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The importance of mentoring first year teachers

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The importance of mentoring first year teachers

Abstract
The importance of mentoring first year teachers is a subject that waxes and wanes according to the popularity of the subject at any given time. As a former teacher who was formally mentored, having a veteran teacher as a friend and confidant was the best experience a first year teacher could have. Not every teacher in every school district in every state is given the opportunity to have a mentor to assist him/her during the critical first year. With many differing opinions on the subject, not all states require first year teachers to be mentored as a condition of continued employment. This paper will explore the importance of mentoring first year teachers.
THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTORING

FIRST YEAR TEACHERS

A Literature Review

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Abstract

The importance of mentoring first year teachers is a subject that waxes and wanes according to the popularity of the subject at any given time. As a former teacher who was formally mentored, having a veteran teacher as a friend and confidant was the best experience a first year teacher could have. Not every teacher in every school district in every state is given the opportunity to have a mentor to assist him/her during the critical first year. With many differing opinions on the subject, not all states require first year teachers to be mentored as a condition of continued employment. This paper will explore the importance of mentoring first year teachers.
Introduction

On the first day of a new job, the excitement thunders through the teacher’s chest. She can’t wait to attend her first meeting as a teacher. She enters the meeting with a smile on her face and a spring in her step. Her students’ names are seared into her mind because they will be with her for an entire school year. A classroom of her own; what a dream come true! As the principal enters the room, she has a large cart with her. What is this all about? The principal announces the classroom assignments, duties, and changes in scheduling. Everyone is supposed to pick up a copy of the manuals to begin studying the policies. The new teacher looks confused and does not know what to do. Even when the principal asks if there are any questions, she does not know what to ask. After the meeting is over and everyone leaves, she heads back to her classroom. The load in her hands, matches a heavy feeling in her chest. How will she ever survive this? She seeks the assistance from the teacher next door, but he is gone. She is so confused, that she would not know what to ask him anyway. She holds back the tears as she realizes there is work to be done. Who does she ask for help? If she calls her student teacher supervisor will she be of any assistance?

This situation is more prevalent than one might think. First year teachers are thrust into the classroom with the door closed behind them to figure everything out for themselves. The principal assumes the other teachers will help them, but the teachers are so busy trying to get ready for their own students, that the new teachers are forgotten. Imagine if a surgeon went to perform a surgery without being told where the surgical tools are located? "To withhold the basic tools needed for success until the new teacher
has the time and familiarity with the system to seek them out is to deliberately handicap that person” (Portner, 2003, p. 31).

What is Mentoring?

Definition of Mentoring

What is mentoring? Mentoring can be defined in many ways. For the teaching profession, mentoring is “one who supports either formally or informally a teacher’s professional development” (Rudney and Guillame, 2003, p. 2). He or she is the role model for the mentee. A mentor is the one who guides, assists, and supports this first year teacher. Mentors do not always have the answers, but he/she is the one who continually works to find the answers to learn more and provide assistance. A mentee or protégé refers to the first year teacher who is assigned to work with a mentor. The goal “is to develop (the) mentee into a self-reliant teacher. By self-reliant, (Portner) means a teacher who is willing and able to:

1. Generate and choose purposefully from among viable alternatives.
2. Act upon choices.
3. Monitor and reflect upon the consequences of applying those choices.
4. Modify and adjust in order to enhance student learning” (Portner, 2003, p. 41).

