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A Mentoring Perspective

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The origin of the term mentor is attributed to Homer's famous work, *The Odyssey* (Dimock, 1989). According to this tale, Odysseus entrusted the upbringing of his son Telemachus to an old man named Mentor. He asked him to educate and nurture him while he was away fighting the Trojan War. From this relationship the concept of mentoring has evolved to encompass an older, experienced person working with a younger person with the intention of helping to shape the growth and development of the protégé or mentee.

According to Gold (1996), formal mentoring began in the U.S. in the early 1970's in the business communities and government agencies. In the 1980's, universities and school districts picked up on the idea, believing that if it was successful in these other settings then perhaps it could be helpful to beginning teachers as part of their induction process into the teaching profession. Mentoring, in fact, became very prevalent in the United States due to the recommendation of such powerful groups as the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession (1986) and the Holmes Group (1986). Neuwiler (1987) claimed that all 50 states had established induction programmes to help ease entry of beginning teachers into the workplace, and many of them included mentoring. Furtwengler (1995) conducted a 50-state survey to determine the status of state-mandated beginning teacher programs from 1983 to 1992 and detailed mentoring programmes in 27 states. Interest in mentoring was so pronounced in the U.S. in the late 1980's that of 30 research projects funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), 17 were in this area (Zimpher & Rieger, 1988). Furthermore, in the "First Annual Survey of Critical Issues in Teacher Education" (ERIC ED 318 699) of 1990, members of the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) rated the mentoring of beginning teachers, along with school reform, as the two most critical issues for improving teacher education (Stewart, 1992).

Definition of Mentoring

A review of the literature on mentoring as part of induction reveals that there is no agreement on a universal definition. It appears that teachers are more interested in 'helping' other teachers rather than 'taking charge of them' (Gold, 1996). The prevalent terms used in the literature refer to mentors facilitating, assisting, and helping mentees. Parkay (1988) spoke of the importance of modelling and encouragement within the relationship. Healy and Welchert (1990) while claiming that no consensus on a definition existed offered their own to be "a dynamic, reciprocal relationship in a work environment between an advanced career incumbent (mentor) and a beginner (protégé) aimed at promoting the career development of both" (p. 17).

When searching for a definition of mentoring one also needs to consider the role of the mentor. Zimpher and Rieger (1988) discussed the difference between formal and informal assistance, with the former involving training mentees' effectiveness in classroom instruction and the latter being a more casual helping relationship. Stroble and Cooper (1988) detailed the differences between a mentor who provided assistance and/or assessment. They have outlined potential

problems when mentors are asked to take on this dual role and recommend that definitions, roles and expectations of mentors be thought out carefully and stated clearly.

Why Mentoring

Is mentoring really necessary in education and if so, how is it beneficial? Research tells us that beginning teachers face a multitude of problems when they are first inducted into the profession full-time (Lawson, 1986). This is clearly the case here in Singapore as well (Wright, 1997). This latest study has shown that recent graduates of the School of Physical Education who completed their first year of teaching struggled with issues ranging from marginality of physical education, to isolation, to role conflict, to reality shock and the wash-out effect. When asked if they had any help dealing with any of these issues only five out of 70 beginning teachers mentioned that they had a mentor. Those five expressed their gratitude and appreciation of the assistance they received from their mentors.

Benefits of Mentoring

What does the research say about the effectiveness of mentoring? Huling-Austin (1990), in a major review of teacher induction programmes stated that "the most consistent finding across studies is the importance of the support (mentor) teacher" (p. 542). Huling-Austin, Putman, & Galvez-Hjornevik (1986) claimed that, "the assignment of an appropriate support teacher is likely to be the most powerful and cost-effective intervention in an induction program" (p. 50). Research findings have shown that the beginning teacher (mentee) appreciated the interactions with their mentors and felt that they helped them more quickly adapt to their new environment (Ganser, 1992; Odell & Ferraro, 1992; Tellez, 1992). Odell (1990) found that mentees acquired more positive attitudes toward teaching and were motivated to stay in teaching as a result of being mentored. Several studies showed that mentees encountered less stress and increased the likelihood that they would remain in teaching longer as a result of the mentoring process (Ganser, 1992; Little, 1990; Odell & Ferraro, 1992). With some studies showing attrition rates as high as 62% within the first three years of teaching (Carre 1980), these findings are encouraging, to say the least.

