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# The Story of Mentoring Novice Teachers in New York

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This case study addressed a gap in literature by focusing on how teachers perceived the impact of mentoring programs on the support and collaboration of first-year teachers. A qualitative case study design was conducted using semistructured interviews and documents. A sample of 16 teachers from two different school districts in New York State participated. The main findings indicated that mentoring benefitted all of those involved in the program. Mentees and mentors in both school districts benefitted from lesson planning, collaborating, and supporting each other. Findings of this study may foster additional support and collaboration for mentees and mentors and possible improvements to existing mentoring programs. These improvements may promote social change by providing teachers with a positive environment where collaboration among all educators is encouraged.

**Keywords:** *collaboration, K–12 education, mentoring, support*

## Introduction

Educators have always known that new employees need to be supported and guided through the first days, even months of their job; such support and guidance can be obtained through mentorship. Mentoring teachers in their new educational setting is all about teaming up a novice teacher with a veteran teacher, a positive and rewarding experience when well implemented (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). Mentoring programs, which vary in terms of time, duration, and content (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004), are intended to help novice teachers handle the challenges of the classroom and the school environment. Teachers need a support system that will not only enable their success, but that will also foster a sense of community among all members of the building faculty. It is important to allow novice teachers time to interact with colleagues (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003), and providing teachers with this positive environment may help to ease the high numbers of new-teacher turnover. In addition, Schwille (2008) found that novice teachers need more than just professional support: it is important for "mentors and novices to work together to learn teaching as they grow professionally at their respective levels of practice" (p. 164).

The 1980s and '90s saw various pilot mentoring programs that showed efficiency in "welcoming new teachers to the profession and assisting them to practice effectively" (New York State Education Department, 2005, p. 51). Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) suggested that the early mentoring programs were only given to novices or incompetent teachers; no support was given to any other teachers. These programs consisted of only "words of encouragement or management tips that were offered in the staff room" (p. 51). There were few direct mentoring programs in place.

## New York State Mandates Mentoring for Novice Teachers

In 2004, New York passed a mentoring requirement as per the Commissioner's Regulations Section 100.2 (dd; New York State Education Department, 2005). The regulations stated that all New York State "teachers must complete a mentored experience in their first year of teaching" (New York State

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Education Department, 2005, p. 4). In conjunction with this law, "New York also implemented new provisions of Section 80-3 […] employing districts are now responsible to provide such mentoring to new teachers and must incorporate the design and planning of such mentored experiences into the district's professional development plan" (New York State Education Department, 2005, p. 4). The new legislation detailed other requirements of the mentoring program, such as (a) a detailed measure of choosing mentors, (b) training and a preparation program for mentors, (c) a set of activities for the mentors and their novice teachers, and lastly, (d) a specific place and time for mentor activities.

Feiman-Nemser, Schwille, Carver, and Yusko (1999) found that teacher induction provided novice or interning teachers with all of the basic skills necessary to function in the classroom, but they also found the concept and practice of mentoring to be missing. The essential role of mentoring as a form of learning was not part of this period. First-year teachers were expected to perform and be just as effective as their more experienced colleagues; however, some of the novice teachers did not have experience or the useful skills needed to manage a classroom of students. This void of support left the new teacher with the sense of isolation and frustration. Because first-year teachers generally want to make a good impression, they may be cautious to ask for help or share any problems that they experience, thus compounding the problem and potentially contributing to first-year teacher turnover.

## The Mentor Role for the Veteran Teacher

An important teacher-retention practice is the implementation of a formal support system. Such mentoring would automatically assign an experienced teacher with a novice teacher at the beginning of the term (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; NCTAF, 2007). An experienced teacher, or one who teaches the same subject and/or grade level, may be considered a mentor. This allows the mentee to be shown the trials and tribulations of teaching from the mentor's personal experience (Algozzine, Gretes, Queen, & Cowan-Hathcock, 2007; Kinsey, 2006).

