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Through the Eyes of the Novice Teacher: Perceptions of Mentoring Support

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Abstract

This study examined the perceptions of elementary school beginning teachers (N= 136) across a Rocky Mountain state in the US regarding the mentoring support they received during their first year teaching. Beginning teachers were asked to report the types of mentoring support they received and to rate the helpfulness of this support on the *Mentoring Support Survey*. Individual item scores and scale scores are reported. An analysis of variance was then used to compare the scale scores of teachers with the administrator facilitated mentoring supports of common planning time with their mentors and/or release time to observe other teachers. Results indicated that beginning teachers who received both common planning time with a mentor and release time to observe other teachers rated the mentoring experiences they had as significantly more helpful than beginning teachers who were not provided these mentoring supports. Of the two, provision of common planning time was the most important type of administrator facilitated support.

Keywords: beginning teachers, mentor teachers, mentoring, new teacher induction

Introduction

In the past, most teaching was done in isolation from other colleagues and teachers were left to their own devices to navigate the vulnerable first year (Ingersoll 2001). The stark reality of being alone in the classroom was in distinct contrast to the feeling preservice teachers experience in their teacher preparation programs where faculty, classmates, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors envelope them in a safe learning environment. Once these preservice teachers were hired and began teaching, they quickly realized that their time with other colleagues was reduced to a few harried minutes at lunch, before, or after school.

In an attempt to ameliorate these feelings of shock and isolation, mentoring programs were introduced in the United States and in other countries during the 1980s. Mentoring programs are now commonly provided (and are sometimes mandatory) to novice teachers worldwide (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, and Tomlinson 2009). Mentoring programs are generally seen as helpful for new teachers but they vary widely in terms of the type of mentoring activities provided and available resources (Huling and Resta 2007). This study, taking place in a state in the US several years after the mentoring of new teachers was mandated, examines what type of mentoring activities beginning teachers received and which ones they found to be most helpful. This study also examines whether or not certain administrator facilitated mentoring supports affect their perceptions of mentoring activities.

The research questions guiding this examination were as follows:

(1) What forms of mentoring support do beginning teachers receive and which of these do they find most helpful?

(2) Do beginning teachers who are given administrative support in the form of common planning time with a mentor and/or release time to observe other teachers, rate the mentoring activities they receive as more helpful than those who do not receive these administrative supports?

Few studies in the mentoring literature compare mentee perspectives on a broad range of common mentoring activities. This study of 136 first-year teachers fresh out of college and hired by districts with fairly new state mandated mentoring programs provides additional insights into what young professionals find helpful. In addition, no empirical research studies were found that compared the perspectives of beginning teachers in mentoring programs who received certain administrator facilitated supports with novice teachers who did not receive these same forms of support. By identifying specific features of mentoring programs that are perceived as most helpful to beginning teachers, the needs of beginning teachers can be more closely met, time and energy can be spent on the most helpful mentoring supports, and principals and administrators can target mentoring resources more effectively.

Theoretical Framework

The need to provide mentors for beginning teachers is supported by a vast body of literature on how adults develop professional knowledge. Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) is the theory most relevant to our work. Vygotsky believed that the accumulation of knowledge was not an isolated experience. He explained that knowledge is not merely transmitted from one person to another, but rather is socially constructed through interactions with other individuals, and through the use of cultural tools, artifacts, and experiences. The beginning teacher is very much a learner in her new role as a teacher. There is much for the new teacher to learn about working with students, dealing with parents, providing differentiated instruction, managing the

classroom, and understanding the school culture. As a young learner needs a teacher to grow and develop, a beginning teacher needs a mentor who has experience and knowledge to share.

In addition, this study in based on Kouzes and Posner's (2008) work on transformational leadership. Kouzes and Posner contend that when new programs are implemented, transformational administrators must, among other things, foster working relationships and remove roadblocks by providing resources necessary for implementation. "Enabling others to act" is one of the five central leadership practices they promote. While the concept of novice teacher mentoring is greatly supported by the literature on adult learning, we wanted to know if supports put in place by the principal were significantly related to how novice teachers perceived these experiences. Mentor/mentee activities take place within a context where time is limited and there are many responsibilities competing for both the mentor and mentee teacher's time. While one can mandate a mentoring program and provide mentor training, the spirit of the program is unlikely to be translated into effective practice without resources. A school administrator has the resources and big picture view to create school structures that support the work of mentor/mentee teams (Roberson and Roberson, 2009). We wanted to see if the administrator's role of providing release time for observation and common planning time with a mentor (enabling others to act) had an impact on their overall perceived helpfulness of mentoring activities.

