Teacher's Perceptions of the First-Year Experience and Mentoring*

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Abstract

This study sought to investigate the perceptions of teachers' first-year teaching experiences with a focus on mentoring. Findings of the study provide insight into best practices associated with the development and support of new teachers. The data were collected through the use of a survey consisting of Likert scale and open-ended response items related to mentoring processes and perceptions of the first-year teaching experience. Elementary-level teachers had a more positive perception of their overall experience than middle and high school teachers. First-year teachers voiced concerns about the availability of their mentors both before and during the school year. There was a positive relationship between feelings of empowerment and job satisfaction. Additionally, 63% of the respondents indicated they had already determined they did not see themselves teaching in 10 years.

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1 Sumario en espanol

Este estudio procuró investigar las percepciones de experiencias docentes de primer año de maestros con un se centra en mentorizar. Las conclusiones del estudio proporcionan penetración en mejores prácticas asociadas con el desarrollo y el apoyo de nuevos maestros. Los datos fueron reunidos por el uso de una inspección que consiste en escala de Likert y artículos abiertos de respuesta relacionaron a mentorizar procesos y percepciones de la experiencia docente de primer año. Los maestros del elemental-nivel tuvieron una percepción más positiva de su experiencia general que maestros de centro y colegio secundario. Los maestros de primer año expresaron preocupaciones acerca de la disponibilidad de sus mentores antes de y durante el año escolar. Había una relación positiva entre sentimientos de autorización y satisfacción laboral. Adicionalmente, 63% de los demandados indicó ellos ya habían determinado ellos no vieron a sí mismo enseñar en 10 años.

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2 Teacher's Perceptions of the First-Year Experience and Mentoring

So often we cast new teachers into the proverbial lion's den of the classroom without considering their readiness. Armed with diplomas and passing certification test scores, new teachers may feel invincible as they set up their classrooms for the first time, open new school supplies, and arrange their desks in just the right pattern. Excitement and suspense fill those first few days before the academic term begins. However, when that moment arrives, first-year teachers who have mastered educational and pedagogical theory are overwhelmed by the realization of the magnitude of their responsibility.

If the perception of one person is reality, the frustrations and tribulations of the first-year experience can be unbearable to experience in isolation (Descartes, 1641). The nature of teaching is very different than most professions for the work is usually done in isolation from other professionals (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004). This mixed methods study examined the perceptions of first-year teachers in regard to the mentoring process in relation to the potential impact on teacher attrition levels (Amos, 2005; Stanulis, Fallona, & Pearson, 2002). Additionally, this study sought to provide insights to aid system-sponsored professional development for the first-year teacher (Conway, 2006).

3 Discussion of Related Literature

The first years of teaching are a testing ground for teachers who were previously working as scribes in the classrooms of others, and for the first time are charged with the same responsibilities as teachers who have been in the field for many years (Raine, 2005). It is intimidating, scary, and when unsupported, can be the time when a new teacher changes his or her mind about a long term teaching career (Feiman-Nemser, 2003). Since first-year teachers have never had full responsibility for a classroom, the concept that there may be little to no learning curve could potentially be a problem for first-year teachers. Addressing these and other issues within the first-year could provide needed support and higher levels of job satisfaction for first-year teachers. Many first- year teachers struggle with the mechanics of instructional planning, physical arrangement of the classroom, and curricular expectations (Viadero, 2003). In addition, McCann and Johannessen (2004)

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identified anxiety inducing factors such as professional relationships, work load, time management, content knowledge, evaluation, and control that have potential impact on teacher attrition.

Teacher attrition has become an increasingly threatening problem to the attainment of a high quality public education system in America (Sargent, 2003). According to Ingersoll and Kralik (2004), the epidemic has reached as high as a 40-50% attrition rate within the first five years of their career. The authors attributed this to high stress levels and lack of support in the working environment. Additionally, Ingersol and Kralik found a relationship between above-average performance on the *Scholastic Aptitude Test* and those teachers who leave the profession within the first five years. In their critical review, Ingersoll and Kralik found the staffing problems of schools were not due to a lack of graduates from accredited teacher preparation institutions, but was a result of the rate of new teachers who are leaving the field of education prior to retirement age. Theoretically, mentoring and induction processes are designed to assist teachers who are either new hires to an institution or transitioning to the profession in adjusting to their roles as instructional providers (Rippon & Martin, 2003).