History of Mentoring

The history of mentoring began in the 1980’s. In the 1980’s, a mentoring system was introduced in hopes of slowing down the loss of teachers. A very simplistic system was set up to assist teachers by being assigned to a “buddy”. This “buddy-level setups didn’t help much” (Kersten, 2006, p. 10). During President Clinton’s term in office, The Department of Education worked on ways to improve education through the publication
Mentoring of the Seven Priorities of the U.S. Department of Education. The fourth section of priority five "stresses the need for special efforts to retain beginning teachers in their first few years of teaching, because we now lose 30% due to lack of support" (Portner, 2003, p. xi). President Clinton's Call to Action for American Education in the 21st Century was another attempt to work on the problem of retaining beginning teachers. One focus of this report was to encourage "school districts to make sure that beginning teachers get support and mentoring from experienced teachers" (Portner, 2003, p. xi-xii). "By 1999-2000, two-thirds of beginning teachers nationwide were working with a mentor – at least on paper- but the percentage of those leaving the profession remained high" (Kersten, 2006, p. 10). The school districts with formal mentoring programs which included collaboration time and demonstration of teaching practices retained their teachers for longer periods of time. By 2000-2001, "a broad network of induction support, including mentoring, cut attrition in half" (Kersten, 2006, p. 10). As of 2003, some form of mentoring was mandated in thirty states. Even with mentoring being put into place, teachers were still leaving the profession at high rates within the first five years of teaching. So, does mentoring work? Formal mentoring programs lower attrition rate according to the National Association of State Boards of Education. "For example, in a study of new teachers in New Jersey reported the first-year attrition rate of teachers trained in a traditional college program without mentoring was 18%, whereas the attrition rate of first-year teachers whose induction program included mentoring was 5%" (Andrews and Martin, 2003, p. 7). In 2004, school systems who provided intensive mentoring for their beginning teachers found that these teachers were less likely to leave the profession.
How Mentoring Works

A meaningful relationship that was created between the mentor and the mentee was one of the keys to success. “Having the mentor in the same building and one who had time for them was important” (Bauer and LeBlanc, 2002, p. 18) in order to be successful in the mentoring program. An effective mentor who acted like a role model by encouraging, nurturing, and befriending the mentee was another key to success. This was a critical factor in eliminating feelings of isolation. “The guidance and support of a mentor teacher have been found to be invaluable for many beginning teachers” (Tusin, 1995, p. 3).

A first year teacher stated the following:

“I remember back when I first started teaching. I had doubts about whether I would become a competent teacher, let alone survive my first year in the classroom. I really felt that I was on my own. I did make it finally, but I sure wish I had someone there for me, someone I felt comfortable with. I guess a mentor is someone that I could call on when I needed help, information, or just assurance” (Portner, 2001, p. 17).

For me, mentoring was a way to become successful in my career. When I graduated from college in 1994, Louisiana was implementing a revised program for first year teachers titled Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program (LTAAP). “During the first semester, a mentor teacher is assigned to assist the new teacher in becoming a competent, confident teacher within the framework provided by the Louisiana components of effective teaching” (Bauer and LeBlanc, 2002, p. 12). First year teachers were required to complete one year of assessment with the assistance of a mentor. As with any new program, there were kinks to be worked out but most teachers, like me, were successful within the one to two year time limit to receive a permanent teaching certificate. After several years of teaching, my principal approached me about becoming
a state certified mentor/assessor. Attending in-services and training was a requirement which made me hesitant because I would be pulled out of my classroom for a total of two weeks. Wanting to help other teachers experience success like I did was the driving force for me to leave the classroom and attend the training. Upon returning to the classroom, my principal quickly assigned me my first mentee. Denise was brought to the school after the school year began due to overcrowding in the fifth grade section. She was the best mentee and I am glad I had the privilege of becoming friends with her because I learned as much from her as I believe she did from me. In 2001, when I left Louisiana, Denise had been nominated for Teacher of the Year and was very successful! With the personal experience of a formal mentoring program, I believe this was the catalyst that kept Denise, my other mentees, and I in the teaching profession.

How to be an Effective Mentor

“Studies demonstrate that new teacher turnover rates can be cut in half through comprehensive induction – a combination of high quality mentoring, professional development and support, scheduled interaction with other teachers in the school and in the community at large, and formal assessments for new teachers during at least their first two years of teaching” (Anthony and Kritsonis, 2006, p. 3). More than thirty states are now involved in some type of mentoring program to support beginning teachers. With veteran teachers by their sides, first year teachers have been able to be successful their first year of teaching. Both the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers are encouraging states who have implemented mentoring and assistance programs for first year teachers. The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future have conducted studies which “show that beginning teachers who
receive mentoring become more effective as teachers, and leave teaching at much lower
rates” (Bauer and LeBlanc, 2002, p. 7). The National Association of State Boards of
Education also cited the same facts: mentoring programs reduces the rates of teachers
Administrators, Teachers, and Policymakers Can Help New Teachers Succeed” was
published. The following suggestions were made:

1. Make support of new teachers a priority by committing funds and developing
an induction program that lasts from two to three years.

2. Assign beginning teachers reasonable class and course loads in the grade level
and subjects they taught as student teachers.

