Supporting our Novice Teachers through Mentor Programs

Paula Huffman

The first years of teaching can be both an exhilarating and stressful time for teachers. Brand new teachers who have recently completed coursework are moving forward into a position of primary responsibility for students where they will need to balance a myriad of challenges that include curriculum planning, classroom management along with local administrative procedures. School administrators are focused on hiring exemplary candidates and most would agree that the single most important resource for an effective school is an effective teacher. Stronge (2007) asserted that the number of well qualified teachers in a state is a consistent predictor of student achievement on standardized tests. Yet many teachers do not stay past the first few years of teaching, even though they have spent thousands of dollars in college tuition to prepare them for this career. According to a report from the National Center for Educational Statistics, of the 3,377,900 public school teachers during the 2011-12 school year, 8% transferred to another school and another 8% left the profession altogether (Goldring, 2013).

Why Do Our New Teachers Leave?

The first years are a stressful time for novice teachers with having to create lesson plans from scratch, learn all about a new school environment, meet parental expectations and manage classroom discipline. Henteges asserted that (2012) "stress, salary, working conditions and school leadership" (p. 101) are potential reasons for teachers leaving the field. On top of the job requirements, the salary for beginning teachers is low, working conditions may or may not be adequate depending on the state and/or school district and school leaderships vary in philosophical approaches to management. Allen (2013) claimed that our beginning teachers enter the field where each field is different. Working conditions and school culture are unique to each context and this proves to be a vulnerable area for those entering the profession.

A school culture can alternate between being inclusive of novice teachers or potentially hostile. The culture of the school community plays a crucial role in the establishing the beliefs, values and practices of new teachers. Feinman-Nemser (2003) wrote that "whether the early years of teaching are a time of constructive learning or a period of coping, adjustment and survival depends largely on the working conditions and culture of teaching that new teachers encounter" (p. 27). Administrators can either set new teachers up for success with class placements that allows for new teachers to experience a gradual challenge or capitulate to the entrenched belief that all new teachers need to pay their dues.

How Do We Help Our New Teachers Stay?

The question then becomes, how do we best help our new teachers to stay with us? Potential solutions to the concern about beginning teacher attrition rates include the creation of a professional image of teaching as a career, additional professional development, teacher preparation programs and induction programs (Henteges, 2012). In terms of teacher attrition, school districts often tend to blame teacher preparation programs instead of turning the mirror on themselves. One common frustration is the time variance regarding pre-service teachers having hands on work with students. Unfortunately, teacher preparation programs can plant the seeds of attrition early as pre-service teachers enter the "experience with little or no training and without sufficient background knowledge to effectively evaluate and process what they are observing" (Pearman & Davis, 2012, p. 10).

Teacher Mentors

A potential solution that many districts are implementing to improve teacher retention is that of assigning a mentor to each new teacher. Mentors can be informal in that they are helpful in acclimating new teachers to the building, copiers and other daily needs or they can be formal and

"charged with a more specific task- specifically to help novice teachers improve their craft" (Pogodzinski, 2012, p. 18). Bennets (2002) wrote how the mentor and protégé relationship engages both emotions and intellect providing the impetus necessary to "support cherished dreams and promote new ideas" (p. 168). Haines (2014) listed many potential positive outcomes from using mentors including "increased productivity, organizational stability, socialization, communication, retention of employees, support of cultural diversity and improved succession planning" (p.3). Overall, strong new teacher mentor programs that contain an effective training component and framework have been found to bring many positive outcomes to schools including the retention of new teachers, the development of trust in relationships, increased collaboration, leadership benefits for mentors and a positive school climate for all.

The Impact of Training and Tools

Unfortunately, being an expert within one's own classroom does not automatically guarantee that one will be able to positively impact others as they pursue professional growth (Riggs, 2000). Innovative teachers do not automatically transition into role models for the newest in the profession. Training provides a key element in the success of a mentor program. Riggs found that mentors trained using a specialized program were more likely to have a higher self-efficacy in their ability to serve as effective mentors. This self-efficacy was especially prominent in regard to their belief in the ability to unpack assessment tools in their work with new teachers (Riggs, 2000). Increased teacher efficacy has also been an outcome of mentor training. A recent study regarding mentor teacher training in Oregon, Menegat (2010) identified a positive relationship between the skills and content provided during mentor training and the resulting sense of program value and teacher efficacy for novice teachers. In this case it seems the success of the mentor training translated into a positive impact for novice teachers as "protégés attributed increased success to their participation in a mentoring program" (Menegat, 2010, p. 194).

