
Mentorship Defined by Alternative Teacher Certification Candidates: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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National teacher shortages have driven the market for alternative means of teacher certification. This study sought to understand what mentorship means to 27 beginning teachers in a university-district partnership Alternative Certification Program (ACP) in an effort to understand the participants' perceptions. The process included administering and coding self report questionnaires, random selection and focus group interviews, data triangulation, and intense interaction over a 10 month period. Principles of phenomenology guided researchers to realize four interrelated essential core themes exploring the meaning of mentorship (a) school politics, (b) proximity (c) relationship, and (d) classroom management.

Florida is expected to need 30,000 new teachers in the fall of 2006, and an estimated 20,000 each year for the following ten years (Matus, 2005). By 2006, the federal No Child Left Behind Act mandates that every classroom must be led by a highly qualified teacher who is certified in his/her field or subject area. National teacher shortages have driven the market for alternative means of teacher certification to produce quality teachers and ultimately improve student learning outcomes. School districts and state and local governments are meeting the demands through alternative teacher certification programs (Feistritzer, 1998; Henke & Zahn, 2003; Legler, 2003). Programs vary from emergency certification to very sophisticated and well designed programs (NCEI, 2002). Many of these alternative teacher certification programs are aligned to universities which provide ACP teachers an opportunity to complete a master's degree. One such ACP program is described in this study.

A northwest Florida university partnered with three local school districts to provide an Alternative Certification Program (ACP). The program developer and instructor was a veteran teacher with 18 years classroom teaching experience and 5 years teaching experience at the university level that included courses at the graduate level. Cohort groups, on-the-job classroom assignments, alternative scheduling of coursework, the use of in-school and peer mentors, and school district induction activities were ACP characteristics. At least a bachelor's degree and employment with any of the participating school districts were prerequisites for program participants. Many ACP candidates also had life experiences that enhanced classroom teaching.

Ultimately, ACP candidates were assessed by state, university and district guidelines. Each candidate submitted a portfolio of authentic classroom tasks, including documentation of student learning outcomes that reflected Florida Educator Accomplished Practices (FEAP). Skills such as lesson planning, assessment, and

classroom management were also included. The university instructor provided the final evaluation of the coursework while school site administrators provided the final evaluation of the infield performance of each ACP candidate. District certification specialists determined which ACP candidates successfully completed district teacher certification requirements before forwarding a report to the state Department of Education. Mentorship as another important ACP component was the focus of this research.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

While mentorship models have existed for decades, typically these models regarded business or youth programs. Mentoring was not as common in the educational setting until recent years (Davis, 2001). Mentorship can be thought of as a way to retain and support beginning teachers with professional growth. Using national data, Ingersoll & Smith (2004) found that beginning teachers who were provided mentors for the same subject field and who participated in collective induction activities, such as planning and collaboration with other teachers, were less likely to leave the teaching profession.

Mentoring in induction programs can be effective to help ameliorate isolation and lack of support (Andrews & Quinn, 2005). Teaching reflects vulnerability for both teacher and mentor. "Beginning teachers must be helped to understand and to face their weaknesses even when they do not wish to and even when mentors, who badly want to be supportive and not directive, would rather disengage, as so many do, to avoid conflict." (Bullough, 2005, p. 10).

Characteristics common for mentors of beginning teachers were described in the literature. Simmons (1998) describes necessary characteristics as professional role models, voluntary servants, good communicators, astute diplomats, and self-reliant mentors. Kelley (2004) proposes that mentors should be chosen for their teaching excellence, disposition toward collaboration, commitment to growth and change, and expertise in priority areas such as classroom management or content areas. Mentorship was defined by the ACP candidates in this study.

The researcher, developer and instructor for the program, was intimately involved with the ACP beginning teachers for the first year of teaching experience. While the literature indicated that mentors are important and the participating school districts mandated that ACP candidates have mentors, a common meaning of mentorship was unknown. Consequently, schools within districts and schools across districts approached the phenomenon of mentorship differently. The overarching question became, "What is mentorship?"

METHODOLOGY

Phenomenological research can be a springboard to quantitative research. Qualitative research, to understand the human experience and construct meaning from it, sets the stage for quantitative research to generate and test hypothetical generalizations (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). Phenomenological inquiry as a type of qualitative research was considered as the theoretical framework for this study. By definition, the purpose of phenomenology was to emphasize "a descriptive recording of

immediate subjective experience as reported” by the 27 ACP candidates in this research study (Sonnemann, 1954, p. 344). Phenomenological reflection is retrospective. Van Manen (1990) describes phenomenology as “reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through”

(p. 9-10). Therefore, the researcher sought to understand how ACP candidates perceive, make sense of, and describe mentorship to others through their individual and collective lived experiences through phenomenological research methodology.

