



A Phenomenological Exploration: Mentoring and Teacher Retention in an Urban Maryland School District-Part 1

Dwight Barnes, Lakeland Elementary/Middle School (Baltimore, MD)

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between mentoring and Early Career Teacher retention, within an urban school district in Maryland. The research examined mentoring and teacher retention in an urban school district. There were 11 participants in the study. Seven of the participants remained in the district after their three-year mentorship support. The other four participants left the district at the end of the three years. The study was phenomenological, as it examined the lived experiences of the Early Career Teachers. The study's methodology utilized purposeful sampling and data collection using semi-structured interviews. Some of the major themes identified were mentoring is important for new teachers, mentors should operate in full time positions, mentors should possess certain traits, and the summer orientation session is beneficial.

Keywords: *mentor, mentoring, teacher retention, phenomenology*

Eight percent of teachers leave the profession every year in the United States (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). The high rate of teacher attrition is a primary contributor to the national teacher shortage (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017) and potentially teacher effectiveness. For this reason, Early Career Teacher (ECT) retention is an area of concern in the country (O'Connor et al., 2011). The retention of ECTs is critical to the development of the United States of America, and by extension, the world (Callahan, 2016; Furlong 2013). ECTs have five years or less experience in the classroom (O'Connor et al., 2011). In general, it takes up to seven years to develop highly skilled teachers (Long, 2010), yet many teachers do not survive in the profession that long. Nationally, the statistics indicate that 30% of new teachers depart after the first three years and 50% leave after their first five years (O'Connor et al., 2011). Over the last five years, the attrition of ECTs has continued to increase (Borman & Dowling, 2017; Taylor & West, 2019). In Maryland, approximately 42% of ECTs with one to five years' experience leave teaching (Maake, 2016) by the end of their fifth year. In Scooter Public School District-SPSD (pseudonym for the urban district) the trend is the same. Only 44 % of the ECTs who began in 2013-2014 remained in the district after three years (Chief Academic Officer's Institute, Summer 2018).

One positive approach designed to mitigate teacher attrition and increase teacher retention is mentoring (Saylor et al., 2018). Mentoring is teacher preparation in practice which involves leading, supervising, teaching, supporting, and providing feedback to teachers (Mahboob, 2014). Mullen and Klimaitis (2019) stated that mentoring is the inclusion of certain tenets: meaningful,

relationship building, can be formal or informal, goal oriented, and driven by results. A mentor is an experienced educator who provides support to ECTs (Hudson et al., 2013). A mentoring program is one in which mentors give guidance by way of supervision, support, and collaborative self-development to teachers (Kemmis et al., 2014). Effective mentoring practices have positive impacts on retaining new teachers within the profession (Dishena & Mokoena, 2016; Oliver, 2009). The establishment, organization, and implementation of meaningful mentoring programs can be beneficial to address the large numbers of teachers who exit the profession (Breaux & Wong, 2003; Callahan, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Lipton & Wellman, 2018). Mentoring helps new teachers improve their effectiveness and promotes retention (Hughes, 2012). Thus, there must be systems in place to help this cadre of educators during their formative years. Mentoring can improve the quality of teacher personnel and aid immensely with new teachers being assimilated in new places of work (Odell & Huling, 2000).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the phenomenon of mentoring and its influence on retention of teachers in Scooter Public School District, an urban school district in Maryland. Phenomenology involves understanding the lived experiences of the research participants through conversations (Bliss, 2016). Researchers have examined mentoring and the resultant effects on retention of new teachers across the country (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Kent et al., 2012; Lipton & Wellman, 2018). However, few scholars focused on the effects of mentoring on ECTs in urban school districts in the state of Maryland. There were 11 participants in the study. Seven of them remained in the school district after completion of their three-year mentoring program. The remaining four left the district at the end of the mentoring program as outlined by state law. The participants provided information for the study in semi-structured interviews. In these interviews, the ECTs shared their experiences by responding to interview questions.

This study provides information on factors that support retention and attrition of ECTs in Scooter Public School District. As such, this study gives valuable insights to stakeholders regarding the role of mentoring and the potential relationship between mentoring and keeping teachers. There are two research questions addressed in this paper:

1. What are the perceptions of school teachers about the relationship between mentoring and teacher retention?
2. How do school teachers describe the role of mentoring in influencing their decision to remain in teaching?

In the next section, there is a review of relevant literature, followed by the methods employed to collect and analyze the data. Subsequently, the findings and a discussion conclude the article.

