

Addressing Attrition: Multi-Level Mentorship Model

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ABSTRACT

Mentorship has been identified as a protective factor in early career special education teacher retention. These mentorships can be formal or informal during teachers' first years of teaching and can support teachers in various aspects of their careers, such as navigating required paperwork and instructional practices. However, these mentorships should be individualized and consistently provided to be meaningful. To address the inconsistent mentorships that early career teachers may receive, we propose a model in which early career teachers are supported by a network of alumni to both support and retain the early career special education teaching force. In turn, the alumni are supported by university faculty in mentorship skills to fill gaps in administrative roles where special education expertise is needed. By providing support to both groups of special educators (e.g., early career, mid to late career), we hope to address the shortage of special educators by improving attrition rates of early career special educators while concurrently encouraging and promoting leadership roles for in-service special educators, filling the critical need of administrators with special education expertise.

KEYWORDS

alumni, attrition, mentorship, special education teacher

Various factors can impact early career special educators' retention and attrition, including their working conditions, relationships, and initial preparations (Bettini et al., 2020; Conley & You, 2017; Helms-Lorenz et al., 2016). One of the protective factors in teacher retention is mentorship. These mentorships can be formal or informal during special educators' first years of teaching and support the teachers in various aspects of their careers, such as navigating the paperwork (e.g., IEPs, assessments), instructional practices (e.g., behavioral and classroom management, curriculum), and collaborating with school personnel (e.g., classroom assistants, related service providers) (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hagaman & Casey, 2018). While the literature acknowledges the multifaceted and bi-directional benefits of mentorship, we aim to maximize the outcomes of mentor/mentee relationships by proposing a multi-level mentorship model in which universities work with local schools and their community to support and continuously evaluate intentionally curated mentorship dyads.

Types of Mentorship Support

Mentors can provide formal and/or informal mentorships (Sikma, 2019; Sutcher et al., 2019). Literature on mentorship for early career teachers has identified five types of support: 1) emotional support, 2) contextual support, 3) academic support, 4) social support, and 5) relational support (Sikma, 2019). Emotional support is most prioritized and sought by early career teachers. This type of support involves an identified trusted individual who the early career

teacher can “vent” to at the end of the day. This can include supporting early career teachers in their interpersonal or personal struggles (e.g., family, health, etc.). Contextual support includes more context- and institutional-specific information (e.g., paperwork, personnel who are or are not helpful) is beneficial to navigating their work environment more efficiently. Academic support includes curriculum or instruction-related supports. Social support includes informal social interactions such as meetings to check in on the mentee’s day or participation in non-school related activities. Lastly, relational support involves identifying individuals who would most likely relate to the mentee’s feelings and experiences, such as introduction to other early career teachers at other schools. Depending on the individual teacher, the support type and frequency can vary.

In many formal mentorships, veteran teachers are assigned to early career teachers to provide support (Carver & Feiman-Nemser, 2009). The assigned mentor is recommended to be in the same field and specialization as the mentee. Still, in practice, formal mentors provided by school districts may often not be trained or teach in the same specialization as the mentees (Irinaga-Bistolos et al., 2007; Satcher et al., 2019). Frequently, informal mentorships are sought out by mentees for unmet needs or to complement formal mentorship (Desimone et al., 2014; Feiman-Nemser, 2003; Pogodzinski et al., 2012). These informal mentorships are often professional connections with other teachers or involve participation within an external network of teachers (i.e., professional learning communities) that support the learning of the social processes to acclimate to a new institutional environment, such as learning the institutional

The proposed model capitalizes on the resources of the university and the relationships with school districts to support special educators in their first years of teaching. The model also supports mid- and late-career alumni teacher retention by providing new learning and leadership opportunities.

values, expected behaviors, and social knowledge necessary to function in their roles within the organization (e.g., Desimone et al., 2014). Both formal and informal mentorships are critical to early career teachers’ retention in the field as it powerfully impacts a teacher’s well-being (Kutsyuruba et al., 2019). Each type of mentorship is advantageous, and having both provides more individualized and comprehensive support for early career teachers. Furthermore, having these professional relationships can also positively affect early career teachers’ self-efficacy in teaching practices and overall sense of belonging (Andrews & Quinn, 2005; Gebbie et al., 2012; Waddell, 2007).