Phenomenological research focuses on “what an experience means for persons who have had the experience” and how they can articulate the experience (Schram, 2003, p. 71). We can only know the appearance of what mentorship meant but ultimately reality depends upon the participants’ perspectives. The only way to really know what mentorship meant for ACP candidates was to experience it as directly as possible. The researcher as the program developer and instructor shared an intense relationship with the ACP candidates over a 10 month period. Phenomenology research indicates that the researcher have an insider’s perspective. As an ACP advocate, the researcher was well aware of the human cost of living through the first year of teaching for nontraditionally trained teachers and the need ACP candidates appear to have for mentorship.

Researcher bias was addressed by analyzing the data through the cyclical nature of qualitative research methodology. For another form of bias checking, researcher triangulation was employed by the primary investigator and two graduate students. One graduate student had completed the ACP and accompanying master’s degree. The other graduate student was a doctoral candidate seeking a degree in Curriculum and Instruction. Both graduate students were working in university sponsored assistantships regarding the ACP.

Heuristically, the process of the internal search to discover the meaning of the experiences led the researcher to develop methods and procedures for investigation (Patton, 2002). Participation in the ACP, for both the researcher and the ACP participants was an intense human experience. Other artifacts evaluated in the collection of data were email correspondence, journaling, telephone conversations, office appointments, class discussions, and individual portfolio submissions. Data were collected throughout the first year of teaching for the ACP beginning teachers as participants in this research.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 27 ACP candidates voluntarily participated in this research project. All of the participants had completed ACP coursework and were taking summer master’s degree classes as a cohort group at the participating university. Timing was crucial as the investigation required retrospection of mentorship throughout their first year of teaching while they sought teacher certification. Criteria for the participants included: (a) working for one of the 3 participating school districts, (b) completion of one school year as an ACP candidate, (c) taking at least one graduate level summer course at the university.

The participants ranged in age from early twenties to late thirties. Twenty-two participants were female and 5 participants were male. Nineteen participants were

Caucasian, 7 participants were African American, and one participant was Hispanic. Representation of socio-economic level varied with upper-middle class, rural, and inner-city school sites. Ten participants were secondary education teachers, 10 were middle level education teachers and 7 were elementary or preschool teachers. Teaching assignments varied from Spanish, special education, business education, computer technology, dance, reading, and drama as well as the traditional content areas of English, math, science, and social studies. Phenomenology was the methodology used to collect and analyze the data for this research.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

The starting point for knowledge of the mentorship experience came from in-depth data collection from the researcher's insider perspective. Data collection from the researcher's own experience included email correspondence, journaling, telephone conversations, office appointments, class discussions, and individual portfolio submissions as well as the experiences of the research participants. Researchers were required to complete the university's Internal Review Board approval and signed consent was obtained from ACP candidates.

Phenomenological analysis was conducted in five steps (see Figure 1 for model). First, 27 participants completed a general questionnaire. Second, 13 participants were interviewed. Third, 3 participants were asked to check the responses of the interviewed ACP candidates. Fourth, the researchers interpreted data that had been analyzed through the cyclical process. The last step was to define mentorship through the eyes of the ACP teacher candidates. Following, the five research steps are described in more detail.

Initially the researcher sought to ask the basic question, "What is a mentor?" Self report questionnaires were distributed in graduate level summer courses at the participating university to the ACP cohort group of teachers and collected by a graduate assistant (see Appendix for questions). Neutrality about the content of the interviews was achieved by the researcher and two graduate assistants independently coding the questionnaires. All three searched for essential core themes by locating key phrases or statements within the personal experiences of the ACP participants. Although not identical the lists of each researcher were similar and only those core themes that emerged from all three lists were included. Mutual agreement was obtained regarding the following four essential core themes: (a) mentor guidance, (b) mentor experience, (c) relationship with mentors, and (d) the ability to ask questions of mentors. Therefore, essential core themes were defined as true experiences without prejudgment or imposed meanings. Further investigation using interviews was needed to clarify across the collective group of ACP candidates what appeared to be real. The second step in the research process was to interview ACP candidates.

Secondly, all study participants were invited to a "last day of classes" outdoor celebration and told that interviews would be conducted for those who could attend. Interview prompts were a reflection of the previously mentioned core themes. Thirteen of the 27 original participants provided 30 to 40 minute, audio taped interviews. Audio tapes were transcribed by a graduate assistant. Typed transcripts were then coded and compared. Another dimension of a phenomenological approach was the assumption

that there were *essences* of the core meanings of the shared experience (Van Manen, 1990). Patton (2002) suggested “the experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon” (p.106). As informed readers, the researchers interpreted the essences of meaning to be (a) school politics, (b) close proximity, (c) relationship, and (d) classroom management (see Table 1 for identified core themes). The third step of the research process was conducting a focus group to member check.