Mentors are responsible for observing and evaluating their mentees and are to be considered partners in the mentoring relationship (New York State Education Department, 2005; Siebert, Clark, Kilbridge, & Peterson, 2006), such as by collaborating with or even team-teaching alongside their mentees. Their role is also to provide guidance and support (New York State Education Department, 2005). In a study of 60 education students and teachers in a community college, Woullard and Coats (2004) found that mentoring allows effective relationships to develop between new teachers and the programs. In another study, Siebert et al. (2006) noted that novice teachers experienced problems that their mentor teachers had not faced, and the mentor teachers attempted to help; however, having not experienced similar struggles in their own training, the mentors had difficulty in relating to their mentees. Given these circumstances, mentors may have a hard time observing, enlightening, and criticizing preservice teachers (Siebert et al., 2006).

Mentors provide guidance in curriculum and lesson planning and offer critique and feedback about teaching methods (Inman & Marlow, 2004; Kopkowski, 2008). Mentors can also provide additional support such as classroom management to preservice and first-year teachers (Algozzine et al., 2007; Inman & Marlow, 2004). In a study of 14 school systems and over 1,300 teachers, Algozzine et al. (2007) found that new teachers need support and guidance in all facets of their job even in the simple tasks of being a teacher such as grading, keeping attendance, and parent telephone calls. By

providing a solid support system, the mentor enables the preservice teacher to become an exceptional educator.

## Established Mentor Programs

More than 30 states that have implemented a mentoring program into their teacher-retention programs have seen an improvement (Feiman-Nemser et al., 1999). In a study of 16 southern region states, Bolich (2001) found that 10 states had begun initiating mentoring programs for beginning teachers. He found—and others agreed—that a positive relationship between mentoring and teaching suggested a positive influence on teacher retention (Bolich, 2001; Cherian, 2007; Feiman-Nemser et al., 1999; Kopkowski, 2008). In order for the mentoring relationship to be successful, the mentor needs to model good teaching; both the mentor and the novice teacher need to understand the process of learning; and both need to be encouraging and positive while working collaboratively (Bauer & LeBlanc, 2002; Cherian, 2007; Feiman-Nemser et al., 1999; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003).

Evaluation of more structured mentoring programs reports positive teacher retention. Among their successful attributes is the best practice for the beginning teacher to teach the same subject and grade as well as teach at the same school as his or her mentor (Bauer & LeBlanc, 2002; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Through the Schools and Staffing Survey conducted of 3,235 beginning teachers, Ingersoll & Smith (2004) found that over 2,000 of these teachers were contacted by their mentors and that approximately 70% of these mentors were in the same field. They found "that beginning teachers with mentors from the same field were less likely to leave after the first year; but, there was no doubt much variety among respondents' mentoring programs" (p. 38). Contrary to this, Glazerman et al. (2008) conducted a study of 418 schools and 542 teachers and found that after 1 year, the teacher induction program that they implemented "had no statistically significance impact on teacher retention" (p. xxi).

In a longitudinal study, researchers Norman and Feiman-Nemser (2005) found that there are also negative sides to the mentoring program for beginning teachers. Mentoring has been under scrutiny for its potential to "promote conventional norms and practices" (p. 696). The authors discussed how "few mentor teachers practice the kind of conceptually oriented, learner-centered teaching advocated by reformers" (p. 691). New teachers can learn bad habits or ineffective ways of teaching from their mentors. One suggestion that Norman and Feiman-Nemser (2005) made to avoid this is to offer support to the mentors throughout the process and provide training. Norman and Feiman-Nemser (2005) also suggested combining mentors with new teachers "who are already reformers in their schools and classrooms" or developing "collaborative contexts where mentors and novices can explore new approaches together" (p. 690).

The mentor experience, as compared to the other experiences mentioned above, may provide teachers with more of a personal field experience. In several cases, the mentoring programming may allow newer teachers to collaborate with an experienced teacher, allowing a more positive experience for the students (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Kopkowski, 2008). Ideally, the best mentoring relationship consists of respect, maturity, and insight (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004).