Literature Review

Teaching is a multifaceted profession (Admiraal & Kittelsen, 2023) comprised of teaching, learning, assessment, curriculum, technology, and more. In teaching as a career, the initial years are pivotal to the long-term success of the new teachers (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006; Bartell, 2004; Gonzalez et al., 2019). Several policy makers and stakeholders consistently highlight the barriers ECTs face upon assuming their instructional roles (Ingersoll, 2012). It could be hypothesized that the traditional approach of sink or swim for ECTs is archaic and not helpful. Added to their regular classroom responsibilities, ECTs must become familiar with the school community (Khamis, 2000), adjust to overcome limitations in their teacher education programs or routes

(Schaefer et al., 2012), understand the different policy positions in the districts and schools and their impact on their functionalities within the classroom (Achinstein, 2006), and know the content and the methods for teaching (Kardos & Johnson, 2010). All these factors contribute to the overwhelming workload of new teachers (Attard Tonna, 2019; Padwa et al., 2019).

ECTs need a structured support system from teachers with experience (Gonzalez et al., 2019). Therefore, it is pivotal that ECTs get the guidance to be effective and successful. Annually, school districts across the nation invest heavily in mentoring programs that seek to improve retention of ECTs (Barnett et al., 2002; Gold, 1996). Strong mentors help with the retention of ECTs (Mahboob, 2014).

Mentoring

Mentoring is one of the most prevalent forms of support to new teachers (Polikoff et al., 2015). It is the epicenter of any induction program (Zembytska, 2016). Moreover, mentoring is a reflective paradigm encompassing engagement, time, and dialogue (Molitor et al., 2018) and is personal guidance provided usually by seasoned veterans to ECTs (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Also, mentoring occurs over a period and includes repetitive interactions (Henry et al., 2011), and encompasses reciprocity among stakeholders (Mahboob, 2014). Mullen and Huttinger (2008) described mentoring as continuous actions by the mentor: leading, supervising, teaching, supporting, and providing feedback to teachers.

Effective mentoring requires a structured mechanism for training and development of ECTs (Schwan et al., 2020). Mentoring is a potent avenue that helps with the retention of ECTs (Polikoff et al., 2015). There are variations among mentoring programs (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Polikoff et al., 2015; Radford, 2017). A key tenet in a quality mentoring program is that it harnesses a culture of learning (Doan, 2013). Mentoring programs that enhance a culture of learning advances attitudes of lifelong learning (Weaver, 2004) and they support professional growth (Rodd, 2006). ECTs indicate that participation in mentoring programs help with improved student success (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Mentors

Mentors should possess competence and expertise, coupled with a willingness to serve. Mahboob (2014) provided five pillars that describe an impactful mentor: establishes and maintains a positive relationship, provides support for growth and development, gives technical support, offers emotional support, and embraces the growth mindset (the mentor seeks to improve himself/herself). A successful mentor should be able to “read” the mentee (Witz, 2004) and make recommendations accordingly. The ability to read the mentees helps to build and maintain meaningful relationships among mentors and ECTs (Saylor et al., 2018).

Mullen and Klimaitis (2009) stated that proficient mentors are influential in the retention of ECTs. Similarly, effective mentors provide meaningful and impactful support to ECTs (Hudson et al., 2013).

One of the most important roles of mentors is to provide support for the ECTs; a main reason for ECTs leaving the profession is due to a lack of adequate support from fellow teachers, administrators, and parents (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Zembytska, 2016). Another important point is that ECTs should have mentors who share common planning periods, same grade levels, and teach similar subject matter (Fry, 2007; Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004). Furthermore, Ingersoll and

Strong (2011) discovered that teachers with mentors in similar content areas with common planning time were less likely to leave the profession at the end of their first year.

Knowles' Theory of Andragogy

The research on mentoring draws upon the approaches proposed by Knowles (1980). In the provision of mentoring support, mentors must be mindful that the ECTs are adults. Thus, the approach should be andragogical and not pedagogical. Knowles' (1980) pioneering work is the forerunner of adult learning. Six assumptions encompass andragogy. The assumptions are intrinsic motivation, need to know, self-directness/autonomy, experience, orientation to learning, and readiness to learn. The mentors should incorporate the different tenets of andragogy in the relationship with the new teachers. Knowles believed that adult education should result in self-actualization (Henry et al., 2011).