Literature

Research has demonstrated that beginning teachers, for the most part, perceive the mentoring support they receive from their mentors as beneficial and positive (Hobson et al. 2009). Research studies conducted in many nations have produced similar results regarding mentor/mentee relationships. Moskowitz and Stephens (1997) conducted case studies in Japan,

New Zealand, and Australia and found that when mentor teachers assisted new teachers in making the adjustment to full-time teaching, it was easier for beginning teachers to feel comfortable in their role. Other researchers in Sweden (Lindgren, 2005), Australia (Carter and Francis 2001), Canada (Fantilli and McDougall 2009), and Estonia (Lofstrom and Esienschmidt 2009) illustrate how critical mentoring support can be for beginning teachers.

Researchers have identified specific things that mentors can do to support their mentee. For example, beginning teachers in Carter and Francis' (2001) study rated their mentoring support as helpful when they had mentors who provided social support, were friendly and approachable, and encouraged collaborative learning and reflective teaching practices. Marable and Raimondi (2007) reported that beginning teachers appreciated a mentor who provided a listening ear, met frequently with the beginning teacher, maintained confidentiality, and shared ideas and materials. Additionally, Lofstrom and Eisenschmidt (2009) found that beginning teachers appreciate mentors who are willing to socialize new teachers into the school community, are accessible, and are willing to share materials and advice. Clearly, beginning teachers appreciate attempts made to help socialize them into the society of teachers.

Two important structural mentoring supports discussed in the literature on mentoring are common planning time with a mentor and release time to observe other teachers (Ingersoll and Smith 2004, Roberson and Roberson 2009). Each of these forms of support is discussed below.

Common Planning Time with Mentor

One feature of many mentoring programs is for beginning teachers to spend time planning instruction with their mentor. The benefits of this mentoring support are easy to identify. Common planning time with a mentor has been recognized in the research as beneficial to beginning teachers – especially in relation to their plans to remain in the profession. Smith and

Ingersoll's (2004) analysis of a nationwide survey in the US noted that one of the strongest predictors of beginning teacher retention was common planning time with a mentor. Time spent planning with a mentor allows the new teacher access to see the fine art of scheduling the school day, planning daily lessons, as well as general tips on how to be an effective teacher. It is important to note that common planning time is made possible by administrative support. Effective instructional leaders not only assign trained mentors, they assure that they have time designated for interaction (Roberson and Roberson 2009).

Release Time to Observe Other Teachers

The practice of observing other teachers teaching has also seen support in the mentoring research. The opportunity to observe teaching in action with time to review and examine what took place is highly valued by beginning teachers (Hobson 2002; Luft and Cox 2001; Williams, Prestage, and Bedward 2001). Hall, Johnson, and Bowman (1995) reported that of all mentoring supports, beginning teachers most valued the opportunity to observe others teaching. Marable and Raimondi (2007) found that beginning teachers valued mentors who were willing to serve as a demonstration teacher, not just willing to talk about teaching. Again, the role of an administrator is important here as he or she is responsible for creating the organizational structure within which a teacher can be released from other responsibilities so that such observations can readily occur (Roberson and Roberson 2009).

Though most beginning teachers receive some sort of mentoring, not all beginning teachers are provided with common planning time with a mentor, or release time to observe and learn from other teachers. In this quantitative study, we examine the influence that having common planning time with a mentor or release time to observe other teachers has on the perceptions beginning teachers have toward common mentoring activities. Many types of

mentoring activities may not occur or will not be perceived as helpful if they are packed into days already overflowing with important teaching responsibilities. With limited time and resources available, it is imperative that schools are supplied with sufficient evidence to guide decisions about how to design mentoring programs as well as the most meaningful ways to support and sustain beginning teachers.

Methods

Participants

The participants (N = 136) in this study were first-year elementary school teachers representing multiple school districts across one Rocky Mountain state in the US. All participants had recently completed their degrees in elementary education and received their teaching license at one of eight similarly structured teacher development institutions in the same state. They were all in the process of completing their first year of full-time employment as elementary school teachers. These teachers were all participants in a larger study on novice teachers and undergraduate teacher education programs.

Teacher candidates (N=341) who received their teacher training in this state during the 2005-2006 school year and who were believed to be teaching in state were all asked to complete a survey on their first-year experience. Forty percent (N=136) of the teachers responded by completing and returning the survey. The overwhelming majority of these participants were white and female. The teacher demographics in this sample resembled those of teachers nationwide where seventy-five percent of teachers are female (US Department of Education 2005) and 84% are white (Snyder, Tan, and Hoffman 2004). Therefore, these findings are most relevant to a white, female population of teachers. The *Mentoring Support Survey* was part of a

much larger instrument addressing novice teacher issues. There is no doubt that the length of the total instrument and the busyness of new teachers contributed to the low return rate.