Third, all of the remaining ACP candidates were invited to participate in a focus group interview. Six teachers participated and responded to the same interview questions. The focus group interview was audio taped, transcribed, and coded to obtain commonality of the subjects’ interpretations. As a form of member checking, essential core themes and essences of meaning that previously emerged were presented to a final group of 3 not previously interviewed study participants to assess if the researcher’s findings were viewed as accurate. The fourth research step required interpretation.

School Politics

Fourth, researcher interpretation “seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience” of the phenomenon of mentorship for ACP candidates (Patton, 2002, p. 482). This called for serious inspection of what the meanings revealed about the essential, recurring features of mentorship for ACP candidates. Noted was *school politics*. One teacher talked about her mentor warning her to “pre-watch videos” before showing them to students and to “stay away from topics” that would be too controversial. Another ACP candidate mentioned that her mentor told her to “keep [a copy of] all of her tests.” One talked about how colleagues can “play games.” Nine respondents actually said they were mentored to know which people they “can and can’t” consult. One participant remarked that her mentor was “tight with administration” which made the beginning teacher mistrustful. The words “school politics” were used repeatedly by research participants when describing the mentorship experience.

Typically, ACP candidates are unfamiliar with school culture unless they have experienced a previous career such as substitute teaching or have actively volunteered in school settings. Mentoring for an ACP candidate means so much more than just the details of the school site policies and procedures. School policies and procedures can be learned from school handbooks or manuals but the hidden curriculum of teaching can best be taught through nurturing mentorship. To facilitate the indoctrination of school culture with ACP candidates, mentors need to be in close proximity.

Close Proximity

Another dominant commonality from the data was *close proximity*. ACP candidates talked about mentor teachers being “right next door” or “across the hall.” Research participants often referred to having lunch with their mentors. Several affectionately referred to their mentors as “lunch buddies.” Sharing a common planning period also emerged as a popular occurrence. Teachers talked about seeing their mentors “on the way in [to school]” or their mentors checking on them “daily.” One

ACP candidate described it this way, “She would spend her whole planning period with me when I was stressed out.” “She would ask me to tell her about my problem and stay with me her whole [planning] period.” Another respondent reported, “My mentor was right across the hall.” “She was there all the time, any time, and was that was the best reassurance.” “She kept me safe.”

A preschool teacher noted that she had “lots and lots and lots” of questions to ask her mentor. She felt fortunate because her mentor was also the guidance counselor for her school. This meant her mentor not only had the expertise of guidance counseling but also had more opportunity for immediate availability to the ACP candidate. Close proximity meant help in classroom management for this particular preschool ACP teacher. Sometimes the participants’ responses regarding close proximity and classroom management became intertwined.

Seniority is a concept of school culture that veteran teachers understand. Due to seniority, sometimes ACP candidates are the teachers who are not assigned a specific classroom but instead are referred to as “floating” teachers. Floating teachers use the classrooms of teachers who have a scheduled break or planning period during that specific period of time. Being a floating teacher may present several problems for ACP teachers. In addition to not having the safety and security of their own classrooms or close proximity to mentors’ classrooms, ACP candidates may be further away in proximity from other resources. These resources may include the front office, other resource officers, or guidance departments. ACP candidates felt that it was important to have close proximity to a mentor with whom they shared a relationship.

Relationship

Relationship with mentors was thematic in the lived experiences of the ACP candidates. Two respondents used the words “mother-daughter” to describe the relationship while other respondents used the word “friend.” An ACP candidate remarked that her mentor was a friend in “spite of the age difference.” Another ACP candidate remarked that her mentor was “awesome” and that she even had her “[phone] number in her cell phone.” She continued to say that they had become “best buddies” and would even “hang out” outside of school. She explained how she could tell her things in “confidence and trust her to go no further.” Yet another replied that her mentor “taught” her “the stumbling blocks” so she didn’t have to “mess up.”

Many times the phenomenon of school politics and relationship became intertwined in the interviews. One teacher reported that she felt like she could “confide without jeopardy” in her mentor, especially if she had a “problem with another co-worker.” Several times ACP candidates mentioned “safety” when describing the mentor relationship and the school politics. Mentors need to develop relationships that are supportive in nature rather than instructive in nature.