3. Orient new teachers at the beginning of the school year to school policies,
teaching practices, and other necessary information.

4. Clarify expectations.

5. Integrate newcomers into the whole school and the community, and ask
veteran teachers to invite them to meetings and events (Black, 2004, p. 5).

There are many attributes of a good mentor. A willing listener, encouraging,
optimistic, goal setter, and willing to share tools and practices are a few of the most
important attributes. Mentors should not be an assessor. The U.S. Department of
Education’s National Center for Educational Statistics published a report that stated “that
having a mentor program to assist beginning teachers is less important for improving
teacher performance and commitment than the quality of that assistance” (Portner, 2003,
p. 4). This means that training is the key to becoming effective mentor. As stated before,
Louisiana’s Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program is a formal system. This
included training the mentors and state assessors for two weeks from both the school
district and the state. I feel I was a better mentor because of the training and support I
received from the school district.

With the induction of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, all classrooms are
required to have a qualified teacher. "With 10% of new teachers leaving the profession
within the first year, 20% leaving within three years, and 30% of new teachers leaving
the profession with their first five years of teaching" (Andrews and Martin, 2003, p. 4)
school districts are looking at ways to retain these teachers. Poor, urban, and diversified
school are the ones in the most trouble to hire and maintain quality teachers as stated by
No Child Left Behind. Mentoring seems to be the key to this success. Mentors are
valuable partners who facilitate the learning of the mentees to retain them as quality
teachers in the classrooms. "Mentoring is an investment in the success of both beginning
teachers and the thousands of students whose lives those teachers will touch throughout
their careers" (Sweeny, 2001, p. 2). Informal mentoring is not enough to meet the
standards of No Child Left Behind because there is not a way to follow the progress
being made. With the induction of formal mentoring programs, school districts along
with the state education departments are able to track the progress of novice teachers to
ensure all students are receiving a proper education. "Effective induction and mentoring
programs with well-trained mentors and supportive administrators are needed to ensure
no teacher, and thus no child, will be left behind" (Andrews and Martin, 2003, p. 14).

Should All States Mentor First Year Teachers?

Should all states be required to have formal mentoring programs? This question is
difficult to answer due to the fact that currently states that have mentoring programs have
created them on their own. There is not a nationwide standard for all states to use. Some states are choosing not to mentor their first year teachers. “In 1995, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) published a report called the Professional Teacher Project which describes NCATE’s efforts to make the university-level preparation of teachers more standards-based process” (Sweeny, 2001, p. 122). They feel if teachers are universally prepared, mentoring programs will also become universal. In the 1990’s the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was created. The thought was if teachers are nationally accredited, the students along with school districts would benefit from the expertise gained. More and more teachers are becoming nationally accredited which improves the quality of teachers in the classroom. With more highly trained teachers in the classroom, more highly trained mentors will be available to assist the mentees during his/her first year of teaching. The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) is an organization which assists mentors with the induction and mentoring programs. They also monitor the “progress and findings and then apply the conclusions in their own work with new teachers and mentors” (Sweeny, 2001, p. 124). As a former mentee and then mentor, I agree with the recommendations of the NSDC. Novice teachers need two years of mentoring with possibly three years to complete the entire process of induction. This time would enable the novice teachers to become more independent and self-reliant. With that said, mentors also need time to become more reflective in their practice to be able to assist their mentees. School districts need to have program leaders to assist mentors with questions and/or concerns.
Methodology

As mentioned before, mentoring is a subject that has been discussed and then forgotten time and again. Right now is one of those times. Trying to locate information that is up-to-date has been difficult and challenging. Using the Rod Library’s resources helped to locate a majority of the information, along with phone conversations to educational associations, such as the Association of Teacher Education and the National Council of Educational Statistics. State educational departments of various states have been utilized also. A phone call to Senator Grassley was a source that proved not to be effective. The internet proved to be the best source of information with the location of Barry Sweeney’s website and other resources. Even though this website has not been updated in awhile, email correspondences with him answered some of my questions.

After researching, locating, and reading many articles and books on mentoring, I began the process of narrowing down the selections to include as the main issues I wanted to address in this paper. Resources that are the most current and accurate are the resources I chose for this paper. Even though many of my resources are not all current, the information is still relevant to the topic.