Mentors are more than “cheerleaders” and provide more support than basic tips and survival strategies (Stanulis et al., 2019). As aforementioned, mentors can formally and informally support early career teachers in various aspects of their professional lives. Effective mentors often support their mentees in a structured way and actively listen, problem-solve, and provide specific, targeted feedback in a safe, non-evaluative environment (Gist et al., 2021; Stanulis et al., 2019). Skills required of mentors are learned over time and require practice and guidance. Mentor teachers, particularly those assigned a more formal

mentorship role, are often experienced and can provide the institutional and specialization knowledge and expertise early career special educators need to be successful in the new teaching environment, but may need more specific training and professional development to mentor adult learners (Ellis et al., 2020; Gakonga, 2019; Parker et al., 2021). Universities and school district partners can collaborate in professional development to prepare mentor teachers, particularly those with a background in special education and research-based mentoring practices (e.g., Cornelius et al., 2020). These collaboration efforts not only can increase the number of qualified mentor teachers, but it is also an investment in the next generation of administration leaders with expertise in special education (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

Theoretical Framework **Social Constructivism**

The Theory of Social Constructivism (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978) posits that social interactions are the basis of knowledge sharing and acquisition; learning is an interactive and collaborative endeavor that is context-specific, and individuals are active players in their learning. In the case of a veteran teacher as a mentor to an early career special educator, the school site and expectations of a teacher within is the context; the veteran teacher,

FIGURE 1: Model Phases

through mentorship - a social exchange of ideas- imparts valuable knowledge about the school context to enable the new teacher access to a hidden curriculum at a particular school site (e.g., working with administration, families, and the community; hierarchical and lateral relationships).

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977) posits that learning occurs through modeling, observing, and imitating behavior. This suggests that one with more experience and knowledge in each situation is better positioned, via social learning theory, to mentor someone new to the situation. A mentor teacher is often in a position where their behaviors in the school setting are observed and imitated by

mentees. Further, for mentors who have shown workplace success (e.g., classroom management, collaboration with school personnel and related service providers), others often imitate their social and professional behaviors.

Together, social constructivism and social learning theories provide a strong foundation for the mentor/mentee relationship given that the intentional selection of dyads is valued, and training is provided to all participating members, including the mentors and relevant school personnel and leadership to promote and ensure collaboration among members at every level.

MULTI-LEVEL MENTORSHIP MODEL

Qualified mentor teachers are instrumental in the training and retention of early career teachers. Effective,

intentional mentorship requires the dedication of mentors' time, expertise, and willingness to support early career teachers (Ronfeldt et al., 2018). The time commitment and the emotion-intensive needs of early career teachers present a challenge in finding qualified and willing mentor teachers (Hoffman et al., 2015). One viable option in increasing qualified mentor teachers is to recruit, invest, and train program alumni whose teaching and experiential methods align with a shared mission, values, and beliefs of the university and districts in which they teach.

To support and retain early career special educators, a mentorship model that strengthens the capacity building of the programs' alumni network is proposed. Localized and targeted mentorship opportunities between program

alumni and recent graduates can create dyads with shared pre-service programmatic experiences. This can be the first step in finding common ground and forming meaningful personal/professional relationships. Further, strategic matching of dyads would yield other shared experiences, such as similar administrative and structural experience (e.g., school district, curriculum) and community and student demographics (e.g., Title I schools, inclusion). The shared experiences are valuable for a mentor/mentee relationship as it allows the mentor insight into the mentee's experience for targeted mentorship. Teacher attrition may be mitigated by cultivating the mentor/mentee relationship and creating the basis for strong professional and interpersonal relationships (Hasselquist & Graves, 2020; Waddell, 2010).

The proposed model capitalizes on the resources of the university and the relationships with school districts to support special educators in their first years of teaching. The model also supports mid- and late-career alumni teacher retention by providing new learning and leadership opportunities. To build the alumni network, the proposed model requires the commitment and dedication of community partners, including universities, local school districts, and program alumni mentor teachers. In the sections below, recommendations for implementation are provided.

Phase 1: Getting Started

Prior to the implementation of the model, community partners are identified. Determination includes an interest in the model, willingness to be part of the continuous evaluation of the model, and openness to ongoing shifts based on identified needs. Additionally, needs assessments are conducted with all participating members. The

needs assessment will be developed and tailored to specific groups (e.g., Sawatzky & Enns, 2009).

Identification of key members. A small group of interested, committed, and dedicated members of the proposed model will be identified at the initial stage of implementation. Members will include university members (e.g., administrators, faculty, staff), school administrators and personnel, alumni mentor teachers, and soon-to-be graduates of a pre-service program and early career mentees.

University members should be willing to be the point of contact in communicating and developing relationships with school districts, alumni mentor teachers, and early career teachers. School administrators and personnel members should also be a small, committed group who have self-selected to be part of this project. Alumni mentor teachers would be identified through recommendations from faculty, school districts, and other qualified mentor teachers in the field. Recommended mentor teachers would be provided with clear expectations of a mentor (e.g., topics that a mentor may advise, time requirements) before they commit themselves to the role of a mentor. Lastly, early career teachers would be identified through an alumni listserv of the university program.