Classroom Management

Classroom management, was another commonality. One candidate remarked that her mentor’s advice was “more beneficial” than the school district pre-service workshop. Another remarked that her mentor taught her “little things like field trips”

and “how to get a bus.” One ACP candidate said that she “didn’t even know what a cum [cumulative record] folder was” until her mentor informed her. Frequently mentioned were words to describe the essence of classroom management like “strategies,” “ideas,” “modeling,” “tips,” “suggestions,” “pointers,” “techniques,” “materials,” “practical applications,” “planning,” “tests,” and “projects.” One respondent summarized it by saying that her mentor “helped tremendously by just giving me her Julius Caesar stuff.” Another exclaimed that she didn’t know she “couldn’t send five kids to the bathroom” at once.

Classroom management includes management of materials, the classroom atmosphere, and behavior management techniques. All of these concepts work together for a positive teaching and learning environment. Many of these management skills come from experience. Initially, ACP candidates lack the direct experience necessary and these skills must develop over time. Mentors familiar with the school culture, in close proximity, and who have developed good working relationships with new ACP teachers can offer much needed support. A definition of mentorship through the experiences of beginning ACP teacher candidates may be helpful to provide such support.

Mentorship

The fifth step in the phenomenological analysis was an attempt to offer a tentative definition from organized immersion in the data, meaningful clusters, and a synthesis of meanings as the experience unfolded. Initially the researcher sought to ask the basic question, “What is a mentor?” One ACP candidate was very factual when he reported that a mentor was, “Someone to take initiative to ask and keep tabs on a new person.” When asked if he would take initiative to be a mentor for new teachers, he readily nodded his head in agreement. Later in the interview he described the excitement of teaching a special program at a different school site for the coming school year. When asked if he would be mentor for beginning teachers at his new school, his expression was perceived to immediately change from an expression of contentment to be a second year teacher to an expression of confusion to be a beginning teacher again at a new school. Thus, the concept of mentor can mean many different things to many different stakeholders and the paradigm changes with the situation.

Negatives reported by ACP candidates include mentors who “want you to do things their way,” mentors who are “tight with administration,” and mentors who express that the beginning teacher is a “burden.” Additionally, one participant reported that her mentor was generally disliked and the candidate feared that dislike could be transferred to her. Several ACP candidates reported that they didn’t want to “feel judged or evaluated.”

Overall, ACP candidates who participated in this research study were very pleased with the mentor experience and could articulate what that meant to them. ACP candidates felt more secure in teaching when mentors with whom they had established trusting relationships were close by for guidance with school culture related issues and as a resource with the management skills necessary for teaching. One ACP candidate described her teaching situation by saying she was a “first year teacher, in a portable

[building], with no intercom, and teaching a split 4-5 grade ESE [Exceptional Student Education] class. She acknowledged the need for and reliance upon a mentor. Another remarked that she was “very appreciative of the ACP and my relationship with my peers but you need someone at school!”

Table 1
Mentorship Defined by Alternative Certification Candidates: *Essences of Meaning*

Four Emerging Themes: School Politics, Close Proximity, Relationship, Classroom Management and the characteristics as described by ACP candidates for each theme.

School Politics Management	Close Proximity	Relationship	Classroom
Suggestions	Share tests	Friend	Detention
Pointers	Share lesson plans	Mother/Daughter	Strategies
Observation	Tips	Balancing	Modeling
	Ideas		Materials

PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

School politics, proximity, relationship, and classroom management categories aim to make sense of the complex reality of school culture. The reflections by the participants throughout their first years of teaching and the additional interviews make it clear that the majority of the ACP candidates feel they have been positively affected by a mentor. The reader of this research should come away with a better understanding of what it feels like to experience mentorship in the ACP (Schram, 2003). Phenomenology is methodology used in this research which allowed for insights that would not have been possible with more traditional qualitative research. A need for additional research calls for manuscripts that address other forms of alternative certification programs and comparisons between novice teachers and ACP candidates regarding mentorship.

School culture is a new paradigm for most of the ACP second career professionals. Doerger (2003) purposes that mentors need to have the personal disposition and understanding that they are responsible for cultural transmission because beginning teachers are learning the culture of their own schools as well as the culture of the education profession. In describing adaptation to school climate, one ACP candidate responded “nothing really prepared me and I made it my goal just to make it until Christmas.” Another described it by saying her mentor “opened my eyes.” After establishing a relationship with her mentor one beginning teacher said she felt more prepared as “just the second semester was so different.” Grossman & Thompson

(2004) suggested that the goal was not to change beginning teachers as they begin to construct their practices but rather how to provide the needed supports.