Literature Review

Professional View of Mentoring

Mentoring new teachers began as a way to assist teachers during the first year of teaching. Informally, teachers “attached” themselves to a veteran teacher as a way to become familiar with the school and students. Many times new teachers step into the classroom not sure of how or what to teach. Feelings of isolation and loneliness are prevalent among first year teachers. “In fact, 92% of new teachers do not seek help
unless required to do so” (Andrews and Martin, 2003, p. 4). Formal mentoring did not come into play until the 1980's. Even with a few school districts trying to formally mentor their new teachers, many were left on their own. Susan Kardos conducted a study in California, Florida, Massachusetts, and Michigan consisting of 486 new teachers. She found that teachers left the profession because they were discouraged over the lack of assistance they received. She stated that “learning to teach is a developmental process that happens over time, often requiring several years. However, she claims, few schools view beginning teachers as novices who need help to master the art and craft of teaching” (Black, 2004, p. 4). “Researchers have found that well-designed mentoring programs increase retention rates for new teachers by improving their instructional skills, attitudes, and feelings of efficacy” (Andrews and Martin, 2003, p. 4). With the assistance of well-designed mentoring programs, the day-to-day responsibilities of the novice teacher could be less stressful and more rewarding to the students.

How Should States Mentor?

How to mentor is also a question many states grapple with. Some states focus on short-term mentoring while others create a more long-term program. These programs focus on “developing effective teaching practices (which concentrate) in developing the skills and dispositions in the emerging educator of reflection, self-assessment, openness to the perspectives and feedback of others, and continuous inquiry and growth” (Sweeney, 2001, p. 10). The more successful induction programs included three key propositions. The keys are: “new employee or inductees need support and continuing staff development to succeed, mentoring is an important piece of a successful induction strategy, and mentoring provides benefits for all participants” (Bauer and LeBlanc, 2002,
The one main goal of mentoring is to bring a veteran teacher together with the novice teacher to create a support environment for the students and school community.

The following suggestions to a successful mentoring program are as follows:

1. Mentoring is an important element in seeking to establish a strong sharing relationship between the mentor and first year teacher.

2. Novice teachers should not need to rely on a single source of support, such as their mentor teachers. In addition to being supportive and helpful themselves, administrators need to foster a collegial environment.

3. Building administrators should be aware of the many stressors that novice teachers encounter. In addition to mentors, novice teachers would benefit from being assigned to buddy teachers to promote socialization.

4. Train novice teachers to recognize the importance of establishing relationships with students (Schlichte, Yssel, and Merbler, 2005, p. 39).

In 1992, California looked into what was needed to create a successful mentoring program. The purpose of the program was as follows:

1. Provide an effective transition into teaching for first and second year teachers.

2. Improve educational performance of students through improved training information and assistance for new teachers.

3. Enable the professional success and retention of new teachers who show promise of becoming highly effective professionals.

4. Identify teaching novices who need additional feedback, assistance, and training to realize their potential to become excellent teachers (Olebe, 2001, p. 73-74).
Their research "confirmed that retention and success of new teachers was directly related to the projects' intensive site-based programs of support". Their data indicated a clear connection between the support provided for the novice teachers and the success of these beginning teachers (Colbert, Wolff, and Trimble, 1994, p.2). With California looking into ways to assist their novice teachers, many other states were looking into some type of induction program. "Induction needs to be part of a new culture of teacher professionalism" (Dymoke and Harrison, 2006, p. 72) in order for schools to have a successful learning atmosphere. Having a partner to exchange ideas, concerns, and struggles with will continue past the formal mentoring stage. Many of the problems that first year teachers have identified are:

1. Discipline and classroom management.
2. Dealing with individual differences.
3. Relations with parents.
4. Assessing students' work.
5. Organization of class work.
6. Insufficient materials and supplies.
7. Motivating students.
8. Lack of emotional support.
9. Planning and time management.
10. Communicating with students, other faculty members, and administrators.
11. Understanding the procedures and policies of the school.
13. Change in schedule.

