



Teacher Isolation: How Mentoring Programs Can Help

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Teacher attrition has become a very serious problem in the United States in recent years. Studies have shown that many talented, new teachers are leaving the profession early in their careers due to feelings of isolation. In response to the alarming turnover rate, school districts have adopted mentoring programs which have been successful at making beginning teachers feel less isolated. This article examines four such mentoring programs and their potential to reduce teacher isolation.

Introduction

Nearly 540,000 teachers moved to other schools or left the teaching profession in 2000—many of them due to feelings of isolation (Carroll & Fulton, 2004). Despite investing four, sometimes five, years of their time and money in a college education, spending hundreds of hours observing teachers in the classroom, completing a semester as a student teacher, and obtaining a job in a very competitive field, forty-six percent of new teachers nationwide leave the profession within the first five years of service (Ingersoll, 2002). In fact, the annual turnover rate for teachers is close to four percent higher than the average of all other professions (Carroll & Fulton, 2004).

In response to this high rate of attrition, many state education associations have begun to focus on solving the problem of teacher isolation through formal mentoring programs. In fact, formal mentoring has become a very popular teacher induction tool in recent years. In 2001, thirty-eight states were offering some kind of mentoring or induction program for new teachers (Hirsch, Koppich & Knapp, 2001). The Vermont Department of Education, for example, requires each of its schools to provide mentoring support for new teachers throughout their first two years of employment.

Participation in a mentoring program is also required to be eligible for a Level II teaching license (Vermont Project for Accomplished Teaching, 2003). Other states, such as Georgia, Louisiana, Montana, Texas, Wisconsin, California, Ohio, Washington, and New York, have also been experimenting with induction programs that include some form of mentoring with promising results (see Table 1).

Table 1
Positive Effects of Mentoring Programs on New Teacher Retention Rates

Program Name	Location	Retention Rate
Armstrong Atlantic State University branch of the Pathways to Teaching Careers	Savannah, Georgia	100 percent over five years
Framework for Inducting, Retaining, and Supporting Teachers	Thibodaux Parish, Louisiana	88 percent over three years
Beginning Teacher Support Program	Montana	97 percent over one year
Teacher Induction Program at Texas A&M University	Corpus Christi, Texas	100 percent over five years
Teaching Incentives Pilot Program	Wisconsin	100 percent over one year
New Teacher Project	Santa Cruz	95 percent over

	California	twelve years
Toledo, Ohio's Teacher Induction Model	Columbus, Ohio Seattle, Washington Rochester, New York	98 percent over one year 90 percent over one year increased by 70 percent the first year

Note: Adapted from The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. (2002). *Mentoring and supporting new teachers*. Washington DC: National Governors Association.

By 2013, 3.5 million new teachers will need to be hired to support increased enrollment in public schools and to replace retiring teachers (Hull, 2004). Without good mentoring programs that reduce teacher isolation and encourage teachers to stay in the profession, it will be very difficult for school districts, especially low-income school districts, to fill these positions and keep them filled. In this article, we will examine four different types of mentoring practices, including telementoring, mentoring by a veteran teacher, novice teacher learning communities, and peer coaching and their potential for decreasing or eliminating teacher isolation (see Table 2).

Table 2
Some Strengths and Weaknesses of Four Mentoring Programs

Program	Strengths	Weaknesses
Telementoring	New teachers can get help or feedback at times that accommodate their busy schedules.	There is a lack of face-to-face contact with mentors.
Mentoring by a Veteran Teacher	There are numerous face-to-face interactions between mentors and new teachers.	Mentors are often untrained or have different teaching assignments or philosophies.
Novice Teacher Learning Communities	All participants are new teachers who are empathetic to each other's problems and concerns.	It is difficult to build trust when participants are only able to meet when busy schedules permit.
Peer Coaching	It promotes reflective practice in a non-threatening environment.	It has never really caught on in the U.S. because teachers have very little free time to observe colleagues.

Reducing Teacher Isolation through Telementoring

Every year, 3.5 trillion e-mail messages are sent—many of them between employees of corporations. This year, daily e-mail correspondence is projected to reach 36 billion (Public Interest Registry, 2003). Big business has been very

successful at building relationships through e-mail. In fact, “relationship building is precisely what drove the expansion of the Internet” (Public Interest Registry, 2003, para. 2). Educators can learn from this success and use e-mail to build collegial relationships between new teachers through a process called telementoring. Telementoring involves electronically connecting a group of new teachers by using a list server. The list server allows beginning teachers to voice their concerns, share valuable teaching resources, get advice about dealing with difficult students, share strategies for time management and parent conferences, and exchange creative lesson plans (Eisenman & Thornton, 1999).