The mentoring process, combined with an effective induction process, can provide a minimum of a year -long period of nurturing and support for those who need it most. In some cases, mentoring extends in a lesser form beyond the first year (Smith, 2005). Ideally, the mentor would be a trained, competent, veteran teacher who coaches the mentee and provides emotional and curricular support (Kajs, 2002). Thus, the importance of a trained and competent mentor is integral to the success of the mentoring process. The simple conveyance of teaching methods and practices, from mentor to mentee, may not be appropriate especially if the mentor's practices are not sound (Hansford, Tennent, & Ehrich, 2002). Therefore, the selection of the appropriate mentor for each new teacher is of the utmost importance. Teachers who are mentored by trained and competent teachers demonstrate higher levels of teaching skills when compared to their contemporaries who have not had the benefit of a trained mentor (Holloway, 2001). This period of adjustment is often anxiety laden for the new hire and the assistance of an effective mentor could be the difference between the mentee remaining in the profession or leaving it in search of an alternate career (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004).

Effective mentoring programs can have a tremendous impact on the performance levels of new employees (Rowley, 1999). Competent mentors offer support through which the mentee is able to experience success, job satisfaction, professional and personal growth, and organizational productivity and success (Kajs, 2002). According to Descartes'(1641) philosophy, these positive interactions create positive experiences from which to draw when creating our realities based on our perceptions of events.

Many new teachers experience feelings of isolation from other professionals. Socialization and acclimatization to the new environment must be encouraged by the induction and mentoring processes (Schrodt, Cawyer, & Sanders, 2003). To promote professional growth, mentees must be given opportunities to socialize with their contemporaries. This allows the mentees to create networks from which to pull when faced with a situation (Blair-Larsen & Bercik, 1993). In the proper setting, mentees are exposed to a wide variety of people and given the freedom to forge collegial bonds often denied if not for the activities within the induction and mentoring process (Holloway, 2001).

The mentor also benefits from participating in a mentoring process (Young, Alvermann, Kaste, Henderson, & Many, 2004). New Brunswick, Canada instituted a mentoring program which was created by the National Department of Education and measured perceptions of participants. According to Holloway (2001), 96% of mentees and 98% of mentors believed they experienced professional and personal growth in the time they participated in the structured trainings and mentoring activities. As an added benefit, mentor teachers also reported they experienced rejuvenation through the mentees' innovative creativity and enthusiasm.

Finally, mentoring as part of an effective induction program benefits the professional culture of the individual school and school system as a whole. This is evidenced by higher job satisfaction, positive outlooks, lower attrition rates associated with a lack of support, and an overall increase in the quality of the working environment for all organizational members (Schrodt et al., 2003). The mentoring and induction processes are opportunities to infuse the new members with the values, beliefs, and behaviors that are appropriate for a specific organization (Norman & Ganser, 2004). In order to promote a cohesive and operational culture that can be focused on reaching its goals, the organization must encourage the new hires to "buy in" to the existing structure (Stone, 2004). Without the ownership of veteran and novice employees, the organization

cannot continue to cohesively or successfully reach its goals (Fullan, 2000).

Though the majority of research suggests that mentoring relationships are beneficial for both mentor and mentee, some research suggests that in certain relationships the mentor or mentee can develop negative attitudes or behaviors (Blasé & Blasé, 1994; D'Amato & Quinn, 2005; Lopez-Real & Kwan, 2005; Norman & Ganser, 2004). When mentoring and induction activities are conducted by trained, caring mentors (Rippon & Martin, 2003), who exhibit the attitudes and dispositions of the environment the mentee is entering, the mentoring processes are beneficial for all involved (Norman & Ganser). First-year teachers need access to a competent mentor who provides them with basic information about instructional methods, procedural issues, and classroom management practices reflective of the culture of the school community (Futrell, 2001).