15. Underestimation of the difficulties of teaching.

16. No formal or inadequate orientation.

17. No distinction between work requirements of beginners and veterans.

18. Limited opportunities for mutual exchange between beginners and veterans.

19. Inadequate professional training for practical knowledge and skills (Andrews and Martin, 2003, p. 6).

First year teachers also face the daunting task of developing their own personal attitudes, thoughts, feelings, expectations, and teaching styles. With support for these novice teachers, many of these first year problems and worries would be eliminated or at least diminished. One novice teacher stated:

“I think the more experienced teachers can add to a young teacher’s or new teacher’s way of doing things. They may not adopt exactly what the more experienced teacher is sharing with them, but at least it gives them more options than just coming out of the classroom to know the actual effects that are going to be realized” (Bauer and LeBlanc, 2002, p. 24).

Along with this support, the veteran teacher’s understanding of the profession is important. The veteran teacher’s understanding of the teaching process, improving the novice teacher’s professional practice, teacher development, standards, and student content are the areas the mentee needs guidance in routinely. With the support of the veteran teacher, the novice teacher has the opportunity to reach optimum potential. Many mentees possess the feeling of extreme gratitude that a mentor was there to assist them through the first few years in a new profession. “The habits formed during the induction years become the teacher’s disposition toward professional practice throughout his or her career” (Sweeny, 2001, p. 124).
How is Mentoring Being Used?

In 1998, The United States Department of Education reported that the use of mentoring programs has tripled in the last thirty years. (See Appendix A for a list of states currently using mentoring for their first year teachers) “The emergence of mentoring in education as a formal part of teacher induction may be seen as part of a broader trend involving the professionalization of teaching and the emergence of teaching as more collegial, collaborative, and team-based” (Bauer and LeBlanc, 2002, p. 6). As veteran teachers become involved with novice teachers, relationships are formed and a feeling of self-worth for both is provided. In California, 3,450 beginning teachers were surveyed pertaining to their experience with the mentoring program. They stated that “early connection between support providers and beginning teachers... appear(s) to be critical to the success of beginning teachers” (Meckel and Rolland, 2002, p. 18).

Research has also shown that one-on-one guidance between the veteran teacher and the novice teacher is an essential ingredient for a successful career for all involved. “Simply bringing two adults together is no guarantee of success” (Trubowitz, 2004, p. 59). A relationship must be formed where both individuals feel comfortable with each other.

Another key ingredient for novice teachers is the skill of reflection. When I mentored the novice teachers who were assigned to me, reflection was an important part of the process. Once a week, the mentee and I would sit down to discuss anything the new teacher felt was important to discuss. We also discussed any changes the mentee made or exciting events he/she wanted to share. Because we felt comfortable with each other, we were both able to express our feelings in a safe and secure environment. The main reason for reflection is to note instructional strategies and/or performance
assessments that worked or needed changing. Bouncing ideas off each other is another benefit to reflection. Reflection is also a tool to aid the mentee into becoming an independent and successful professional. One novice teacher stated that if the mentor had not encouraged self-reflection, she was not sure she would have done it (Bauer and LeBlanc, 2002). The veteran teacher “plants the seeds” and nurtures the novice teacher into becoming a confident individual. “Training and experience for novice teachers in the skills of self-evaluation (reflection) based on data can have the potential to promote career-long continuous professional development” (Sweeney, 2001, p. 133). The mentee will gain a repertoire of teaching strategies when the mentor is there to assist the new teacher. Because the mentee is reflecting in his/her own teaching styles, the veteran teacher does so also. “Mentoring represents a win-win situation because to truly serve as a mentor to a novice teacher, one must critically rethink one’s teaching methods and strategies” (Bauer and LeBlanc, 2001, p. 21).

Lastly, instructional observations are another key to successful mentoring. In one study, seventy-five percent of the respondents mentioned their mentors doing demonstration lessons as a valuable practice (Bauer and LeBlanc, 2001). A post-observation conference is a must for the novice teacher also. The feedback sessions, along with watching the veteran teacher demonstrate a research-based practice for the mentee, are “tool(s) to help new teachers think critically about their practice” (Bauer and LeBlanc, 200, p. 27). Confidentiality is a must for these discussions because without it, the trust between mentor and mentee would have never been established or had been broken.
Having access to each other is also key to establishing a relationship. If the two people involved never see or speak to each other, how can the novice teacher feel important to the veteran teacher? “Learning occurs most successfully for the mentee when they have regular opportunities to develop their knowledge and skill and to problem-solve issues of practice with the assistance of their mentors” (Bauer and LeBlanc, 2001, p. 23-24).