Setting

This research was conducted in a Rocky Mountain state in the US that requires all novice teachers to be assigned a mentor. This state defines a mentor as an experienced teacher who has been trained to advise and guide novice teachers. The state provides suggested content for mentor training. It is suggested that mentors guide novice teachers to meet the procedural demands of the school; provide emotional support; share their own professional knowledge regarding student learning, materials, curriculum, planning, and methods; assist with classroom management issues; engage the teacher in self-assessment and reflection; and help arrange opportunities to observe others teach (USOE, 2006). School districts within the state determine for themselves how they meet this mandate.

Instrumentation

The data for this study was collected using the *Mentoring Support Survey*. This scale was taken from the *Total Quality Partnerships Teacher Survey* used in a longitudinal study analyzing novice teacher experiences in the state of Ohio (see Lasley, Siedentop, and Yinger 2006). There are fifteen items on this mentoring scale asking beginning teachers to identify the types of mentoring support they received and to rate the degree of helpfulness this mentoring support provided during their first year of teaching (see Table 1 for list of items). Teachers were provided the following instructions for the survey:

> This state requires that a mentor teacher should be assigned to all first-year teachers. Please indicate how helpful your mentor was in each area. If this type of mentoring did not occur, please mark "Did not occur" box and skip to the next item.

Participants were then asked to rate the degree of helpfulness of the mentoring received on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1 = not helpful, 2 = minimally helpful, 3 = somewhat helpful, 4 = very helpful, and 5 = extremely helpful). If the mentoring activities did not occur, teachers were asked to mark these items as "Did not occur." To allow for the development of a scale score, a zero was recorded for an item if the activity did not occur, essentially for scale purposes giving it a value of less than "not helpful." The overall scale score for this survey is a measure of both the occurrence and helpfulness of the mentoring support received. A high score on the scale reflects that a wide range of mentoring activities occurred and that they were generally considered very or extremely helpful. A low score suggests that mentoring activities that occurred were considered less helpful or may not have occurred at all.

The scale mean was 46.17 (SD=23.24) with a range of 0 to 75 (one person marked that none of the activities occurred and another that all activities were extremely helpful). The alpha-coefficient for the scale was .94. To establish content validity the items on this scale were carefully selected to represent common experiences mentor teachers would be expected to provide novice teachers. The items were carefully reviewed by a panel of experts to assure they covered a representative sample of expected mentor behaviors and that they were well matched with the suggested mentoring activities in the state.

As stated in the directions for the survey, shown above, all novice teachers are required to have trained mentors. What type of mentoring they receive and whether or not they receive administrative support that helps with the development of a constructive mentor/mentee relationship varies throughout the state. Thus, participants were asked to answer two additional questions to determine the types of administrative support they received along with their assigned mentors. These questions were, "Were you provided with common planning time with

your mentor?" and "Were you provided with release time to observe other teachers?" Participants responded with "yes" or "no" to these questions. These items were combined to create a variable labeled "administrative support for mentoring." This variable included the following categories: novice teachers who had both common planning time and release time to observe other teachers (N=53), novice teachers who had common planning time but not release time for observation (N=31), teachers who had observation time but not common planning time (N=31), and teachers who had neither common planning time or release time (N=18). There were missing data for three teachers.

Findings

The first research question focused on determining what types of mentoring support beginning teachers received and their perceptions of the helpfulness of the various form of mentoring support they received. As shown in Table 1 teachers in this study reported that a fairly large number of mentoring activities occurred during their first year of teaching and that some activities were perceived as more helpful than others.

The two most frequently occurring activities were perceived as being the most helpful. The two most frequent mentor activities were the mentor being a good listener (93% occurrence, helpfulness M = 4.26, SD=1.04) and the mentor encouraging the novice teacher during times of self-doubt (85% occurrence, helpfulness M =4.25, SD=.99). The degree of occurrence and the degree of helpfulness, however, did not always match. Interestingly, mentor modeled professional behavior when communicating with parents, was rated as the third most helpful activity (helpfulness M = 4.13, SD=1.06) but only occurred for 76% of these novice teachers.