## Benefits for Mentor Teachers

A mentoring relationship does provide other benefits to the mentor teacher. Healy and Welchert (1990) suggested that "the relationship is a vehicle for achieving midlife generativity" (p. 17). The

mentors may know more in terms of procedures and operations of the classroom, but the new or novice teachers may have new teaching strategies to offer to the mentor teachers (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). Schwille (2008) also concluded that mentors will "gain deeper insight into their own teaching when mentors and novices together plan, teach and reflect" (p. 164).

# Methods

## Setting and Participants

In this qualitative case study design, the teachers' perceptions of mentoring programs and the relation of teachers staying and leaving were explored in depth. Semistructured interviews and school-related documents were used with a sample size of 16 participants in two different school districts in New York State. The participants were from two schools: the first was a public school district (School A) located in the suburbs of New York. There were four elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school—a population of nearly 4,000 students. The other school district was an alternative public school (School B) and provided services to 37 school districts throughout New York. It had a student population of 6,000.

The mentees, mentors, and administrators in this study specialized in elementary or secondary education. They varied in age and gender. There were limitations to the number of mentee participants because only a certain number of teachers completed their first year of teaching. There were also limitations to the mentor participants because they had to be currently mentoring a first-year teacher. The administrators also needed to be currently supervising the mentoring program. Numerous school districts refused to have a study conducted within their district because they did not want potential for negative publicity before a budget vote during hard economic times. The school districts selected were the only districts who cooperated and had an active mentoring program for their teachers. There were three mentees, three mentors, and two administrators interviewed from each School A and B. The participants needed to either be a first-year teacher, a mentor, or an administrator.

## Materials and Instruments

During the semistructured interviews with mentees, mentors, and administrators, responses were analyzed for similarities and common themes. Open coding was completed while the data were gathered to identify any emergent themes regarding teacher attrition or teacher retention methods. These three groups of interviews allowed triangulation of interview data to occur during data analysis. Member checking was used to ensure accuracy of data. Each interview participant was given his or her transcript to review for accuracy.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection sources that were used in this study were interviews and document analysis. The questions asked during the interview were developed to adequately address the research questions. The researcher used follow-up questions in order to fully examine the research questions. Some background and demographic information on the school districts was provided through public record. The interview process was used to assess information about the teachers' educational backgrounds, teacher preparation programming, and educational coursework. The interviews were conducted to record participants' interpretations, thoughts, and feelings about the mentoring in their school district as well as its relation to teacher retention. The semistructured interviews took

approximately 30–45 minutes and were tape-recorded; hand-written notes were also taken. For this study, interviews from first-year mentee teachers in two New York State school districts, as well as their mentors and administrators, were utilized to gain information about the mentoring programs within some New York State school districts.

In order to avoid bias and ensure accuracy of the data, confirmation was found in several ways. Open-ended questions were asked within the semistructured interviews. The interviews were conducted with the mentees and mentors within the two aforementioned school district cases to assess the mentoring methods within the schools. Interviews were also conducted with the administration of these schools, leading to multiple data source triangulation. The interviews were numbered, and names were not used so as to maintain confidentiality.

Another source of data for this qualitative case study was school-related documents. Documents on the school districts were also provided through the public record. The data consisted of documentation of the functions and purpose of the mentoring program. The documents that were analyzed—mentoring guidelines, mentoring records, and training materials—provided background information about the mentoring program and how the school district was implementing it.

The data and responses from the mentees, mentors, and administrators were sorted into emergent themes based on the responses given during the semistructured interviews. As each semistructured interview was conducted, open coding was done. Each question was analyzed for similarities of responses as well as common themes that were disclosed. First, the emergent themes of the mentees in each case were analyzed. The same analysis then applied to the data to compare and contrast themes common to both cases. There was then an analysis of each mentor interview question for the similarities and differences between the mentors in each case and then within both cases. After all semistructured interviews were completed and open coding of the data was done, axial coding was used. The emergent themes of the mentees were then compared to the mentors' themes in each case and then compared the mentee and mentor responses within the two cases. A final examination of the semistructured interviews of the administration was done within each case and then compared between the two cases. The similarities and differences of all three participant groups were then compared within each case; in addition, the two cases were compared and contrasted. A Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was used to set up a matrix with emergent themes listed at the top and participants' responses listed below each theme. This was done for each participant group in each case.