Administrative support is critical to the success of new teachers (Raine, 2005). First-year teachers who are supported in their efforts and provided with competent, caring mentors will become loyal to that environment, eliminating the need to replace that teacher within one to two years (Wood, 2005). The administrative team fosters the tone for the culture of the school. Therefore, if an administrative team inspires collaboration and collegiality, their faculty will be more responsive to the needs of first-year teachers on all levels (Brock & Grady, 1998). Beyond the concept of individual mentoring relationships is a collective mentoring of all first-year teachers by promoting the collaborative culture and collective "buy-in" that creates a community of educators.

4 Purpose

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to examine novice teachers' perceptions of mentoring and the first-year experience. These perceptions were used in conjunction with previously published literature to create a model of effective practices that can impact the attrition rate of novice teachers. The findings of this study expand the existing body of literature on teacher mentoring, and provide a basis for recommendations that contribute to successful and effective mentoring programs. Specific to this study, the most prominent questions for research included:

1. How does participation in a mentorship program impact teachers' perceptions of the first-year experience?
2. How do demographic characteristics impact teachers' perceptions of the first-year experience?

5 Methodology

A survey research design was employed in this study. The population consisted of all first-year teachers in the Southwest Georgia Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) district consisting of both rural and semi-urban settings. Data were collected through the use of a researcher designed survey following a review of literature.

5.1 Participants

The Southwest Georgia RESA district serves 16 school districts comprised of 91 schools. One district opted not to participate in the study, and one district did not employ any first-year teachers. In the participating 14 districts, there were a total of 229 first-year teachers representing 85 schools from all grade levels. Surveys were returned from 52 of the 85 target schools, yielding a 50.7% participation rate from schools in the RESA district. Individual responses totaled 113 and yielded a 49.3% participation rate by teachers who were asked to participate in the study.

The respondents reflect a variety of educational settings and teaching assignments, and are representative of all grade levels. Almost half, 43% of respondents reported that they had transitioned to teaching as a second career. The majority of the respondents (84%) held a bachelor's degree, 14% held a master's degree when they entered the field, and 2% held a specialist degree. The majority of first-year teachers, 58%,

taught in grades pre-kindergarten through fifth. Middle grades teachers comprised 23% of the total of all respondents, and secondary educators, the smallest group, accounted for 19% of the total respondents.

First-year teachers who were 18 – 29 years of age were the most represented group at 62%. Of the remaining first-year teachers, 26% were in their 30's, 9% were in their 40's and 3% were age 50 or older. Sixty-five percent of first-year teachers had at least one other family member in the field of education. The majority of first-year teachers were female, comprising 86% of the total respondents, 12% were male, and 4% of the respondents did not indicate a gender. Race was an interesting element of the analysis. First-year teachers who responded were overwhelmingly Caucasian, comprising 72% of all respondents, 24% were African American, 1% Hispanic, and 3% of the respondents did not elect to identify their race.

5.2 Instrumentation

The survey was developed following a review of the literature. The survey consisted of a total of 36 items. Seventeen items consisted of questions about the induction process measured on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Another 11 items consisted of questions about the first-year teachers relationships with her or his mentor and teaching aspirations measured on two-point scale ranging from 0 (*yes*) and 1 (*no*). Finally, another eight items consisted of open-ended questions about mentoring, induction, and general perceptions of the first-year teaching experience.

The validity of the instrument was established through an expert panel review. The expert panel reviewed the survey for clarity of directions, adequacy of items to meet the intended purpose, item clarity, and grammatical correctness. In addition, panel members were asked to identify items that might be added or deleted to improve the instrument. Reliability was established using Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient. Cronbach's alpha was .81 for the 17-item set and Cronbach's alpha was .79 for the 11-item set.

5.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a number of procedures. The analysis of the quantitative data primarily used descriptive statistics and Spearman rho correlations. The qualitative data analysis consisted of examining the data for commonalities, best practices, and emergent themes. In addition, frequency of responses within themes was generated.

5.4 Limitations

This particular study may only be generalized to the larger population of the sample or other similar areas (Cresswell, 2002). The majority of school districts in the region sampled are economically depressed. This creates a unique environment for teachers because they have to meet not only the academic needs of their students but also cope with the realities of poverty. The rural nature of the area greatly impacts the perceptions and needs of students. Their needs will be dramatically different from those of their contemporaries who live in urban centers (Conway, 2006). Economic differences within the area of the state of Georgia are significantly different. This could result in a difference in teacher salary and teacher opportunity for support and enrichment.