In addition to Knowles' six assumptions, learning must occur within a contextual framework (Henry et al., 2011). There must be interrelatedness among these concepts and learning from experiences helps to create diversity among adults. Adults bring varying levels of schemata to the learning episodes. Mentors must optimize chances/moments to infuse these in the learning experiences. Hence, mentors of ECTs must inculcate these tenets from Knowles as they engage in the mentoring process.

Teachers have the responsibility to help students learn. However, it may be the case that when teachers do not learn and develop themselves, they may become intellectually stagnant, thus inhibiting the chances of self-actualization. When one does not achieve self-actualization in a(n) field, the intent to press on in the field may suffer.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory

In the social learning theory (SLT), Bandura believed that human's behaviors emanated from a triad: the environment, previous behavior, and personal characteristics. Bandura stated that SLT helps to build teacher efficacy (Koutroubas & Galanakis, 2002). The SLT plays a poignant role in mentoring. ECTs normally learn a considerable amount through firsthand experiences. Learning occurs through constant reciprocal interaction and interplay among the major tenets of SLT. Kim et al. (2008) posited that with the SLT, ECTs acquire knowledge through observations from modeling, attitudes, and emotional reactions of their teachers(mentors). This is critical and can help to build teacher efficacy.

Mentoring programs may support and help ECTs who struggle early in their careers and enhance the efficacies of ECTs (Tschannen- Moran & Woolfok -Hoy, 2007; Woolfok -Hoy & Spero ,2005). In this case, the ECTs observe the mentors modeling specific strategies within the classrooms. Hobson et al. (2009) reported that perhaps the single most common active learning is the ECTs observing the mentor's instructional implementation. Thereafter, they engage in a conversation to discuss the observation by highlighting target areas. Active interaction is a precursor for learning in SLT. Similarly, Owen (2001) stated that when using the SLT, (ECTs) should get exposure to other models. This can help to break the mold that learning is linear and unfolds in silos.

The interactions between ECTs and mentors should continue after the modeling using reflections and providing feedback. This aids in the reinforcement of the metacognitive processes and strengthens the bond between the mentors and the ECTs. Glazerman et al. (2010) indicated

that receiving feedback could help to improve outcomes, such as improvement in instruction, and growth in lesson planning. In a study with mentors from 12 European countries, Jones (2009) found that mentors from England, Greece, and Belgium believed provision of feedback to ECTs was particularly important.

Constructivism

From a constructivist lens, using the viewpoints of Piaget and Dewey the learners (ECTs) are actively participating in the learning process and utilizing prior knowledge. ECTs construct knowledge as they engage in interactions, develop themselves individually, and build on their schemata (Staub & Stern, 2002). The core of mentoring focuses on ECTs observing seasoned mentors and reflecting on mentor strategies that may be used in their own classrooms (Moss, 2010). Additionally, mentors should guide ECTs in reframing their thinking and adjusting their behaviors (Kumi-Yeboah & James, 2012). As the mentoring relationship blossoms, the mentors and ECTs must be open to learning from each other (Kumi-Yeboah & James, 2012). This symbiotic framework helps to build trust and enhances the ECTs' pedagogical efficacies (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Darling-Hammond et al., 2013).

Summary

Mentoring is an integral part of the induction process for ECTs (Ingersoll, 2012). Mentoring is not a panacea for the high volumes of attrition with new teachers. However, research indicates that mentoring may help to limit the rapid departure of new teachers. Effective systems of support offered through mentoring programs can help to curb the revolving door concept and teacher attrition (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Wilkinson, 2009). Mentoring will only be successful with effective implementation. Thus, it is imperative that mentors function in capacities that propel meaningful and impactful guidance.

Methods

The purpose of this research examined mentoring and teacher retention through the lenses of 11 teachers, seven of whom remained in the school district after induction. The remaining four left the school district after the three-year mentoring period. Phenomenology was the approach to collect and analyze data. The purpose of phenomenology is to “describe the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences” (Creswell, 2017, p. 76). The descriptions in phenomenology consist of the “how” and “what” of the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Two primary research questions guided the phenomenological study:

1. What are the perceptions of school teachers about the relationship between mentoring and teacher retention?
2. How do school teachers describe the role of mentoring in influencing their decision to remain in teaching?

Setting

The setting for the research was Scooter Public School District (SPSD) in Maryland. In 2019, the district served approximately 80,000 students, with over 78 % being African Americans, 10.4 % Hispanics, 8 % Caucasians, and the remainder being other races. Over 5,000 teachers work in the district. The school district provides educational services to students mainly from low-income communities in the North Central part of the state. Approximately, 56 % of the students are from low-income households.