In planning a mentor program, training is described as a crucial element (Feiman-Memser, 2003). One early example of a mentor training program was described at the Wheelock College Conference on Mentor Teacher Training (Kamii &Harris-Sharples, 1988). Initial topics listed the following priorities for mentor teacher training: "the knowledge base of teaching, communication skills, supervision and observation skills, adult learning and adult development and school cultures" (Kamii & Harris-Sharples, 1988). Focus in these areas would likely be a part of any mentor program created today.

"Teaching in Loudoun County" is an established mentor program in Loudoun County Public Schools in Virginia. As a large system, the school district trains all lead and school based mentors who then utilize monthly agendas to prompt discussions between the school based mentors and protégés (Teaching in Loudoun County, 2014). Monthly reports regarding the use of the monthly mentoring agendas are then delivered to the Lead Mentor who reports back to school administration regarding fidelity of use (Teaching in Loudoun County, 2014). School administrators are expected to meet frequently with Lead Mentors to implement the program effectively. Using recording logs of activities to track discussions between mentors and new teachers is also a recommended strategy (Potts, 2007).

In Clark County, the sixth largest district in the U.S., there is a specialized class for aspiring Career and Technical Education teacher mentors entitled Mentoring Aspiring Technical Educators. The official course covers the skills and knowledge base necessary to be a successful mentor, roles and responsibilities of mentoring and even allows for a structure to create a mentor/mentee action plan. There is also a list of suggested monthly activities and topics of discussion available as a resource (Brown, 2003).

Personal Attributes of Mentors

One of the key attributes of a successful mentor is the ability to identify and empathize with the new teacher. Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran (2010) stated that "empathy, like trust, is

both a lubricant for change and a glue that binds people together" (p. 87). Emotional intelligence is crucial in driving the development of a positive relationship between the mentor and the protégé. An issue for both the mentor and protégé is the realization that each must exhibit the positive social intelligence characteristics in order to facilitate a positive relationship (Litszky, Sosik, Bechtold, Godshalk &Chun, 2010). The lack of social intelligence in one member of the pairing can impact the relational development. Research points to the level of social intelligence in the mentor having an impact on the level of trust exhibited by the protégé. If a mentor has low social intelligence, the protégé can still develop trust but only if the protégé already has a high level of social intelligence (Litszky, et. al, 2010).

School Climate

School climate also has an impact on whether or not mentor and protégé relationships are positive. In order to have an effective new teacher induction program, schools must also have a healthy climate of collaboration (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010). Healthy school climates foster a supportive environment where new teachers feel both comradery and the support of more experienced teachers. Outside of the mentor and protégé partnership, new teachers will experience the challenges of collaborating with others in the service of their students. This collaboration could include work with a speech-language pathologist, gifted teacher, a special education teacher, teacher of English language learners along with close work with those in the same grade level or department. Collaboration experienced by new teachers creates an affiliation with the school that promotes positive school climate, especially when it is a culture of professional learning focused on student outcomes (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010).

The level of perceived servant leadership within a building and the rate of teacher retention rates were found to have a strong correlation. Principals who know their staff members as individuals, understanding both their strengths and weaknesses along with their preferred methods of communication in addition to other qualities are described as servant leaders (Shaw & Newton, 2014). A feeling of being valued is at the heart of an effective school culture. As Shaw and Newton (2014) asserted, "if the most precious product developed in education is the student, then our most prized commodity should be the classroom teacher" (p.101). This may provide current district level school administrators the opportunity to revisit the qualities in a new local school administrator when making a hiring decision in order to find a candidate who sees the instructional leadership role not as one of enforcer but as one of supporter and developer (Shaw & Newton, 2014). With such a strong correlation between principal servant leadership and retention, it is worth noting that the principal surely plays a strong role in establishing a school culture conducive to retaining new teachers. Principals should be encouraged to be aware and understand their level of influence with new teachers and work to build a strong positive relationship (Hughes, 2012).