The five mentoring activities that were least likely to occur for novice teachers (with 25% or more of novice teachers marking they did not occur) were assistance with teaching content

and planning units (32%), encouragement to self-assess teaching practices (27%), provided a bridge to existing school culture (26%), modeled effective techniques of instruction (26%), and modeled reflective teaching by examining and questioning teaching practices (25%). When modeling effective techniques of instruction, assistance with teaching content and planning units, and providing a bridge to school culture did occur these activities were generally perceived by novice teachers as very helpful or extremely helpful (helpfulness M = 4.08, SD= 1.06; M=3.99, SD=1.11; and M=3.88, SD=1.09 respectively). In contrast, encouragement to self-assess teaching (helpfulness M=3.66, SD=1.09) and modeling reflective teaching by examining and questioning teaching practices (helpfulness M=3.77, SD=1.19) received the lowest helpfulness scores of all 15 items. This suggests that even the teachers who did receive these forms of assistance did not see them as valuable as other types of mentoring they received. Both of these items are reflection oriented suggesting that novice teachers may find emotional support and direct information and assistance more helpful than engaging in reflective conversations with their mentors.

The second research question sought to determine the relationship between the presence of administrative facilitated support for mentoring and perceived helpfulness of mentoring. An ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the independent variable, administrative support for mentoring, on the dependent variable, overall scale score on the *Mentoring Support Survey*. There was a significant effect of administrative support on novice teachers' perceptions of the helpfulness of mentoring activities at the p=.05 level for the four conditions [F (3, 129)=20.05, p=.000]. The effect size was large.

Tukey post-hoc comparisons were utilized to determine which particular group or groups had the higher mean scores on the *Mentoring Support Scale*. The means for the four groups were

(a) both common planning time and release time (M=57.89); (b) common planning time only (M=50.16); (c) observation release time only (M=37.84); and (d) no common planning time or release time (M=19.11). With four types of administrative supports this creates six potential comparisons. Tukey post-hoc comparisons indicate that the group of novice teachers who had both common planning time and release time to observe other teachers (M=57.89, 95% CI [53.38, 62.39]) had significantly higher scores than teachers who had neither planning time or release time for observation (M=19.11, 95% CI [11.38, 26.84]). Teachers with just one of the administrative supports but not the other (common planning time, M= 50.16, 95% CI [41.76, 58.57] or release time, M= 37.84, 95% CI [29.43, 46.25]) also had significantly higher scores on the *Mentoring Support Scale*. When compared, teachers with just release time for observation (M= 37.84, 95% CI [29.43, 46.25]) had significantly lower scores than teachers with both release time for observation and common planning time (M=57.89, 95% CI [53.38, 62.39]). This was not true for teachers who had only common planning time. There was no significant difference in scale scores between teachers who had common planning time with mentors and those who had both common planning time and release time for observations. Comparisons between other groups were also not significant although the means on the *Mentoring Support Survey* approached significance (p=.069) for teachers who received only common planning time (M=50.1) and teachers who only received release time (M=37.8).

With regard to research question two, the results of this study suggest that novice teachers perceive their experiences with mentors as more likely to occur and more helpful when administrative support is built into the mentoring program. Teachers who had neither common planning time or observation time had much lower scores (M=19.11) on the *Mentoring Support Survey* than teachers who had both of these types of supports (M=57.89). While either one of

the administrative facilitated mentoring was significantly better than having neither, having just a common time for planning resulted in scores (M=50.16) that were not significantly different than having both common planning time and release time for observation. There was, however, a significant difference between teachers who had both forms of administrative support (M=57.89) and teachers who had only release time for observation (M=37.84). This finding suggests that if an administrator needs to choose between one of these forms of support, common planning time is the more important administrator facilitated type of mentoring support to provide.

Discussion

We know from previous research that effective mentoring and induction influences teacher effectiveness and student achievement (Cherubini 2007; Fletcher & Barrett 2004; Maciejewski 2007; Wong, Britton, & Ganser 2005). However, resources for mentoring and induction supports are scarce, making it difficult to provide a quality mentoring experience for beginning teachers (Maciejewski 2007). With time and resource limitations, its important to know which mentoring supports are perceived as most helpful by beginning teachers so that administrators can use mentoring resources wisely and effectively. The current study provides three salient points on this topic to help beginning teachers, mentor teachers, and principals or administrators.

First, the findings of the current study demonstrate that beginning teachers, on average, perceive the mentoring support they receive as mostly helpful. If teachers received mentoring supports, they often reported these supports as helpful. These findings echo those found by other researchers who also found it helpful when mentors provided a listening ear, gave advice when needed, were willing to socialize new teachers into the school community, and shared ideas and materials (Carter and Francis, 2001; Lofstrom and Eisenschmidt, 2009; Marable and Raimondi,

2007). It was evident in the current study that beginning teachers, along with teachers in previous studies, see value in the mentoring support they are provided -- especially the benefits of a good listener and a person to give encouragement during times of self doubt.