Participants

There were 11 participants in the study. Four of them left SPSPD after the three-year mentoring program and the other seven stayed with SPSPD upon completion of the induction period. The table below is a synopsis of the participants within the study. Each person got a pseudonym to promote anonymity.

Table 1: *Information on Participants in the Study*

Participants	Routes into Teaching	Qualifications	Present Status
Ann	Non-Traditional	MA Education	Left district
Bob	Non-Traditional	MA Education	Left district
Carol	Traditional		Stayed in district
Devin	Non-Traditional	MSc Education	Stayed in district
Elaine	Traditional	MAT	Stayed in district
Frank	Traditional	BA Education	Left district
Gloria	Traditional	MA Education	Left district
Ingrid	Non-Traditional		Stayed in district
Janet	Non-Traditional	BSc Education	Stayed in district
Kevin	Traditional	BSc Education	Stayed in district
Lionel	Traditional	MSc Education	Stayed in district

The main criteria for participation in this study were, (a) completion of the three-year induction period, (b) teaching in the district or departed from the district, and (c) voluntarily indicating a willingness to be participants. The participants who responded and indicated a willingness to participate got a follow up email with the consent form, participant questionnaire, and the interview questions. In that email, the researcher outlined the guidance for their participation in the study.

All of the participants in this study were teachers who experienced the three-year mentorship from formal mentoring programs when they started teaching. This is in keeping with the phenomenological model, as participants should be those who have experienced the phenomenon in the study (Eddles- Hirsch, 2015; Vagle 2018).

Selection of the participants occurred by using sampling to focus on participants who had direct experience with the phenomenon. Gentles et al. (2015) indicated that from a qualitative perspective, sampling is selection of specific sources of data which provide information to address

the objectives and nuances of the specific research. This approach to sampling is effective because it is cost effective, and it helps with accessibility (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2001). Specifically, purposeful sampling was the technique for selecting the participants. Purposeful sampling is the selection of participants for specific purposes rather than random selection (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Purposeful sampling is generally considered the best tool for phenomenology because only individuals with direct experience of the phenomenon should participate (Creswell, 2017).

Research Design

The research was a qualitative phenomenological study of teachers who were or currently affiliated with an urban school district in Maryland. The research focused on teachers' experiences with formal mentoring programs and the impact these experiences have/had on retention. Phenomenology was the approach as the study's focus pertained to understanding the essence of the participant's experiences with the phenomenon of mentoring. This design seeks to examine a justifiable phenomenon and describes the meanings of the participants' experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2017). Moustakas (1994) opined that phenomenology is an inductive approach to inquiry that seeks to get a fulsome understanding of human experiences. Additionally, Vagle (2018) wrote about how it enables researchers to look at the lived experiences of the participants.

Data Collection

For this research, the approach reflected the steps outlined by Creswell (2017). First, I conducted each interview individually. I used interviews as the tool to collect data. Then, I conducted one semi-structured interview with each participant. Some of them were face to face. And others occurred over the phone. However, I had to conduct some follow up interviews for clarity and further explanations with some of the participants.

Interviews are data collection tools in which the interviewer seeks to understand the meaning or positions of the interviewees through oral or written responses. "The most appropriate data collection strategy for phenomenological research is the profound interview" (Padilla-Diaz, 2015, p. 104). Interviews provide opportunities for the interviewer to ascertain firsthand knowledge from the informants (Zohrabi, 2013). Thus, I used semi-structured interviews with open ended questions.

Data Analysis

I interviewed each participant individually. The interviews were recorded. Next, I uploaded the audio to a website for transcription purposes. After, I reviewed respective transcripts while playing the audio to make corrections and edits for accuracy. For the next step, I read the transcripts several times. "It is important in the first stage of the analysis to read and reread the transcript closely in order to become as familiar as possible with the account, each reading has the potential to throw up new insights" (Smith, 2015, p.67).

Following those steps, there was the highlighting of interesting or significant ideas from the participants' answers. This was the initial step in finding themes. Next, I identified statements of significance, sentences, or quotations that revealed the participants' experiences with the phe-

nomenon. This led into listing and preliminary grouping which was the segue to undertake horizontalization. Creswell (2017) defined horizontalization as the process in which the researcher identifies significant statements made by the participants that are relevant to the phenomenon.

