apparently working effectively on the basis of the type and amount of contact they have with one another. Having accountability measures in place ensures that the needed support is being provided. There are areas in which the new teachers clearly needed more support, including performing evaluations, writing goals and objectives, finding resources, providing appropriate interventions, and completing paperwork. The information gathered from this survey may also be used by personnel preparation programs to prioritize areas in which new teachers feel the least competent. The collaboration between the Texas statewide mentor program and the two visual impairment personnel preparation programs in Texas serves as a model of a joint effort to improve and support new vision professionals.

The data gathered on the most significant stressors for new teachers of students with visual impairments and O&M specialists in their first years of teaching are reflective of the complexity of these roles. Because of the nature of the itinerant service delivery model, in which teachers are not typically part of a school campus community of support, factors related to isolation and information that are unique to serving students with visual impairments contribute to increased stress for a new teacher. The assigned mentor may be the most appropriate individual to support the new vision professional through the provision of specialized information and techniques for improved collaboration, thus helping to reduce the anxiety of being a new itinerant teacher.

Because of the limitations of any personnel preparation program, with its prescribed course curriculum and time constraints, preparing a new professional for the realities of being on the new job is a challenge. For teachers of students with visual impairments who are teaching with probationary or emergency certificates to meet local or state needs and who have not completed their course work, the level of confidence is even lower. Some of the primary stressors noted by the protégés who were new to their positions (such as time management, caseload management, organization, and collaboration) are difficult for personnel preparation programs to address realistically until teacher candidates have an actual caseload of students.

Mentors and the mentor centers that are provided to new vision professionals help bridge the gap between the content of courses and real-life situations. These two aspects of this mentor program combine to enable the new professionals to seek specific information that is relevant to their caseloads. It is difficult to anticipate what questions to ask in relation to the needs of individual students and the logistics of the itinerant role while one is just taking courses. It is when a new

vision professional is hired that this added support provided by the mentor program becomes the most relevant.

Limitations of the study

The responses of the current protégés could be considered a limitation of the study, and therefore, generalizations to other similar populations of itinerant teachers cannot necessarily be made. The participants could have misinterpreted some of the survey items, which may have influenced the results, and the subjective nature of such a survey may have also influenced the findings. For example, the term *face-to-face interaction* was meant to imply a meeting in which the protégé and mentor discussed issues related to the protégé's job but could have been interpreted as a social visit.

It is assumed that having a mentor is a significant factor in the retention of teachers and that the mentor contributes to the reduction of job-related stress (Boe et al., 2008; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). The study presented here, however, did not include a question about a protégé's perception of the effect of having a mentor on his or her desire to stay in the field, nor did it ask about a mentor's influence on the reduction of job-related stress. Another potential limitation could be that the protégés were not asked to review the stressor themes identified by the researchers, which would have strengthened the triangulation process.

Conclusion

The results of the survey support the efficacy of the mentor program for vision professionals in Texas. A connection was found between effective mentoring techniques used by mentors with their protégés and the evidence-based training provided to prepare mentors. On the basis of the stressors identified by the protégés, there appears to be a need for ongoing training of mentors to support these topics in more depth. This mentor program, which has continually evolved over time to its current model, can serve as a framework for other states that are interested in creating or improving mentor programs for new itinerant vision professionals in their states. The results of the survey could also be used as a guide for personnel preparation programs to enhance the course work that they provide by further addressing the areas in which new teachers feel the least competent. Future examinations of protégés' perceptions could include correlations between the size of caseloads and stressors to see if there is a relationship, mentors' proximity related to perceptions of support, the extent to which having a mentor affects job-related stress and the desire to remain in the field, and the degree of isolation on the job (such as rural placements with no other vision professionals with whom to team). An effective mentor program contributes to the recruitment and retention of professionals in a field that has current shortages and projected vacancies because of expectations of increased retirement among the current workforce.

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