It is important to note that when beginning teachers were asked about their mentors assisting them in self-reflection or self-evaluation of their teaching practices, beginning teachers in this study reported these supports as not occurring as frequently as other areas. If these mentoring supports did occur, beginning teachers in the current study rated these forms of support as less helpful than other forms of mentoring support. These findings are reflective of the "survival mode" that many beginning teachers are experiencing. With a lot to learn and with demands on their time, beginning teachers seem to prefer mentoring which helps meet immediate needs with less time spent on reflection or analysis.

Second, beginning teachers in this study who reported common planning time with a mentor teacher and release time for observing other teachers were more likely to rate their overall mentoring experiences as more helpful than those who did not have these supports. Of these two administrative supports, common planning time was the one most powerfully associated with high mentoring support scores. The importance of common planning time is consistent with findings reported by Adey (1997) and Harrison, Dymoke, and Pell (2006) who also found that beginning teachers who had regularly scheduled meetings with their mentor reported these experiences as valuable and effective. This finding illustrates the point that although beginning teachers typically receive some sort of mentoring, without structural support they may not be receiving what they perceive as the most helpful forms of mentoring. Common planning time with a mentor doesn't just happen. This form of mentoring support requires facilitation by an administrator, typically a principal at the elementary school level.

Not all teachers, however, are provided with this support. Thirty-six percent of the teachers reported not having common planning time with their mentor teaching. This is also reflected in the large percentage (32%) of the beginning teachers in the current study who reported that they did *not* receive assistance with teaching content and planning units (activities that would occur during common planning time). This item reported the highest percentage of teachers reporting that these mentoring supports "did not occur." These findings demonstrate that participation in common planning time with a mentor increases the likelihood that a mentee will perceive their mentoring experience positively.

Finally, it is important to discuss how release time to observe other teachers is related to overall perceptions of the helpfulness of mentoring activities. The first-year teachers in the current study who were provided release time to observe other teachers were also more likely to rate the overall mentoring support they received as more helpful than those *not* provided with release time to observe other teachers or common planning time. These findings reflect those found in other studies where beginning teachers reported valuing the opportunity to observe others teaching and to discuss the teaching demonstrations (Hall, et al. 1995; Hobson 2002; Marable and Raimondi 2007; Williams, Prestage, and Bedward 2001). Notably, in this study, when observation time is paired with common planning time with a mentor, the impact of observation time is considerably higher. However, if an administrator needed to make a choice between one form of support or the other, the results of the current study suggest that release time to observe other teachers is not as important to novice teachers as common planning time with a mentor.

For teachers, school administrators and principals, these results have practical implications. Scheduling time to meet with a mentor may seem time consuming for first-year

teachers who are busy with a lot to do and a lot to learn. However, beginning teachers in this study who did have common planning time were significantly more likely to rate their mentoring experience highly in spite of these additional meetings and time constraints. Similarly, release time to observe other teachers also resulted in teachers rating their overall mentee experiences more positively. These findings should reassure principals that these forms of mentoring support are valuable in that they help beginning teachers become socialized into the teaching profession and feel greater amounts of support about daily teaching responsibilities.

Implications and Limitations

Because of the considerable resources in terms of time and energy that go into mentoring programs it is important to have a better understanding of which types of activities are considered most helpful by novice teachers and which supports provided by administrators contribute to optimal functioning of such programs. Novice teachers may *not* be receiving certain experiences that really help them feel supported while instead they are being encouraged or even mandated to take part in activities they do not perceive as helpful. Studies such as this one help us to better understand their perceptions and needs.

Future research should explore novice teachers' perceptions of mentoring support where more is known about the school context and specifically how the administrator actually provides these or other forms of structural supports for mentoring. In future research, timing may also be an important element to consider. For example, while these first-year teachers did not evaluate the items regarding reflection as being as helpful as other types of support, it could be that in year two of teaching such forms of mentoring might be considered extremely helpful. Much information is still needed to inform and improve mentoring programs in the United States and across the world.

Every research study has its limitations and this study was no exception. Participants who returned the survey may have felt more positively (or more negatively) about the mentoring support they received than the beginning teachers who did not return the survey. Additionally, a closed-format survey was used to determine how beginning teachers felt about the mentoring support they received thus limiting the ability to seek additional information. Qualitative data involving in-depth interviews with beginning teachers, mentors, and principals would add further insight into future investigations.

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