Following horizontalization, I developed invariant constituents and clusters of meaning from the major statements. The invariant constituents are meaning units (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). I created columns in the journal and documented the invariant constituents for each participant based on responses to the questions in the interviews. The grouping of the invariant constituents is critical in qualitative research as they highlight the significant areas after the removal of overlapping or repetitive statements. The invariant constituents represent the essence of the participants' experiences with the phenomenon. From these invariant constituents, themes emerged. Ryan, and Bernard (2003) wrote, themes emerge from the data in alignment with an inductive approach; theming of the data is a seminal aspect of qualitative analyses (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Thereafter, I documented the themes for the research questions.

The next step in the process was individual textual descriptions for each of the participants. Vogle (2018) noted that a textural description gives salience to what the participant experienced. Next, I implemented composite textural descriptions. A composite textural description is an amalgamation of the essences of the experiences and integration of all the individual textual descriptions into a whole to reflect the group.

The next step was the creation of narratives that anchored each composite textural description. Following this process, I completed the composite descriptions. Eddles-Hirsch (2015) wrote this is the ultimate step in phenomenology. The composite representation is a lifeworld representation of all the participants in the study (Randles, 2012). Thereafter, I addressed the themes separately and used the information from the transcripts as evidentiary data. Finally, I documented the essence of the composite descriptions to address the research questions under interpretation of findings in Chapter four and extended this to Chapter five.

Results/Findings

Several themes surfaced from the analyses of the data for both sets of Early Career Teachers (ECTs) for the two research questions. Research Question one was, What are the perceptions of school teachers about the relationship between mentoring and teacher retention? I identified three dominant themes that emerged from the ECTs who remained in the district. The themes were Culture of Support, Benefits of Summer Orientation, and Similar Assignments. Conversely, there were two main themes from the ECTs who left the district after the period of mentorship. These themes were Mentoring Mindset and Need for Full Time Mentoring. The same number of themes emerged for each group for Research Question two, How do school teachers describe the role of mentoring in influencing their decision to remain in teaching? The themes were Traits of Mentors and Benefits of Mentoring for the teachers who stayed in the district. The themes for those who left the district were Mentor's Impact and New Teachers need Mentoring. I now present the findings for the first research question, followed by the findings for research question 2.

Research Question 1—Themes Derived for Teachers Who Stayed

Culture of Support

The ECTs who stayed in the district viewed providers of mentoring support as having extensive expertise in the field. The ECTs were unanimous in espousing mentoring as a comprehensive activity that provides support for new teachers. Mentoring can positively affect ECTs' transition into the profession (Richter et al., 2013). These were consistent with some of the comments from the ECTs:

“It is guiding someone through a process of teaching, giving feedback, how to manage a classroom” (Kevin, personal communication, January 2, 2019) and

“Mentoring to me means assisting somebody with less experience to acquire the art, to develop themselves in the profession. It also means helping them to become a more rounded educator and helping them also to gain confidence in themselves as a teacher” (Carol, personal communication, November 24, 2018).

Benefits of Summer Orientation

The New Teacher Institute (NTI) is a one-week Summer Institute for all new teachers to the district. The primary aim is to sensitize new teachers with understanding some of the cultural nuances and expectations of the district. ECTs agreed that the NTI was meaningful and helped them with their onboarding experiences. One of the ECTs stated,

“I think it was a great way to kind of introduce me to some of the system things going on in the city, as well as get to meet and collaborate with some of the people who were teaching the same grade level as me” (Janet, personal communication, December 14, 2018). Adding to this, they espoused the thinking that the exposure to systems of the district and participation in NTI were useful. The following excerpt captures the essence of one participant,

“The people there were great, I had a lot of questions, and I can't remember the names of the people specifically there but I just recall being it being a good positive experience” (Devin, personal communication, November 24, 2018). Devin continued,

“The person from the New Teacher Academy helped communicate with the school and you know human capital about some of the changes and they were able to get it all moved over and that worked out. It was really awesome, and they were really supportive and helpful” (Devin, personal communication, November 24, 2018).

Similar Assignments

ECTs believed the pairing mentors and new teachers based on commonalities should exist, such as teaching the same subject area. Mentors and strategic new teacher pairings had great success (Lozinak, 2016). For example, early childhood teachers should have early childhood mentors. One participant described it as,

My mentor was a Social Studies teacher, and I am a math teacher. She was a nice person but even if I was doing crap, she wouldn't know. I think having a math mentor would make more sense (Lionel, personal communication, December 14, 2018).

Mentors and mentees should be in the same subject areas (Flannagan, 2006).