The documents were analyzed for each case, and then cross-case analysis occurred in comparing the logistics of the mentoring programs. There was next an analysis of the documents. Documents were examined for their significance. A document summary form was created for each document in this study. Through the analysis of the documents provided in this study, the intention of the mentoring program in each case was analyzed. Documents were also analyzed to see how the mentoring program had been revised over time. The documents were used to address the previously stated research questions and were analyzed to determine the strengths and limitations of the mentoring program. Lastly, the documents were analyzed to see what types of support and collaboration were being provided through the mentoring program.

If there were discrepancies within the data, an additional spreadsheet was set up to illustrate the common themes between these discrepancies. After all the responses were compared and contrasted, triangulation of the data occurred. The triangulation of data for research questions 1 and 3 were compared between the interview responses and the documents. There was also triangulation of this

data from the three types of interviews conducted. The triangulation of this data allowed for analysis of the strengths and limitations of the mentoring program. The triangulation of data for research on perceptions was analyzed through the interviews of mentee, mentors, and administrators. Member checking was also used to ensure accuracy of data. Each interviewed participant received his or her interview information to review for accuracy.

## Results

In general, the data collected demonstrated that even with some variation in the two school districts as far as student make-up, school culture, and approach to mentoring, the school districts share some common ideas and implementation in their adoption of the New York State mentoring program. Some similarities between the two school districts were that both gave an assigned mentor and offered workshops to the first-year teachers. Some of the differences between the two school districts were the amount of compensation offered to the mentor and the mentor-to-mentee ratio.

In terms of the mentoring programs, teachers and their practices benefitted. The mentees, mentors, and administrators all agreed that the mentoring program had many strengths to it. In these findings, various participants discussed the profound support that the mentees felt from the mentors to whom they were assigned. As indicated by one mentor, "Mentors provided a safety net for [mentees] and gave them support without asking questions or forming judgments." This was shared by several of the mentees interviewed. Some also mentioned that anytime they approached their mentors, they felt comfortable because of the mutual trust that they had. Another emergent theme was that the mentees were not the only ones benefitting from the mentoring program. The mentors described numerous areas in which they learned from their mentees, such as gaining insight through the different technology components that the newer teachers brought with them.

As far as weaknesses of the program, several mentees described how they felt that the mentors did not have much time. The mentors identified limitations with continuing the mentoring into the second and third year and communicating with other mentors. The administrators felt that there needed to be more collaboration and communication within the school district.

Many of the participants felt that there were several benefits and no hindrances within the mentoring program; many benefits stemmed from the support given by the mentors to the mentees. In regards to personal experiences, all of the participants claimed to have grown in their professional careers as a result of the mentoring program, as both the mentors and mentees discussed how they felt they became better teachers because of the program.

Aside from the mentoring program, other support was offered to the participants in the case study. There were workshops and in-services that helped prepare the mentees for their first year of teaching. Collaboration was another positive learning experience of the participants of this study.

## Study Limitations

In a case study design, there were some conceptual limitations, the first of which were the researcher's biases. These included perceptions that the mentoring program was not organized, did not advance the teachers in any way, was a hindrance for the mentor, and was a way for the administration to remain absent from schools. These biases, in fact, *positively* influenced the

research that was conducted because probing questions were asked about the implementation of the mentoring program. All measures were taken to reduce any bias during the study.

Also limiting were the subjective perspectives of participants and the researcher's own subjectivity during the interviews and the data analysis. Within this case study, there may have been subjectivity in how the participants perceived the interview questions. There was also subjectivity in the researcher's interpretation of the participants' interview responses. In order to reduce the risk of subjectivity, member checks were used.

The semistructured interviews conducted in the study were also a limitation in that the researcher was not able to conduct interviews throughout the year and obtain the whole school year's worth of experience and perception. The interview and archival data provided only partial evidence, and participants revealed their experiences in a single face-to-face encounter. The participants had limited trust and a lack of anonymity, potentially leading to them feeling vulnerable and anxious about how their attitudes might affect their employment or treatment at work. The researcher addressed these concerns by providing consent forms, ensuring confidentiality to all participants.