Nonparticipants in the study could have potentially impacted the results of the study had they elected to participate. Nonparticipant bias is a distinct possibility because 50.7% of the target population did not participate in the study. Nonparticipants could have had no mentor or had a positive relationship with their mentor, resulting in a difference in the findings of the study.

6 Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study supported those of Hargrove, Walker, Huber, Corrigan, and Moore (2004) by concurring that a lack of support for new teachers will leave students with a succession of temporary teachers who never develop the skills or mindsets of master teachers. Based on the analysis of findings of this study, as well as a review of related literature, a number of recommendations for practice have been developed.

Of the first-year teachers who participated in this study, 32 reported that they did not get to spend much time with their mentors and did not meet their mentors until late in the induction process, denying them time to engage in relationship building. As a consequence mentors were unable to answer their mentees' myriad of questions prior to the first day of class, possibly leaving the mentees feeling overwhelmed and unprepared. Maloney (1999) found the lines of communication must be open for the mentoring relationship to be successful. However, when the mentor and mentee do not have time to address issues prior to the first day of class, the mentee's feelings of stress and perceptions of a lack of support could be high. Not having sufficient time to meet prior to the first day of class defeats the purpose of pairing the mentor and mentee during the induction process.

Within the participants from this study, elementary teachers had a more positive perception of the first-year experience than did middle or high school teachers. This could be because the teacher was provided with an environment where professionals are teaching in less specialized fields. This environment may provide more opportunities for common practices and collaboration between professionals. The more specialized nature of teaching within a single discipline at middle and high school levels sometimes result in teachers who feel more isolated simply because there are fewer faculty who also teach in that same discipline. No other demographic characteristics significantly impacted the perceptions of first-year teachers in this study.

The following discussion of findings has been organized around two major themes "the mentoring process" and "mentor accountability and training." These themes provide insight into the implications of the research for the implementation of mentoring programs in our schools.

6.1 Mentoring Process

The effective mentor must be able to identify deficiencies of the mentee and provide support to remedy any deficiency. The effective mentor must provide constant feedback during the process to ensure that the mentee understands and accepts the new methods (Norman & Ganser, 2004). A mentor can enjoy this type of relationship with a mentee only if the school culture is accepting of peer observation and encourages dialogue and feedback from peers (Rowley, 1999). Rowley likens the peer observation process to assisting athletes as they improve their performance without first identifying what should be corrected. New teachers must be encouraged to allow peers into their classroom enabling them to receive objective and constructive feedback on their performance (Rowley).

About 34% of the first-year teachers who participated in this study did not have the opportunity to observe their mentors or other professionals in an instructional setting. These first-year teachers were observed by administrators, mentors, and academic support specialists and given feedback. However, they were never allowed the opportunity to witness effective teaching strategies in action by competent instructors.

New and transitioning faculty should have the opportunity to observe their peers who embody and enact the positive characteristics which the new faculty member is encouraged to cultivate. Those being mentored should not only have ample opportunity to observe experienced teachers but also be given the time to process and synthesize the activities they witness. This synthesis should then be discussed between mentor and mentee in an open environment with no intrusions (Cookson, 2005). When asked what would you do differently if you were assigned a mentor, 31% of first-year teachers commented that they were not able to spend enough time with the mentor in planning or preparation activities before the first day of classes and open house. Additionally, 65 % felt that they needed more time for collaboration both prior to the start of classes and during the school year. This could lead to a perception of being overwhelmed.

The study found that there was a relationship between the first-year teachers' perception of job satisfaction and stress level ($r(83) = -.427$, $p < .05$). A lack of support and guidance by school personnel in the first days of teaching can lead to high stress levels. This finding lends one to make the assumption that if the lack of support continues the teacher is going to experience a lower job satisfaction level, an important fact taking into consideration that the study was conducted only four months into the respondents' first year as a teacher. Sixty-three percent of the respondents stated they could not see themselves teaching in ten years. A staggering 43% of respondents believed they had made the wrong career choice after only four months of classroom experience.