Research Question 1—Themes for Teachers Who Left the District

Mentoring Mindset

The ECTs who left the district believed that the mentoring program was going to provide support for them based on their initial perceptions and experiences at the summer training and orientation at New Teacher Institute (NTI). One ECT shared,

“I really thought of mentoring as someone who would help me when I was confused or overwhelmed” (Ann, personal communication, November 20, 2018). Another ECT stated,

“I had a good week at the New Teacher Institute, and I felt like if the mentors supported us like this, we would be fine” (Gloria, personal communication, November 30, 2018). The ECTs did not experience their expectations or thoughts on the mentoring process based on the NTI. They believed that they would have more guidance and support throughout the process. However, this did not unfold.

Need for Full-Time Mentoring

The ECTs who left the district were explicit in their belief that mentoring support was most effective and credible when providers of the support are not inundated with teaching and other responsibilities. Full time mentors can provide greater assistance and different levels of support more consistently. Gloria’s response described her frustration,

“One thing I would tell the district is my mentor hardly had time for me, she was on the Instructional Leadership Team, math lead, Ed. Associate, and always running. So, I believe mentors should do mentoring fully and they will do it very well” (Gloria, personal communication, November 30, 2018). Another ECT mentioned,

“I just think that by allowing mentors to have mentoring as the main focus of their job rather than an auxiliary focus gives them more time to do quality mentoring” (Ann, personal communication, November 20, 2018).

Summary of Research Question 1

ECTs who remained in the district indicated that mentoring provides support. Also, mentors and ECTs should have similar assignments. For example, an ECT who teaches Mathematics should have a mentor in the same content area. Lastly, ECTs suggested that the New Teacher Institute (NTI) was a beneficial experience. They indicated that the NTI helped them with forming relationships and getting early insights into some norms of the district.

ECTs who left the district identified two main sub-themes, namely mentoring mindset and need for full-time mentoring. Mentoring should provide guidance and support for new teachers. This belief was parallel to the ECTs who remained in the district. Also, they believed that mentoring of ECTs should be a full-time responsibility, unlike the present practice of classroom teachers functioning in part time roles.

Research Question 2—Themes Derived for Teachers Who Stayed

The purpose of research question two was to examine teachers' actual experiences with the mentor and mentoring, and the influence of these two tenets. In analyzing the responses for these questions, the participants views represented mentoring as a salient concept for new teachers and they provided certain descriptors for mentors. Thus, two sub-themes emerged to provide greater clarity to the broader theme. The first sub-theme, traits of mentors highlight specific characteristics. The ECTs suggested that mentors should possess certain traits. While, the second sub-theme, benefits of mentoring outlined the participants' mindsets.

Traits of Mentors

The ECTs who stayed in the district identified certain characteristics that mentors should possess, that help to make them effective. Successful mentors provide support to ECTs (Hudson et al., 2013). Also, mentors should be able to provide meaningful feedback, have experience, be able to engage in difficult conversations, and be effective observers (Rodd, 2006). Kevin, Lionel, and Elaine believed that mentors should have experience. This is critical as the mentor can utilize these previous encounters when providing guidance for ECTs. Lionel remarked, "A mentor is someone who has more experience than the new teacher. In fact, the mentor should be seasoned with lots of experience" (Lionel, personal communication, December 14, 2018). For his part, Kevin indicated, "Somebody who has at least experienced, um, the, the challenges that I am about to face. if not through their own teaching, but through reading as well, so a good mentor should be one who has had that experience" (Kevin, personal communication, January 2, 2019).

Elaine remarked, "A mentor is someone who is well versed in various student behaviors and various grade levels" (Elaine, personal communication, November 24, 2018).

Some of the participants explicitly identified helpfulness as a key attribute of mentors. One of the ECTs put it this way,

"My mentor was very helpful, very hands on. She came down on her free periods on her planning period and what hold my class for me, so I could knock out assessments" (Ingrid, personal communication, December 13, 2018). Another ECT thought, "She was willing to go above and beyond to help me and do anything that she could in order to make sure that I'm getting the support that I needed" (Janet, personal communication, December 14, 2018).

Benefits of Mentoring

ECTs who stayed in the district viewed mentoring as beneficial. One of the participants was emphatic, "Yes, the mentoring program is critical in one shape or another" (Devin, personal communication, November 24, 2018). Elaine's belief was that mentoring was the reason she remained in the profession. Her position was, "If it wasn't for mentoring, I wouldn't have survived" (Elaine, personal communication, November 24, 2018). Another ECT, stated,

Mentoring is critical. It helps you with building that sense of community. Sometimes it can be with one or two people at your school in your area. You get to share ideas and have them critique lesson plans and ideas, that experience I got from the mentorship program (Kevin, personal communication, January 2, 2019).