## Findings

School districts promote positive teaching through their mentoring programs. Many first-year teachers, after being mentored, feel a sense of support from and a relationship with their mentors. Such connections allow a mentee to succeed in the world of teaching knowing that he or she is not alone. The conceptual framework for this study was grounded in the research of Feiman-Nemser et al. (1999), who suggested that the mentoring relationships worked if there was collaboration, coplanning, and coteaching with novice teachers. This theory implied that with the guidance and collaboration of mentees and mentors, the mentee would receive a positive mentoring experience.

This case study analyzed how teachers perceived the impact of mentoring programs on support and collaboration. The factors that related to the benefits of the mentoring program were indicated in the literature review. Mentoring is evaluated as a positive and rewarding experience if the implementation of the mentoring program is well done (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

While researching the strengths of the mentoring program, two areas of concern emerged. The first was regarding the workshops given for first-year teachers in School A versus School B. A new-teacher orientation was not a requirement of New York State. In School B, there were modules that were given, which were attended by all faculty. Because of the vast levels of teaching and education within the faculty, the modules that were given were not specific to the needs of a first-year teacher. The modules described teamwork, technology, and behavioral concerns of the students. In School A, the workshops were dedicated to the first-year teacher. They covered a vast amount of topics from paperwork to ESL students to reading. The workshops were only offered to those that were new teachers to the school district and focused on all first-year teacher concerns.

Another area of concern was that the mentees in both school districts were not being mentored by someone in the same subject area. In School B, a mentor was given to two mentees who were not in the same subject area and, thus, did not give as much guidance and support as someone in the same subject area would have been able to do. To remedy this issue, a lead curriculum teacher was appointed in each subject area; this lead teacher helped support mentees and addressed any curriculum-specific issues.

Similarly, the School A administration recognized the lack of mentors from a similar subject areas as a weakness of its program. In School A, this problem was occurring mostly in the special areas, such as music, ESL, and sign language. These mentees were assigned mentors within the building, but this teacher was not able to help with curriculum-specific issues. The administrator revealed that this led to some of the teachers in these subjects to leave or be fired due to poor performance. In the New York State mentoring guidelines, there is no stipulation regarding matching the subject area of the mentee to that of the mentor; yet this case study revealed that without the same subject area shared between the mentee and the mentor, the mentoring experience was not as positive.

Through their perceptions and personal experiences, the participants identified positive aspects of the mentoring program such as support both inside and outside of the classroom and how this was observed by fellow mentees, mentors, and administrators. During participant interviews, the School B administrator stated that the mentoring program should have been adopted a long time ago. The administrator felt that due to the lack of the mentoring program in place, his first-year teachers were missing out on valuable support. This is an in important point because, while New York only adopted the mentoring guidelines in 2004, some of the New York State school districts had already established a system of assigning a "buddy" to a new teacher. This buddy received no training, was not necessarily a "good" teacher, and was not mandated to help the first-year teacher in any way.

Additionally, during the interviews, both administrators discussed their perceptions of teacher retention within their school districts; they found an increase in retention due to the emergence of the mentoring program. They did not give actual numbers to corroborate this but claimed that, through their observation, this was true. The mentees also implied that because of the positive support they received through the mentoring program, they would stay in their school district as teachers. This suggested that school districts that implement supportive mentoring programs may see an increase in teacher retention.

Several concerns emerged, however, when the researcher asked participants what was helpful and what was a hindrance to the mentoring program. Concerns included mentor-to-mentee guidelines, compensation, collaboration, and mentor training. First, New York State does not offer a specific ratio of mentees to mentors, and New York State policy states that the mentors are responsible for observation and criticism of their mentees and are considered partners in the mentoring relationship (New York State Education Department, 2005; Siebert et al., 2006). As stipulated in the guidelines, the mentor role is also one of providing guidance and support (New York State Education Department, 2005). The mentor in School A was from a different subject area as her three mentees. If the mentor only had a single mentee from a different subject area, it could have been easier to handle.