Relationships between the mentors and novice teachers are crucial to overall success and the creation of self-efficacy in new teachers. Just as our teachers consistently provide young children with encouragement and the ability to believe in themselves, this belief can also be passed on to novice teachers (Bowden, 2004). Menegat (2010) found that the "existence of a positive relationship outweighed specific topics or activities" (p. 194). If novice teachers experienced a comfort level and trust that was appropriate, the interactions were then described as valuable. If the relationship was strained due to personal style differences, the novice teachers rated their mentor/novice teacher relationship as "less productive" (Menegat, 2010, p. 193).

Leadership Development for Mentors

One of the often overlooked reasons for using teacher mentors is the benefits for veteran educators. Hanson (2010) wrote about the experiences of 21 full-release mentors who were employed by the New Teacher Center and mentored new teachers in both Durham and Boston. The mentors had the opportunity to visit a wide variety of schools and many described this experience as

helping them to understand the many factors that influence school culture, styles of teachers, the importance of collaborative structures and different administrative styles. Mentors came away from the experience with what they described as an increased global perspective (Hanson, 2010). Additionally, many mentors described the experience as developing "professional renewal, enhanced self-esteem, more reflective and leadership skills" (p. 76).

All mentors were required to participate in weekly three hour mentor forum meetings in which new strategies were shared by other mentors (Hanson, 2010). Mentors participated in what was described as a collaborative community where there was an opportunity to problem solve, share evidence, model difficult mentor/protégé conversations and analyze the data obtained in new teacher practice (Hanson, 2010). Most mentors involved were highly positive about this experience. By focusing on the quality of the program of mentor development, this work will in turn impact the work of new teachers and through such pathways "schools can encourage great teachers to use their potential to improve teaching and learning" (Hanson, 2010, p. 80).

Considerations

In light of the importance of teacher mentoring relationships, it is interesting to examine how mentor teachers and novice teacher pairs are selected. In many schools, it is simply who is willing to be available and serve in this role. If mentor teachers and novice teacher pairs do not establish a positive relationship from the outset, it may turn out to be a more frustrating than supportive time for both educators. One possibility may be to consider a more formal method of placement through a personality typing system such as Myers-Briggs testing or even simply a compatibility indicator. Another possibility may be to spend time speaking informally with the novice teacher so that the administrator can glean information about what styles of relational support may work best for the novice teacher and take this information into account when assigning mentors.

New teachers may need extensive emotional support as they navigate the first year. Although the use of the structured agendas provides a clear focus for the mentor teacher and novice teacher, the agenda should not ever take the place of true heartfelt discussion. Mentors must be sensitive to the need to cover the material and how this corresponds with the need to be sensitive to issues that arise unexpectedly.

Continuing new teacher mentoring programs past the first year is a consideration in some districts. Conway (2006) asserted that many novice teachers would benefit from support well past the first year and continuation of a mentor program may insure that teachers remain past the five year mark, a time when many new teachers have already resigned. Since the first year is largely a time of survival, continuing with a mentor program during years two through five will both support those new teachers who are already reflective practitioners or potentially create reflective practitioners from those who are not naturally reflective (Conway, 2006).

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, our goal as veteran practitioners must be to consistently serve the needs of our current students while remaining committed to our work with novice teachers so that our profession remains strong. The relationship between new teachers and mentors is a crucial factor in both the retention and success of beginning teachers and the process of working with novice teachers to have them share both failures and successes within beginning practice "seems to hold promise for assessing how we might improve beginning teacher experiences during this critical time in their development" (Romano & Gibson, 2006, p. 15). While the implementation of a strong mentoring program within school districts is continually under development and adjustment, the establishment of a focused program content and implementing successful relational components will move districts forward in creating partnerships that are built on empathy and trust.

References

Allen, L. Z. (2013). The Impact of Induction Support on Teacher Development, Teacher Retention, and the Teacher Quality Issue. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 40(3), 75-92.