Needs assessment. All groups would conduct an internal needs assessment to evaluate the strengths and needs of their programs and/or institutions (e.g., Sawatzky & Enns, 2009). For example, the university needs assessment would include evaluations of coursework and clinical practice that would directly impact early career teachers' preparation in their first years of teaching. It would also include identifying points in the program where mentorship was provided, by whom, and whether additional support may be necessary. Similarly,

school districts would conduct needs assessments to evaluate current practices and expectations of early career special educators at their sites to determine if additional training is needed for identified mentors.

Initiation of a community advisory board. A community advisory board comprised of the community partners involved in this mentorship model, including university members, school administrators, and alumni mentor teachers, would be initiated at this implementation stage.

Phase 2: Curating Relationships

Relationship building and communication are critical to the implementation of the model. At the initial stage of the model, a small, dedicated team is identified from all participating parties. Team membership is selected based on self-nominations and referrals. Final membership is determined by members' interest, availability, and shared understanding of program goals and needs. Subsequently, during Phase 2, relationships are cultivated (in the case of the mentee/mentor matching) and curated.

"Match" mentees and mentors. Mentor/mentee matching should be strategic and individualized. In practice, mentees are often paired with available mentors; however, considerations such as disposition, cultural background, and experiences (e.g., credential specialization, inclusion) are also important in matching mentees and mentors (Fisher-Ari et al., 2019; Sutcher et al., 2019).

Provide bi-directional and collaborative professional development. Leadership capacity building professional development opportunities should be provided to mentor teachers by qualified university faculty and school district leadership. Results from the needs assessments would be used

to inform the topics of the professional development offered. By approaching mentorship skills through the lens of the university and district partners, mentors will be better positioned to understand the needs of and work with early career special educator mentees. In addition to collaborative professional development sessions, university faculty can provide learning opportunities for district partners, including mentors, on continued learning pathways (e.g., master's degree in educational leadership) and program improvement research methods and scholarship (e.g., joint presentation in professional conferences). District partner personnel, including mentors, can provide professional development sessions for university constituents on topics such as school-based outcomes of current policy and curricular implementation, community-school partnerships, and the benefits and challenges of being a peer mentor. Individualized professional development opportunities will benefit all participating parties, whether it be continuous improvement of school-based practices, service to the community, or individual goal setting for professional growth.

Re(convene) the community advisory board. Advisory board members comprised of university faculty, school district leadership, and alumni mentors would continue to meet on a regular basis to build community and shared vision. District and university members would regularly share professional opportunities to capitalize and leverage on the unique experiences and expertise available from the different institutions (e.g., guest speakers, Career Day participation, joint attendance at community events).

Phase 3: Strengthening Relationships

Regular and open communication is

expected to establish the mentorship model. Phase 3 focuses on strengthening the relationships between the different community partners (school districts, alumni teachers, and mentees). Milestones and successes should be recognized and celebrated. Additionally, evaluation is conducted to determine the effectiveness of the model, including the effectiveness of different supports from each community partner (university, school district, alumni mentors) and overall communication among the participating parties.

Iterative assessments. Regular iterative assessments from community members would be conducted for continuous improvement. Data collection would include short-term participant feedback, including time logs of the mentor and mentee, topics of concern addressed, outcomes or actions taken as a result of the mentorship meetings, and a Likert scale rating of the effectiveness of meetings. Long-term data would include retention rates of early career participants, the pursuit of further educational opportunities for the mentors (e.g., admission to a master's program in Educational Leadership), and the number of mentee participants who become mentors. The assessments will also seek to identify the specific and changing needs of community members during each iterative phase.

Recognition of participating members. It is important to recognize and acknowledge the dedication and commitment of the participating members. For school districts, this would be acknowledging key personnel involved in the process, including advisory board membership and participation. For alumni mentor teachers, it would be recognizing their achievements as mentors (e.g., nominations for university-community awards), inviting them to share their mentoring experi-

ences, and to train the next generation of mentors. For mentees, it would be celebrating their successes, including typical school year accomplishments, such as submission of grades, progress reports, and transition IEPs. Attention should also be given to personal achievements such as sustained self-care habits (e.g., yoga) and major life events (e.g., having a child).

Create network opportunities.

Networking events, such as alumni mixers, could be co-hosted by universities and school districts to build professional networks. As the number of model participants grows, the university and districts/school personnel can join professional organizations (e.g., Council for Exceptional Children, Teacher Education Division) and attend/present jointly with local and national recognition of their collaborative efforts.

Engage in collaborative efforts.

