
Title	Teacher mentor training: The Singapore experience
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Source	<i>MERA-ERA Joint Conference, Malacca, Malaysia, 1-3 December 1999</i>

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TEACHER MENTOR TRAINING – THE SINGAPORE EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: Much has been presented in education literature on the positive role that mentors play in teacher preparation, induction, and professional development. Mentoring provides opportunities for competent and experienced teachers to assume a leadership role without relinquishing the classroom. Teacher mentors have the potential for enhancing the morale of trainee or novice teachers by responding to both their professional and personal needs. In Singapore the systematic training of teacher mentors was started in 1998 with the launching of two courses, one for mentoring teachers, and another for level and subject heads in schools. This paper presents the framework of the mentor training programme offered by the National Institute of Education (Singapore), outlining the rationale, the objectives, and content of the courses. In addition, input from school personnel that helped shape the course is included to explain how the training is tailored to meet the needs of teacher mentors in Singapore schools.

Introduction

It is increasingly acknowledged in the education community today that schools play a vital role in teacher preparation, induction, and professional development, and a key component in these processes is *teacher mentoring*.

In the UK, a Department for Education circular (DFE,1993) prescribes that at least two thirds of any teacher training course now has to be school-based. Classroom teachers thus take on a new and extended role, that of *mentors* and professional tutors to student teachers. In the US the focus is on the induction rather than the pre-service phase. Induction programs for beginning teachers are mandatory in most of the states in the US, and *mentoring* is an important feature of these programs.

In Singapore as a result of the Ministry of Education's aggressive teacher recruitment exercises there has been a rapid increase in the numbers joining the profession in recent years. Having attracted more and (hopefully) better talents into teaching, the challenge now is how these new recruits can be adequately trained and prepared for their professional roles, and how they can be retained in the education service after their initial training. Mentoring offers a worthwhile complement to other forms of assistance and support already in place for trainees and beginning teachers.

Why Mentoring?

Much has been presented in education literature on the positive effect that mentors have on teacher preparation and teacher retention. Generally speaking mentoring is a process whereby the mentor (who is relatively more skilled and experienced) offers significant on-site support and assistance to the mentee to help raise his/her level of performance. Mentoring programs are rooted in the belief that adults have the capacity for continued growth and learning, that they go through development stages, and that this development can be influenced by specific types of interventions which both support and challenge (Levine, 1989).

Mentoring also provides opportunities for competent and experienced teachers to assume a leadership role without relinquishing the classroom. Teacher mentors have the potential for

enhancing the morale of trainee or novice teachers by responding to both their professional and personal needs. Mentoring has been acknowledged to be an effective way of fostering the development of new teachers and establishing their professional competence, and increasing the retention of promising teachers.

Who Are The Mentors In Singapore Schools?

In the Singapore school set up while all heads (of departments, levels, and subjects) are expected to be prepared for mentoring responsibilities, *formal* mentoring roles are usually assigned to two categories of teachers: *senior teachers*, and *cooperating teachers*. Senior teachers are expected to serve as mentors to new teachers, and to student teachers during the practicum in the capacity of the *school coordinating mentors*. Cooperating teachers mentor only student teachers.

Mentoring Dispositions, Skills, & Knowledge

(Ganser, 1996; Murray, 1991; Gordon, 1991; McLennon, 1995; Sullivan, 1992)

Dispositions and Attitudes of Effective Mentors

- willingness to nurture another person
- openness
- empathy
- flexibility
- receptiveness
- responsiveness
- dependability
- willingness to learn

Skills for Mentors

Interpersonal skills: Mentors have to relate to and help their mentees as persons, and to influence their actions, which means engaging with their values, motives and feeling. These are the interpersonal aspects of mentoring. Relationship and helping skills are thus a crucial component of mentor training.

Teacher socialization skills: Deliberate teacher socialization is necessary. Research has shown that where new teachers were left to socialize themselves within the profession through trial and error there was a tendency for them to develop idiosyncratic coping strategies which led to anxiety, frustration and even failure.

Conferencing skills: Effective mentoring requires expertise in communicating and active listening skills, as well as skills in the use of mediational questions that promote reflection and analysis.

Lesson observation and feedback skills: To help the young teachers improve their professional skills mentors need to conduct systematic observations of classroom teaching, and to provide feedback about their teaching performance.

Problem-solving skills: Mentors need to learn problem-solving strategies in order to help the young teachers approach problems systematically.

Knowledge for Mentors

The knowledge which mentors need should reflect the goals for mentoring in the Singapore education context.

Beginning teachers' needs: Mentors should be familiar with the stages of teacher development, and the predictable concerns of new teachers.

Teaching as a job: Mentors should understand the occupational and organizational characteristics of teaching so as to help the new teachers appreciate the reality of the teacher's world of work, and the complex nature of the job.

Teaching as a career: Effective mentors understand that teachers experience various stages throughout their career. They model professional behaviors and attitudes that enable their mentees to develop and grow as professionals.

Adult development: Mentoring involves teaching adults. The principles and practices of adult development and adult learning are an essential part of the mentor's knowledge base.

Teacher preparation: Knowledge of NIE's initial teacher education programs will give teacher mentors important insights into the what, why, and how of the professional preparation received by student teachers. It also enables the mentors to understand why beginning teachers are inclined to think and act the way they do.

Effective teaching and classroom management: Mentors need to have a high level of awareness of effective teaching and classroom management behaviors so as to be able to articulate the cause-effect relationships between teaching and learning to the young teachers.

Curriculum and teaching innovations: Mentors should also be familiar with and open to innovative approaches to curriculum design and teaching which trainee and beginning teachers are eager to implement in their work.

Education goals and context of Singapore: Mentors should understand the goals of education in Singapore, and the Singapore education context – the major issues and challenges ahead. Young teachers need guidance in reflecting on the past, learning in the present, and orienting towards the future.

Conclusion

Teacher mentoring is an empowering tool for positive professional and personal development of student and beginning teachers. It is a means of staff development that capitalizes upon the classroom teacher as a teacher educator who helps to facilitate the expansion of professional skills. In the process the role of the classroom teacher is restructured and revitalized with new responsibilities. This will benefit the schooling process and its participants.

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