Of the mentees in this study, 60 reported that they would like to have a common planning time or access to their mentor during the school day. Mentee-mentor advisement and interaction was critical to mentee perception of support and success. This was echoed in 32 individual responses in this study. Only 67% of the mentees reported spending time with their mentors in an advisory capacity, though 80% of respondents reported that they had mentors. Interestingly, 28% of those mentees who reported that they spent time with their mentors in an advisory capacity still felt that they could not handle the required paperwork.

Eighty-nine of the participants responded to the survey item that asked the participants to indicate how much time per week they spent with their mentors. Of the 89 respondents to this item, 32% indicated that they spent no time with their mentor and 44% spent one half hour or less with their mentor per week. Nineteen percent of the respondents reported they spent an average of one hour with their mentors per week, and 18% of the mentees reported they spent three or more hours with their mentors per week. The amount of time the mentee spends with their mentor is critical to their future development. When the appropriate beliefs are identified early in the process, the mentee is more able to develop the appropriate attitudes and dispositions to be successful within the existing culture. Therefore, core values and expectations should be clearly communicated during the induction process and reinforced throughout the first-year and beyond by the mentor (McGee, 2001).

Sixty-five percent of the participants in this study indicated they would have benefited from a mentoring program that maximized the amount of time spent collaborating with mentors and colleagues. Because of the individual strengths and weaknesses of each mentor and mentee, the mentor and mentee must be allowed to establish their own parameters for the relationship (Stone, 2004). Mentors and mentees are unique individuals who have differing abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. Therefore, a preexisting program may not meet the needs of the mentee. When mentees and mentors are able to determine the best activities to maximize their strengths and compensate for and remediate their weaknesses, the mentoring relationship will be infinitely more successful. Supporting this concept are Gilles and Wilson (2004) who found that this success dramatically impacted the experience of the first-year teacher by allowing first-year teachers to have a positive perception of their school, personal abilities, and profession. Therefore, the process encouraged them to have a long-term investment in their teaching. Administrators and colleagues are a deciding factor in whether a new teacher will eventually leave the field. Furthermore, the teachers' perceptions about administrative and faculty support may play a large role in their overall satisfaction.

Mentees continually expressed the desire to work in an environment where their mentor consistently checked on their progress. When asked "what would you do differently should you be assigned a mentor?" 27% of respondents reported that they would prefer a mentor who was continuously present and 31 % indicated that they would like to have a guaranteed time set aside each week for mentoring activities. Employees who are supported and have high levels of job satisfaction are more likely to stay in the profession in future years.

Colleges and universities prepare their students pedagogically, but may not provide them with all the tools they need to survive as an effective teacher in a specific environment. Educators are accustomed to the concept of scaffolding student learning in order to build a foundation of knowledge. We must now begin to scaffold learning for our new and transitioning faculty (Norman & Ganser, 2004). One participant indicated that he would like high levels of support at the beginning of the school year, but felt as he became more competent, the mentor could adopt more of an advising role. A feeling of empowerment should be cultivated in the mentee. According to first-year teachers in this study, they perceived empowerment when their mentors demonstrated interest in their success and adjustment ($r(83) = .728$, $p < .05$).

The process of preparing new and transitioning faculty must be supported by a mentor who spends time with the mentee in a beneficial way and by a system that aids the administration in holding the mentor accountable for the assistance or lack of assistance given (Cookson, 2005). Mentorship should be accompanied by an effective induction process where expectations are clearly communicated to new and transfer faculty. Cookson (2005) and Pololi and Knight (2005) found that new faculty should also have a support system that provides a safety net including resources from which to acquire lessons, ideas, and answers to their questions. As new teachers strive to educate the whole child in their classrooms, so must administration and veteran teachers strive to train the whole teacher so that he or she is efficient, excited about the subject matter, and able to recognize student needs.