The provision of mentoring helps to enhance job performance and retention of novice teachers (Kelly et al., 2018).

Research Question 2—Themes Derived for Teachers Who Left the District

Mentor's Impact

The ECTs who left the district accorded value to their mentors, though at varying degrees. Ann stated that, "I would describe my mentor as invaluable. I don't think I could have survived my first two years in the city if I hadn't the support of mentors" (Ann, personal communication, November 20, 2018). Frank's thinking was,

"My mentor had the requisite knowledge and experience, that enabled me to do better and greater work. However, she was overworked and that hindered the support I should have had" (Frank, personal communication, November 30, 2018). Lastly, Gloria thought, "My mentor was understanding and willing to guide, I liked her mentoring, she was very helpful, upfront and nice, but my mentor was too busy, she was always doing something" (Gloria, personal communication, November 30, 2018).

New Teachers Need Mentoring

The ECTs espoused the viewpoint that mentoring is seminal. The responses indicated that the exposure to mentoring is valuable and assisted in anchoring them during their time in the district.

"I think it is absolutely vital, I do not think that you can retain the type of quality teachers that you have if you don't have a strong mentoring program" (Ann, personal communication, November 20, 2018). Another ECT posited, "Mentoring helped me with managing my time for lessons much better. I used to be poor with time management, but my mentor showed me how to use my time better" (Gloria, personal communication, November 30, 2018). Also, Ann expressed a parallel position, "It was good to have somebody be able to give tools for my toolkit, brainstorm solutions that I used to help me create management plans" (Ann, personal communication, November 20, 2018).

Summary of Research Question 2

This research question concentrated on teachers' descriptions of mentoring and its salience. ECTs who stayed in the district posited that mentoring is beneficial. In like manner, ECTs who left the district, stated support from mentoring is important. Additionally, mentors are advantageous to teacher retention. The provision of mentors for new teachers is one way to combat the high rates of attrition (Porumb, 2015). ECTs who remained in the district believed that mentors should possess certain traits that will serve them meaningfully during the process. For example, mentors should be experienced and helpful.

Discussion

I will begin with the synthesis for research question one with the ECTs who stayed in the district. Then, I will do it for the ECTs who left the district. The study found that mentoring provides support for new teachers. This was synonymous with literature. Mentoring advances professional growth (Lipton & Welman, 2018; Rodd, 2006). Also, Kemmis et al. (2014) stated successful mentoring incorporates support and collaboration.

ECTs who stayed in the district echoed the sentiment that the New Teacher Institute (NTI) played a pivotal role in laying the foundation for success. The activities in the NTI promoted collaboration and provided support for the ECTs. Devin recounted the assistance he got from persons he met at the NTI in helping him with a school placement. This finding is unique to the region of the school district. The ECTs' participation in the NTI helped to advance their learning as they got information on system expectations and exposure to subject matter. This finding was parallel to Henry et al. (2011) who wrote, learning occurs within a social context.

Another major finding from the ECTs who stayed in the district was that there should be similar assignments with mentors. This was in unison with research. Mentors and ECT pairings should have similarities, such as, content areas and grade levels (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Lozinak, 2016). It is important that school leaders utilize this information when assigning ECTs to mentors. So, a Mathematics ECT should not have a Reading specialist as the mentor.

The ECTs who left the district suggested that their mentoring experiences were not really effective. Their mentors had good intentions, but their other responsibilities negatively impacted the support. This was different from the experiences of the ECTs who stayed in the district. The findings for the ECTs who left the district were not reflective of the research on how to enhance ECT retention. Mentoring provides a new teacher with several opportunities for frank and transparent interactions and conversations (Callahan, 2016). Another finding was that mentoring should be a full-time responsibility. However, this was not the case within the school district. I did not locate any literature that aligns with this finding that mentoring should be full time.

The aim of research question two was to elicit ECTs' descriptions of mentoring and its influence on them. In reviewing the themes, the ECTs who stayed identified characteristics of mentors which were beneficial. The ECTs suggested that mentors must not only be experienced but knowledgeable and have a mindset to assist. Mahboob (2014) identified traits of competent mentors and some of these were in the list, such as: provision of support for growth and development and maintaining a positive relationship.