Bennets, C. (2002) Traditional mentor relationships, intimacy and emotional intelligence. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 15 (2), 155-170.

Bickmore, D. L., & Bickmore, S. T. (2010). A multifaceted approach to teacher induction. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, 26(4), 1006-1014. doi:10.1016/j.tate.2009.10.043

Bowden, S. H. (2004). Top Ten List for Choosing to Become a Mentor. *YC: Young Children*, 59(4), 78-79.

Brown, S. (2003). Working Models: Why Mentoring Programs May be the Key to Teacher Retention. *Techniques: Connecting Education & Careers*, 78(5), 18.

Conway, C. M. (2006). Navigating through Induction: How a Mentor Can Help. Music *Educators Journal*, 92(5), 56-60.

Cowin, K. M., Cohen, L. M., Ciechanowski, K. M., & Orozco, R. A. (2012). Portraits of Mentor-Junior Faculty Relationships: From Power Dynamics to Collaboration. *Journal of Education*, 192(1), 37-47.

Feiman-Nemser, S. (2003). What New Teachers Need to Learn. *Educational Leadership*, 60(8), 25-29.

Goldring, R., Taie, S., & Riddles, M. (2014). Teacher Attrition and Mobility: Results From the 2012–13 Teacher Follow-up Survey (NCES 2014-077). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved [date] from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch.

Haines, S. L., & Popovich, N. G. (2014). Engaging external senior faculty members as faculty mentors. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 78(5). American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy.

Hanson, S. G. (2010). What Mentors Learn About Teaching. *Educational Leadership*, 67(8), 76-80.

Hentges, J. (2012). Why Do Beginning Teachers Leave the Profession? What Can Be Done About It?. *Global Education Journal*, 2012(3), 100-105.

Hughes, G. D. (2012). Teacher Retention: Teacher Characteristics, School Characteristics, Organizational Characteristics, and Teacher Efficacy. *Journal of Educational Research*, 105(4), 245-255. doi:10.1080/00220671.2011.584922

Kamii, M., & Harris-Sharples, S. (1988). Mentors and new teachers: Reshaping the Teaching Profession in Massachusetts. Report of the Wheelock college conference on Mentor Teacher Training (Boston, MA, August 1-5, 1988) Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/630032 13?accountid=15053

Litzky, B. E., Sosik, J. J., Bechtold, D. C., & Godshalk, V. M., with Jae Uk Chun. (2010). *Emotional Intelligence and Trust in Formal Mentoring Programs. Group & Organization Management*.

Loudoun County Public Schools. (2014). *Teaching in Loudoun County: Teacher Induction, Mentor and Coaching.* Ashburn, VA.

Menegat, G. M. (2010). Mentor/protégé interactions and the role of mentor training within a novice teacher mentoring program (Order No. 3403009). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global: Social Sciences. (305240163). Retrieved from

http://search.proquest.com/docview/305240 163?accountid=15053

Pearman, C. J., & Lefever-Davis, S. (2012). Roots of Attrition: Reflections of Teacher Candidates in Title I Schools. *Critical Questions in Education*. 3(1), 1-11.

Pogodzinski, B. (2014). Collegial support and novice teachers' perceptions of working conditions. *Journal of Educational Change*, 15(4), 467-489.

Potts, K. D. (2007). Mentoring for novice elementary school teachers: Its influence on retention and attrition rates. Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/165184 1836?accountid=15053

Riggs, I.M. (2000). The impact of training and induction activities upon mentors as indicated through measurement of mentor self-efficacy, 1-14. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED442639.pd f

Romano, M., & Gibson, P. (2006). Beginning teacher successes and struggles: An elementary teacher's reflections on the first year of teaching. *Professional Educator*, 28(1), 1-16. Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/620122 56?accountid=15053

Shaw, J., & Newton, J. (2014). Teacher retention and satisfaction with a servant leader as principal. *Education*, 135(1), 101-106.

Stronge, J. H. (2007). *Qualities of effective teachers* (2nd Ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Tschannen-Moran, B. & Tschannen-Moran, M. (2010). *Evocative Coaching.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.