6.2 Mentor Accountability and Training

No mentee reported that his mentor had an accountability system that extended beyond his own logs of mentoring activity to ensure a quality mentoring experience for the mentee. Mentors should be held accountable for their activity level after they have been thoroughly trained. These findings are corroborated by McMillan & Parker (2005), who stated that mentors must be trained in order to properly foster appropriate attitudes and dispositions of the mentee. Such training should include:

- the types of activities that constitute effective and appropriate interactions
- communication skills that are consistent with the culture
- listening skills that encourage the mentor to actively understand and interact with the mentee and guide the professional development of the mentee
- the need to encourage positive interactions between mentor and mentee
- training in constructive feedback skills and observation and evaluation techniques
- scaffolding activities that gradually lessen over time as the mentee becomes more secure in their professional identity
- developing attitudes and dispositions conveyed by modeling (Collins, 1994; Orland-Barak, 2001; Stone, 2004; White & Mason, 2001).

In order for mentors to provide the most appropriate and culturally relevant support system for their mentees, they must be trained. Mentors cannot be expected to provide consistently beneficial environments for mentees without formal training that specifies the types of interactions expected, the amount of time that the mentor and mentee must spend in meaningful activities, and the attitudes and dispositions that are expected.

7 Recommendations for Future Research

A study could be conducted using only a qualitative approach. The purpose of exclusively relying on qualitative methods would be to examine individual sites or teachers with a much more in-depth focus. Case studies could be constructed to detail experiences and perceptions in a specific environment, then compared and contrasted with case studies from other individual teachers or sites using a cross-case analysis methodology. Though the scope would be rather narrow, the results would be much more detailed yielding potentially rich insights into the perceptions of first-year teachers and the implications of those perceptions.

A second iteration of the investigation could be to conduct a similar study expanding the scope of the study and utilizing only a quantitative approach. The sample could be greatly increased to include participants from other geographic and economic regions of the state. The study could even be expanded to a regional or national scope providing data that may be generalized to the larger population.

An examination of the roles of school leaders and their impact on the experiences of first-year teachers would be beneficial to understanding the most effective strategies to train and retain new teachers. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) and Brock and Grady (1998) have investigated the characteristics and dispositions of leaders and their impact on faculty. Therefore, a study examining leader perceptions of the effectiveness of mentoring and induction processes could be interesting. These data could also be compared to the perceptions of the first year teachers experiencing those processes.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a study could be undertaken to examine how mentoring and induction programs are related to student achievement. According to Blasé and Blasé (1994), administrative dispositions, attitudes, and actions impact teacher dispositions, attitudes, and actions, which in turn impact the environment of the classroom and student achievement. Downs-Lombardi (1996) suggested that previous research has established a significant relationship between teacher self esteem and student learning. An investigation of student achievement in relation to mentoring and induction processes could potentially impact the development of first-year teachers.

8 Conclusion

The consequences of neglecting to meet the needs of first-year teachers are dire. As discussed earlier, 63% of the first-year teachers in this study could not see themselves teaching in 10 years, and 43% felt they had made the wrong career choice. This is further punctuated by the fact that data were collected in early December, only four months into their first-year experience. Should the mentoring and induction programs in many districts not be redesigned to include training for mentors and clearly defined expectations for first-year teachers, the throngs of novice teachers fleeing the field will not slow, but increase (Hargrove et al., 2004). This will leave our students with teachers who never developed into master teachers and lack the dedication and devotion of veteran teachers. This results in a disturbing picture of education in the future. Not only will the state continually lose highly-qualified, motivated teachers with great potential, students will receive an increasingly diminished education. Teachers spend years developing their craft and honing their skills, but this process is negated when teachers leave the profession.

The potential impact of a positive and supporting mentor on first-year teacher perceptions of success and support has been evidenced by this study. Thus leading to the assumption that if teachers are not being provided with support and collaboration, they may not remain in the profession long-term. New teachers must be eased into the current structure of the working environment and given the expectations of the administration regarding the attitudes and dispositions employees need to survive within the environment (France & Jarvis, 1996).

Mentoring programs provide first-year teachers with support, opportunities for collaboration, and socialization with colleagues. This support system, forged in the early days of employment, forms a safety net which first-year teachers need when creating their classroom environments. Early bonds with colleagues and support from qualified and trained mentors invested in their success, could improve not only the perceptions of the mentee but also his or her teaching abilities. Thus, an environment that facilitates improved student achievement may be cultivated in each school.

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