Universities and school districts could co-envision, develop, and implement continuing education, leadership opportunities, and certification programs to advance university alumni in their professional development while strengthening the relationship between the participating members.

Utilize the advisory board. The advisory board members should be utilized effectively to make a high impact, internally and externally (i.e., on their respective campuses and the surrounding community). Their shared experiences and recommendations should be taken under advisement and, more importantly, implemented if possible.

University-School Partnerships: Capacity building and long-term benefits

The benefits of university-school partnerships are well documented in the literature (Burns et al., 2015;

Parsons et al., 2016). The proposed model aims to cultivate a culture of shared responsibility between the university and the local school partners to ultimately “grow your own” alumni network of qualified mentor teachers who are willing to mentor and support the next generation of special educators. More importantly, the model aims to address and counter factors that contribute to early career teacher attrition by having a network of alumni mentors who are willing and can effectively provide mentorship to early career special educators. Specifically, the alumni mentorship model addresses teacher attrition by focusing on three areas that have shown to be protective factors against teacher attrition and job dissatisfaction: 1) increased interpersonal relationships and sense of belonging, 2) greater access to resources, and 3) greater job satisfaction.

Increased Interpersonal Relationships and Sense of Belonging

Interpersonal relationships and sense of belonging are protectors against teacher attrition (Khaleel et al., 2016; Le Cornu, 2013; Shahidan et al., 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Zhang et al., 2019). Starting a job in a high stress environment, such as teaching, can be challenging and isolating without guidance or mentorship. The alumni network mentorship model allows early career teachers to access alumni mentors who can support them in various aspects of their new position. For example, mentors can provide contextual support, such as institutional-specific information, to help early career teachers more effectively navigate the new working environment (Sikma, 2019). They can also help early career teachers build meaningful interpersonal relationships with new colleagues

(i.e., other teachers, mentor teachers) who have similar goals and ultimately a collaborative community with shared values and goals that can be accessed for informational and material resources. The model presents multiple avenues for increasing a teacher’s sense of belonging by creating more individualized professional connections (i.e., mentorship, alumni network) within their school site, university, and larger professional community.

Greater Access to Resources

Teachers, particularly in low-resourced communities, have identified a lack of resources as a significant stressor that leads to job dissatisfaction (Okeke & Mtyuda, 2017; Van der Klink et al., 2017). Resources can include basic needs such as classroom furniture, supplies, and required curricular materials. The model aims to support early career teachers in the acquisition of resources through the mentor/mentee relationship. For example, the developed interpersonal and collaborative relationships among teachers in the alumni network at various levels (e.g., early career, mid-to late-career) can work together to share methods of procuring needed resources. In addition, the alumni of the program often teach within the proximal geographic region of the university, making the physical sharing of resources possible. The community sharing of resources not only addresses the issue of resource allocation and scarcity but also increases the feeling of connectedness to others within the profession and who support the profession.

Greater Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is also a protective factor against teacher attrition (Brunsting et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2019). Locke (1976) defines job satisfaction

as a positive emotional response stemming from a person’s experience with their work. This broad definition encompasses many aspects of a teacher’s work, from in and out of the classroom to personal and academic. For example, being current on the constant changes in state and federal mandates in education can be overwhelming for early career teachers and, concurrently, may become aggravatingly routine for veteran teachers. The proposed model and recommendations provide both new and veteran teachers an option to access an alumni network of support for their specific needs, which are addressed through continuous needs assessments built into the model.

For veteran teachers, mentorship opportunities can also disrupt the cycles of isolation and routine with the potential gain of increased job satisfaction and professional growth. Mentorship is one facet of teacher leadership that is formalized in which the veteran teacher supports the less experienced colleagues to improve their skills and support their success in the field (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Dozier, 2007). Stepping into this new leadership role and networking within the alumni collective may also open other leadership opportunities and increase job satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

The shortage of special educators is a crisis across the nation. The number of new special educators entering pre-service programs is insufficient to counter the high attrition rate in the profession (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). Universities and school districts have long-standing partnerships, but it is time to explore novel approaches using these existing relationships and resources to address the challenge in the field. The proposed model is a viable option to address teacher attrition in special

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education by focusing on a mentorship approach using a curated university alumni network to retain special educators in the field. It highlights the significant role that localized and targeted mentorship can have for early career and veteran special educators. Specifically, the alumni-based mentorship model supports early career teachers as they become independent teachers and encourages veteran teachers to consider leadership positions leveraging their special education expertise. The model calls for university and school district partners to re-engage with program alumni to support and cultivate the next generation of special educators while, at the same time, elevating qualified veteran teachers to more leadership positions within the profession in an effort to combat the chronic special education teacher attrition.

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