Second, New York State does not offer guidelines on compensation. This issue involves the union or bargaining unit of each school district, as well as the allotted budget. The current research suggests that the huge discrepancy within compensation should be addressed. New York State may be able to offer some calculation or stringent guidelines to make compensation more uniform.

The discrepancy between the two school districts and their mentor training was the last area of concern. In School B, the mentors had to attend all of the modules that the other teachers had to attend; this was their mentor-specific training. In School A, a special workshop was held by an outside speaker to address what it is to be a mentor. The discrepancy in what is required of the mentor lies in the New York State stipulations. New York State school districts are adopting such a

variety of policies regarding mentoring because the districts are not given specific rules or guidelines on what features the mentoring program needs to possess.

During the analysis of the research questions, strengths and weaknesses of the mentoring programs within these two school districts emerged. Through this research, it was discovered that the both mentoring programs benefitted the entire faculty involved. As several mentees suggested, there were huge paybacks from the mentors, such as lesson planning, collaborating, and supporting each other. Likewise, the mentors agreed that they reaped benefits from the mentees, such as learning new technology and creative ideas. By the novice teachers using the valuable experiences gained from participating in the mentoring activities, they remained in teaching and positively impacted their school districts.

## Recommendations for Further Study

While the focus of this study was on teachers' perceptions of support and collaboration in mentoring programs within two New York State districts, other studies could be conducted in a wider variety of school districts in New York in order to see how other districts interpret the mentoring guidelines. An examination of the workshops provided to the first-year teachers, as well as the type of training being offered to the mentors, should be studied. This study should be conducted at the start of the school year and follow first-year teachers through their mentoring journey.

Another recommendation is for a study based on teacher turnover. It would be important to examine which schools are experiencing the highest teacher turnover and then analyze what their mentoring programs are like. This comparison would provide great value to the educational community to see if the mentoring program does in fact help in retaining teachers.

Another study could be conducted by analyzing the implementation of a prototype mentoring model into school districts that may not have a very positive mentoring program for first-year teachers and then analyzing the positive and negatives of this experience. This model would be constructed out of all of the best practices of these two observed case studies, such as one-on-one mentor-to-mentee workshops with specific first-year teacher concerns, compensation for the mentor, training for the mentor, and mentoring beyond the first year.

A longitudinal study on mentoring should be considered. This analysis should occur over a period of 3 to 5 years. This would enable more of an in-depth analysis of teacher retention and attrition rates to be analyzed.

## Conclusion

Mentoring programs are essential for the growth of a first-year teacher, who needs to develop a positive teaching experience and receive support from mentors and administrators. Throughout this case study, the mentoring programs of two school districts were analyzed. Both school districts found the mentoring program to be a benefit to teachers. The first-year teachers and mentors both found a relationship between their experiences within the school districts. All the mentees who participated in the case study agreed that the most influential part of the program was the guidance that they received from the mentors.

In 2004, New York State passed a mentoring requirement that was implemented within every school district. One of the primary roles of the mentor in this program is to provide the mentee with

guidance and support throughout the first year of teaching. New York State provided guidelines for the school districts to implement the mentoring program, but each school district implemented the program in different ways.

This case study provided insight into some of the positive components of mentoring programs. The findings obtained from this research can be utilized to create a stronger and more supportive mentoring program in a school district. This can be achieved by not only adding a supportive mentor-mentee relationship, but also offering supportive workshops and in-services for the first-year teachers. This case study is a positive addition to the research that had been conducted in the education field and may serve as a source of awareness of the perceptions of teachers on the support and collaboration of mentoring programs. In order for there to be success in the mentoring program within school districts, administration, faculty, and staff need to offer a more supportive and encouraging environment for first-year teachers. The mentoring program also needs to follow certain guidelines to be successful. Some of these guidelines are one-on-one mentor-to-mentee relationships; workshops relating to the specific needs of a first-year teacher may allow for teachers to feel supported. With the implementation of these strategies, first-year teachers will feel encouraged and supported, and teacher attrition may be decreased.

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