In 2003, Lynda Abbott conducted a study at the University of Texas at Austin involving beginning teachers' experiences with telementoring as learner-centered professional development. Her multiple-case study followed ten new teachers who used telementoring services sponsored by the University of Texas' WINGS (Welcoming Interns and Novices with Guidance and Support) program for fifteen to twenty-four months. E-mails were sent between beginning teachers and their mentors at least once a week, and these e-mails, in addition to interviews with the new teachers, information submitted by the new teachers when they were selecting their mentors, profiles written by the mentors, and interviews with WINGS staff, served as data that were analyzed and organized into themes. These themes developed into three interesting findings.

First, it was discovered that the participants preferred online mentoring support because they were embarrassed to ask for help from teachers or supervisors in their own districts. Second, the new teachers were pleased with the amount of professional and personal support they received from their telementors. Not only did they get practical teaching tips and pointers on assimilation into school culture, but the beginning teachers received care, empathy, and optimism. In fact, seven of the ten mentoring relationships grew into “collaboratively reflective professional-development exchanges” (Abbott, 2003, p. viii). Finally, WINGS staff members were instrumental in keeping an open line of communication between new teachers and their mentors by providing much-needed technical support.

Other new teachers who have used telementoring report both positive and negative feelings toward the process. On a positive note, teachers who participated in telementoring felt less isolated (Eisenman & Thornton, 1999). Because most schools are departmentalized or divided into grade levels, and ever-increasing duties leave little time for

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communication between teachers, there is a tendency for beginning teachers to adopt a self-reliant philosophy (Lortie, 1975). Telementoring not only allows new teachers to communicate freely with other colleagues, but it enables them to obtain assistance or feedback at times that accommodate their busy schedules.

Despite the benefits associated with telementoring, some beginning teachers are not satisfied with the process. Criticism focuses on one area in particular—lack of face-to-face contact with mentors. In many cases, students never meet their mentors. “It feels a little odd not knowing what they look like,” (Woodd, 1999, p. 142) Ann, a telementoring participant, states. This dehumanization of communication has left a small percentage of teachers feeling just as isolated as they did before telementoring. However, most new teachers report feeling less isolated after being given the opportunity to participate in telementoring (Woodd, 1999)

Reducing Teacher Isolation through Mentoring by a Veteran Teacher

Unlike telementoring, mentoring by a veteran teacher involves numerous face-to-face interactions between beginning teachers and their mentors. Mentoring by a veteran teacher is the most traditional type of mentoring program. In this program, a veteran teacher is chosen to coach and provide support for a new teacher during his/her first few years of service. Since veteran teachers can be very influential in shaping the philosophies, teaching styles, and attitudes of the novices they mentor, it is very important to choose them carefully.

According to Tom Ganser (1995), the director of field experiences and director of the Beginning Teacher Assistance Program at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, there are four criteria for choosing veteran mentors: competency, enthusiasm, an ability to work with adults, and professionalism. In order to pair mentors who meet these criteria with beginning teachers, however, other factors need to be considered.

New teachers and their mentors should share similar teaching assignments, whether the similarities occur in content or grade level. Problems that beginning teachers encounter are often specific to one of these factors, and mentors can be more helpful if they are experiencing similar conditions. Also, it is important that new teachers and their mentors share a similar philosophy of education. If philosophies are too different, communication and honesty can become strained, resulting in a breakdown of trust in the relationship. Finally, beginning teachers and mentors need to have similar schedules, with hall duties, lunches, or plan periods occurring at the same

times, to facilitate the mentoring process. Without time to talk, the mentor relationship is useless, and the new teacher becomes isolated, once again (Ganser, 1995).

Although careful pairing of beginning teachers and mentors is important, it isn't enough to ensure mentoring success. To be effective, mentors need to be trained. A study conducted by Evertson and Smithey (2000) found that beginning teachers were more successful after being mentored by trained veterans than they were if their mentors had not been trained. “The mere presence of a mentor is not enough; the mentor's knowledge of how to support new teachers and skill at providing guidance are also crucial” (Holloway, 2001, p. 85).