The ACP was many things to the candidates but most of all, the program was the relationship with the people who helped them learn the school culture. In response after response, participants talked about the importance of the people who helped and supported them. Other mentor relationships mentioned by research participants were family members who were also teachers, ACP peer members, the program instructor, the school secretary, and data clerks because they “know student issues.”

These new teachers crave close proximity and relationship with mentor teachers to learn the school culture and to acquire strategies, such as classroom management, necessary for teaching. These results are supported by the literature which suggested that the strongest factors for teacher retention include a same field mentor, common planning periods, and regularly scheduled collaboration with other teachers (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004).

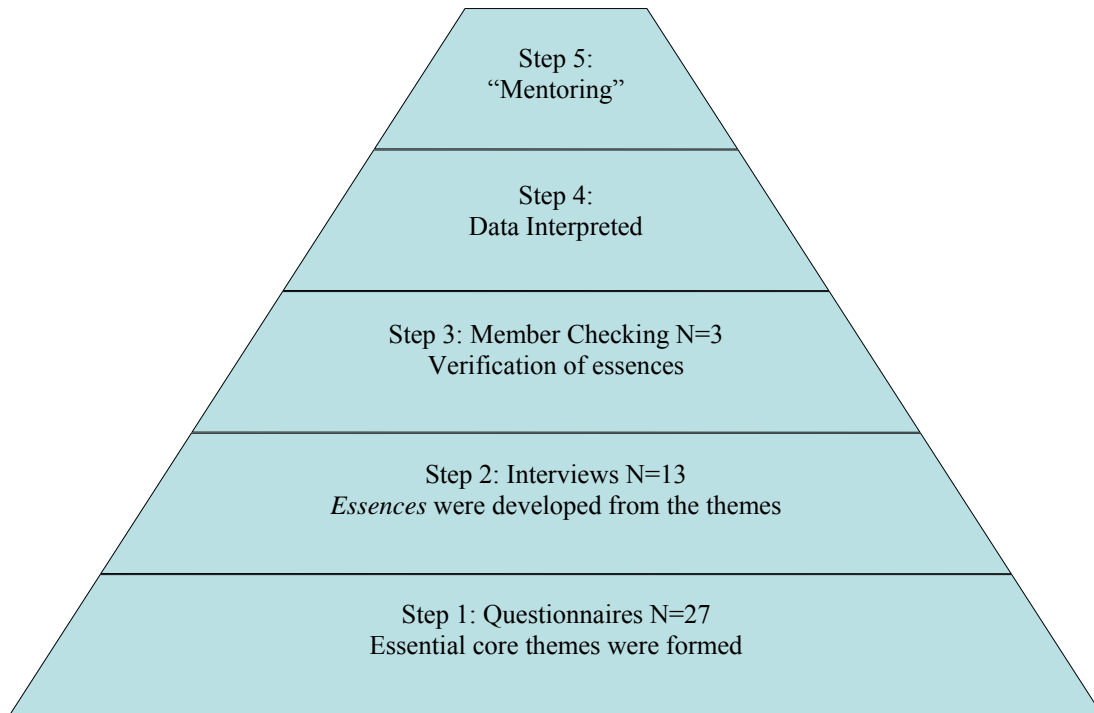
The experiences and influences of mentors have implications for ACP candidates because they reveal the school culture for beginning teachers. This research illustrates the importance for mentors to understand the needs of teachers who are not traditionally trained and feel vulnerable. Mentors will increasingly come into contact with teachers who are becoming teacher certified in alternate ways. Therefore, it is important for mentors to not only be knowledgeable about the procedures, school climate, pedagogy, curriculum, and classroom management strategies, but also to understand the needs such as classroom management skills and feelings such as safety and security of teachers completing the program. Alternative teacher training programs are providing an opportunity for additional people to join the teaching profession. Teachers who are provided with positive mentors and receive nurturance and support may promote a sense of well-being and self-confidence. With the overwhelming shortage of teachers needed in Florida as well as across the nation, stakeholders should be aware that mentorship for ACP beginning teachers remains an important phenomenon.

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Figure 1. Phenomenological Analysis



Appendix A. Questionnaire and Interview Questions

Self Report Questionnaire Questions

1. What does mentorship mean?
2. Tell me about your “mentor.”
3. Tell me about meeting with your “mentor.”
4. Estimate how many contact hours you spent per week with your mentor.
5. Define mentorship
6. Describe mentor feedback
7. Tell me what you mentor did for you.
8. What else do you want to tell me about your mentor?

Random Selection Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your mentor.
2. Tell me about “guidance” regarding your mentor.
3. Tell me about “relationship” regarding your mentor.
4. Tell me about “asking questions” of your mentor.
5. What else do you want to tell me