Several studies have also shown that mentors as well as mentees benefit from the mentoring process. Brzoska (1987) found that mentor teachers experienced a sense of renewal and rejuvenation in their teaching as a result of their interactions with mentees. Ackley and Gall (1992) found that mentors claimed that they became more reflective of their own teaching, while Ganser's (1992) mentors expressed both personal and professional satisfaction for making a significant contribution to the profession. It appears that mentoring may very likely be a win-win situation for both parties involved.

The Training of Mentors

Bey (1990) and several others have argued the importance of training by stating that preparing someone to teach is quite different then asking an adult to support another adult. Several studies have found that when mentors have difficulty in their role it is often because they have not been trained properly. For a summary of these findings, refer to Tauer (1995). As Odell (1990) states: "To begin with, a wide array of related areas of study have been suggested for the training of mentor teachers" (p.22). She suggests content areas that include teacher development, concerns

and needs of beginning teachers, clinical supervision, teacher induction and adult professional development. Ganser (1996) stresses the importance of mentor training with a strong emphasis on developing skills in conferencing (active listening and the use of questioning to promote reflection and analysis), systematic observation, and problem solving. Ackley and Gall (1992) spoke of the importance of mentors dealing with mentees socio-emotional issues first and then tackling task-oriented concerns. Wildman et al (1992) broadly identified the mentors' role of assisting the mentees in both their professional and personal needs. The California Mentor Teacher programme advocates a coaching model called the "turning point interaction model" (Olsen, 1989) which stresses the interdependence of the mentor and mentee. The challenge, as I see it, is to determine what type of training has proven to be most effective in preparing mentors in a given context.

Selection of Mentors

A great deal has been written and discussed regarding the selection criteria for mentor teachers. Zimpher and Rieger (1988) have done a good job of summarising the literature in this area and offered the following advice to organisations responsible for selecting mentors to work with beginning teachers. They state that there is a need for a clear definition of teacher expertise, which includes years of experience and competence in the classroom. Also, there must be some way to measure the potential commitment to the role of being a mentor, perhaps through past professional involvement and a willingness to be trained for the role. Potential mentors should exhibit self-confidence and the ability to model integrity and empathy in their relationships with fellow colleagues. Candidates should also be reflective practitioners of their craft who are willing to take on this crucial leadership role within the context of their professional duties.

Necessary Conditions for Mentoring

Through trial and error and the benefit of studying many different mentoring models, Zimpher and Rieger (1988) have documented some of the reasons for why mentoring as part of induction has or has not been successful. It appears that mentoring is less likely to be successful when mentors are given the task of mentoring in addition to all of their other professional duties. This often leads to mentors and mentees scrambling to find time to nurture this relationship, in an environment that does not offer the necessary support. This typically leads to frustration for both parties.

The suggestion, therefore, is to allow release time for both the mentor and mentee so that there is time to cultivate this relationship on a daily basis. Great care should be given to the matching of mentor and mentee. Wherever possible, the match should allow for those who teach in the same grade level(s) and subject area(s) so that content advice can be maximised. Care should also be given to age differences with not to narrow or wide a gap (Levinson, 1978). This relationship should last for a minimum of one school year. Mentors, if possible, should have the opportunity to share with other mentors their experiences in monthly feedback sessions chaired by a mentor trainer. It is also recommended that mentors be financially compensated for the added responsibility that they have agreed to take on.

Sponsoring Mentor Programmes

Ganser (1996) identified four different organisations that sponsor mentor programmes in the U.S.: school districts, school-district partnerships, university and state programmes. Other countries vary in their sponsorship models. For example, here in Singapore there are two organisations involved in mentoring, the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Education. Where possible, it would be most efficient for the various sponsoring organisations to work together to enhance each other's programmes.

Mentoring beginning teachers is a worthwhile, but rather complex undertaking. Organisations who wish to undertake this process would be wise to start by examining various mentoring schemes that have been tried and tested over time. Attention should then be given to the local context to determine what modifications, if any should be implemented. Finally, research needs to be carried out to determine if the mentors and mentees are indeed benefiting from the experience.

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