The Muscatine Community School District in Muscatine, Ohio won the 2002 NEA-Saturn/UAW Partnership Award for its successful induction program which includes thorough training for veteran mentors. During the summer, every new mentor receives a full day of instruction followed by eight after-school training sessions throughout the academic year. Training sessions teach coaching skills and stress the importance of confidentiality in order to build trust between mentors and beginning teachers. Following the advice of Tom Ganser, veterans are selected to mentor new teachers based on their past teaching performance and assignments (O'Neill, 2004).

With proper selection and training, mentoring programs can foster strong professional relationships that benefit not only the beginning teachers, but the mentors themselves. In an article entitled *Veteran Teacher Transformation in a Collaborative Mentoring Relationship* (2001), June Zuckerman tells the stories of three experienced teachers who felt that their own careers had been revitalized by serving as mentors to new teachers. Ganser (1995) cautions, however, against administrators using mentoring as a means to improve the performance of struggling veteran teachers. This practice can backfire, resulting in the poor training or resignation of a new teacher. One must always keep in mind that the goal of a mentoring program is to transform novice teachers into successful professionals. According to Dennis Sparks (2002) of the National Staff Development Council, this goal cannot be reached unless new teachers feel a strong connection to colleagues.

In fact, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2002) claims that teacher induction programs are more effective if beginning teachers are paired with veterans. The organization cites several states that have been successful at reducing teacher turnover by designing induction programs that include mentoring by a

veteran teacher. For example, California's Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment Program (BTSA) reduced teacher attrition rates by two-thirds (National Governors Association, 2002), and districts in Ohio and New York had similar results when they gave veterans release time to mentor new teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Connecticut's Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) program not only improved teacher retention with the use of veteran mentors but contributed to better student performance on the state's assessment test (O'Neill, 2004).

In order to improve student performance in schools, districts have to be able to retain good teachers. Pairing veterans with new teachers can prevent isolationism and help beginning teachers complete a successful indoctrination. "Good teaching thrives in a supportive learning environment. Collegial interchange, not isolation, must become the norm for teachers" (NCTAF, 2002).

Reducing Teacher Isolation through Novice Teacher Learning Communities

Another way to prevent isolationism and create a supportive, collegial environment for new teachers is to develop novice teacher learning communities. Like telementoring, novice teacher learning communities allow groups of beginning teachers to come together for support and guidance. However, the new teachers actually meet face-to-face several times throughout the school year rather than communicating only through e-mail. For example, between August 1995 and June 1999, two Stanford University researchers and twelve new teachers formed a learning community that met eleven times per school year for reflection on teaching practices. Each meeting was held at a teacher's house with dinner followed by two discussion sessions. The first session was rather informal, lasted thirty to forty-five minutes, and consisted of small talk, updates on current classroom practice, and discussion of individual stumbling blocks. In the second session, discussion became more formal and focused on inquiry. Each new teacher was responsible for bringing an artifact to share with the group, such as a student's project, a formal evaluation, a class videotape, etc. The new teacher then received feedback from the other members of the learning community relevant to the artifact (Meyer, 2002).

The results of this five-year study were quite powerful. Participants compared their relationships with colleagues in their schools to the relationships that developed with the teachers in their learning community and found the learning community relationships to be closer, more supportive, and more focused. Colleagues in the new teachers' schools were apathetic when it came to discussing or

questioning teaching practices, but the opposite was true in the learning community. One participant said:

The way my faculty interacts is very different from the way this group interacts, and that is because people don't know each other as well, or don't respect each others' ideas as much or are not interested in learning what other people are doing in their classrooms. (Meyer, 2002, p. 33)

All of the beginning teachers agreed that they felt isolated in their schools but connected in their learning community.

A similar study was conducted by Sandy Schuck at the University of Technology in Sydney, Australia in 2003. Eighteen beginning teachers volunteered to be members of a novice teacher learning community for one academic year. Unlike the participants in Meyer's five year study, the subjects in Schuck's study also communicated through attendance at workshops, online discussion boards, e-mail, fax, and telephone. Schuck found that her participants liked having different means of communicating and valued the learning community for the support it gave them when they were unable to get the help they needed in their schools. However, subjects participated in learning community activities on an irregular basis and gave several reasons for their poor attendance including lack of time, concerns about confidentiality, and lack of trust in learning community members.

Like the participants in the telementoring studies, the new teachers in Schuck's learning community also preferred face-to-face contact to online interactions but appreciated the ability to communicate between meetings and workshops using technology. Overall, Schuck's novice teacher learning community helped beginning teachers reflect on their teaching, share resources and techniques, and develop professional relationships, thus reducing feelings of isolation.