Ingersoll (2013) found that mentors play important roles in retention of ECTs. The more seasoned mentor can help to develop the efficacies of the ECTs through constructivism by observing, modeling, and providing feedback (Moss, 2010). Gloria and Ann indicated that mentoring helped them to improve. This helps to promote ECTs professional development and growth (Tasnim, 2020). Ingrid and Janet spoke quite glowingly about their mentor's helpfulness. This was instrumental in their survival as ECTs. The research indicates that effective mentors provide support (Hudson et al., 2013). The second theme was parallel to one of the themes for the first RQ. The provision of mentoring is helpful with retention of ECTs.

The ECTs who left the district were unanimous that new teachers need mentoring. Again, this aligns with the research. Also, there is some parallel with the theme of Benefits of Mentoring from the ECTs who remained in the district. Mentoring is important in any ECT induction program (Dishena & Mokoena, 2016; Zembytska, 2016).

The study revealed that ECTs need support and guidance to be effective, and thus promote their retention. The absence of a meaningful mentoring program with structured systems promotes high rates of attrition among ECTs.

Implications

Participants concluded that mentoring was important, and they relied on their mentors' varied expertise to assist them. Ann and Frank spoke about getting invaluable support and mentor's knowledge propelling them to improve. The implication for practice is that mentoring of new teachers should continue. So, if mentors engage in providing this support, it will strengthen new teachers and may advance the levels of retention in Scooter Public School District.

Constructivism promotes the active engagement of the learners in the process. Constructivism is a chief paradigm in mentoring (Moss, 2010). One of the main characteristics of constructivism occurs through modeling by a more experienced person (mentor) for a less experienced individual (ECT). Features of constructivism were evident in this study. Lionel and Elaine disclosed that the modeling was invaluable as it helped them to see the explicit expectations. In going forward, mentors should ensure that modeling of behaviors occur as it provides a framework of the expectation.

Andragogy according to Knowles (1980) "is the art and science of helping adults learn" (Usman, 2015, p. 58). There were several aspects of andragogy within the study. Two of the tenets from Knowles' work are readiness to learn and orientation to learning. The participants had exposure to these at the outset of joining Scooter Public School District. Their participation in the week-long summer training and orientation underscores this fact. Therefore, the researcher suggests that leadership within Scooter Public School District continues to provide this platform for ECTs.

Presently, there is no policy in Scooter Public School District that outlines the duration or time expectation for mentoring support. The ECTs who left the district indicated that they needed more support from their mentors. However, this was not possible as their mentors had several other responsibilities. An implication of this is the district could create a pool of mentors who work full time with ECTs across the district.

Limitations

One of the potential limitations is the generalization of the study's findings. Generalization continues to be an issue for qualitative research, but it still has value (Merriam, 2009). This is due to the sample sizes that normally comprise qualitative research. The researcher cannot state definitively that the results are applicable to teachers in other school districts. Another limitation is the trustworthiness of the data from the research. The researcher addressed the issue by implementing the paradigms of credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability, and authenticity (Lincoln & Guba (1985, 1994).

Future Research

This phenomenological study focused on the impact of mentoring on teacher retention in an urban school district located in Maryland. The researcher utilized the study's limitations, the study's findings, and reflective thoughts to forecast future work from this initial undertaking. The first study could examine the relationship between mentoring and teacher retention in a suburban

school district in the state using the same or a larger sample size. Next, a phenomenological study could juxtapose perceptions of mentors and new teachers on the efficacy of the mentoring program on teacher retention in the school district. An extension of the previous study could keep the same tenets but include another set of participants, school administrators (principals and vice principals).

Also, a quantitative study could examine the impact of mentoring on teacher retention in the school district or another school district using a questionnaire with a four-point Likert scale for data collection. The study could have ECTs and mentors as the participants. Also, to analyze the data, the researcher could compare groups. Lastly, another quantitative study may explore the potential causal relationship between leadership and retention of ECTs. The purpose of this study would be to examine the role school leadership plays in the retention of ECTs from a school district. The study could have a minimum of 50 participants. Again, a questionnaire would be the data collection tool and a t-test would help in the inferential statistics and interpretation.

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Dwight Barnes works at Lakeland Elementary/Middle School with Baltimore City Public School System as a Lead Teacher. His main responsibilities are Academic Math Lead for PreK-2nd grade and teacher development. Also, Barnes leads district PDs in Early Childhood Mathematics and Early Career Teacher Support. His interests lie in teacher development, specifically early career practitioners, instructional leadership for elementary instruction, and teaching in urban contexts. Barnes earned his Ph.D. in Leadership in Education in 2019.