Reducing Teacher Isolation through Peer Coaching

In novice teacher learning communities, large numbers of beginning teachers get together several times a school year to share ideas, discuss problems, or confide in each other. In peer coaching, two or three teachers with varying levels of experience observe each others' lessons, share strategies, discuss solutions to problems, or conduct research in the classroom on a weekly or even daily basis (Robbins, 1991). Because the relationship is confidential, participants are not being formally evaluated as part of the process, and peers meet and interact on a regular basis, new teachers who are part

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of a peer coaching relationship find it much easier to confide in their fellow mentors. As a result, they build closer relationships with their colleagues and feel like they are part of a team. Other benefits of peer coaching include a heightened awareness of one's own strengths and weaknesses, an openness to new ideas, an increase in self-efficacy, higher motivation levels, and a shift from subject-centered instruction to student-centered instruction (Slater & Simmons, 2001).

Participants in a university study conducted by Jenkins and Veal in 2002 experienced all of these benefits and more. After being trained in the methods of peer coaching in a secondary pedagogy course, eight preservice teachers used those methods to complete field experiences required in their elementary pedagogy course. Each of the eight preservice teachers taught kindergarten, second, or fourth grade classes over a two-month period while being observed by a peer who was not teaching.

After the observations, the teachers and peer coaches had private conferences which began with positive comments from the coaches. Teachers initiated all discussion about their lessons with the coaches interjecting only to ask for clarification or encourage reflection. This entire process was repeated fifteen times, until each participant had served as teacher eight times and coach eight times.

Being able to discuss their teaching in a non-threatening environment made the experience enjoyable for all the participants. In addition, all eight preservice teachers felt that their pedagogy improved and said that they saw themselves using the skills and techniques they had learned while peer coaching throughout their teaching careers (Jenkins & Veal, 2002).

Unfortunately, peer coaching is not a popular mentoring practice in the United States. Most teachers in America never get to see their colleagues teach or have colleagues observe their teaching. Observations are almost always done by administrators a few times a year in a formal, threatening manner which results in little reflection on the part of the teacher. In China, Japan, New Zealand, and Switzerland, however, new teachers often observe other new teachers, mentors, teachers in the same grade or subject, and teachers of other grades or subjects (Britton, Raizen, Paine & Huntley, 2000).

By observing other new teachers, beginning teachers can support one another. It is important to note, however, that peer coaching should never be limited to new teachers. Best practices are usually found in the more experienced teachers' classrooms. Observing teachers in the same grade or subject area increases content knowledge and improves pedagogy,

but there are also benefits to observing teachers in other grades or subject areas. New teachers who observe professionals who teach outside of their grade or subject can pay less attention to content and more attention to classroom management (Britton, Raizen, Paine & Huntley, 2000).

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2002) writes, "The era of solo teaching in isolated classrooms is over. To support quality teaching our schools must support strong professional learning communities" (p. 13). Peer coaching is a means by which America's schools can overcome isolation and build collegial environments that improve teacher retention rates and, ultimately, classroom instruction

Conclusion

Studies have shown that mentoring programs such as telementoring, mentoring by a veteran teacher, novice teacher learning communities, and peer coaching keep new teachers motivated and enthusiastic while increasing their skills and self-efficacy. As a result, schools that employ these practices experience less turnover (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Reducing turnover is important because it is costly for both school districts and their students.

The average cost to recruit, hire, prepare and lose a teacher is \$50,000.00 (Carroll & Fulton, 2004). This adds up to a lot of money that could be spent on students and programs designed to raise teacher job satisfaction. With so many qualified teachers leaving the profession, students are experiencing a substandard education in a considerable number of school districts. Simply stated, teacher turnover is disruptive to the education of students. In fact, Bob Chase (2000) writes:

NEA members know that high staff turnover has devastating consequences for children. Research shows that the single most important factor in a child's education is the quality of his or her teacher—and quality depends in large measure upon years of experience. (p. 5)

In order to give students the best education we can possibly give them, we need to encourage good novice teachers to stick around and work at becoming great veteran teachers. Telementoring, mentoring by a veteran teacher, novice teacher learning communities, and peer coaching can help beginning teachers realize their potential and reach this goal. Linda Darling-Hammond (2003) contends:

School systems can create a magnetic effect when they make it clear that they are committed to finding, keeping, and supporting good teachers. These teachers become a magnet for others who seek environments in which they can learn from their

colleagues and create success for their students. (p. 12-13)

Clearly, mentoring programs help school districts create these nurturing environments which reduce teacher isolation, and, in turn, inspire new teachers.

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