Having the mentor in the same environment as the mentee is a valuable tool. That way, the mentee will gain knowledge and understanding from the veteran teacher. “Mentoring encourages learning situations by providing opportunities for new teachers to critically rethink their teaching methods and strategies” (Bauer and LeBlanc, 2001, p. 28). Another plus to working in the same environment is the opportunities to talk about certain ways to teach and being able to show the mentee how to teach makes the difference in many instances. Having a supportive principal to allow for this time is a must. When both teachers are working at the same time, release time for the veteran teacher to assist the mentee needs to be accommodated. In the end, the students are the ones who benefit the most. When the novice teacher is able to learn and grow, his/her teaching abilities improve for the students.

Mentors are a key resource to an effective mentoring program. They provide the wealth of knowledge and experience that the novice teachers need in order to be successful.

“According to the National Educational Association (NEA), new teachers who participate in induction like mentoring are nearly twice as likely to stay in the profession. Some even believe that mentoring programs can cut the dropout rate from roughly fifty to fifteen percent during the first five years of teaching. Research on mentoring programs for beginning teachers showed that mentoring
was an effective strategy in efforts to recruit and retain teachers” (Anthony and Kritsonis, 2006, p. 3).

The mentors “help to blend the theory and the practice” (Tusin, 1995, p. 8) and to assist the mentee’s goal of becoming an effective teacher. Just as surgeons need time to perfect their practice, teachers need time and opportunities to order to become more proficient teachers.

Benefits of Mentoring

“The mechanics of teaching can be taught, but the love for children cannot. Mentors who are able to communicate their caring for children are better mentors...Because teaching is a new experience every time you walk into a classroom, good teachers build a repertoire of strategies and tools that they can use when they need them. Good mentors share their tools with their mentees and help them build their own repertoire” (Portner, 2001, p. 3).

This quote is only one of several of the benefits to classroom mentoring. One of the benefits that I reflect on first is that the mentor is knowledgeable about the school’s needs and issues, more veteran teachers are available for the mentee, and availability of the mentor to assist the mentee with his/her individual needs. Thinking back on the mentor’s own experiences, frustrations, and mistakes made during the first year of teaching helps to build a bond between the mentor and the mentee. If the mentee understands that the mentors will help them by making suggestions, providing resources and guidance, the mentee’s first year of teacher should be a better experience. This is what happened to me. I had a mentor my first year of teaching and learned a lot from her. I then used some of this experience and knowledge gained to help my mentees complete their first years of teaching. Being able to put myself in my mentee’s shoes helped to build a relationship right away
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Mentors are also there to “make things happen, look out for (the mentee) as individuals, see what (the mentee) needed, and get them involved” (Tusin, 1995, p. 7). A competent mentor will be there to observe the mentee’s lessons, give them important feedback to improve the lessons, and to be the friend that the mentee desperately needs when starting a new career. As on mentee stated:

“It doesn’t matter who you are, you are going to need to reach out to other people in teaching. That’s what teaching is all about. It isn’t keeping things to yourself. You are there to influence the lives of the children you teach... You have to collaborate with other people to make the learning environment for your children better” (Birrell and Bullough, Jr., 2005, p. 75).

Higher student achievement is accomplished through this supportive environment and feedback from the mentor to the mentee. Solving the problems together helps the novice teacher achieve success. Learning new and/or different instructional practices increases the repertoire for the mentee to draw upon which in turn improves student achievement. The lessons become more complex and challenging because the mentee has a wider range of instructional materials to use (Olebe, 2001).

Other benefits to having a mentor to assist the novice teacher are; having another set of eyes to watch over him/her, time to reflect upon lessons to learn from mistakes, and being able to work with other veteran teachers to receive sound advice and to gain knowledge about teaching. “Every beginning teacher...wants to find a mentor to be helpful, concerned, and the source of empathy and unconditional support” (Schlichte, Yssel, and Merbler, 2005, p. 37). By focusing on supporting the mentee, a higher level of teaching skill and abilities is established compared to new teachers who are entering the teaching profession without the assistance of a mentor. The retention of these teachers is higher when the mentor is there to create a relationship with the mentee and to provide
the novice teacher with a feeling of self-worth. The veteran teacher also gains the feelings of self-worth from the mentee because he/she is asking for explanations and demonstrations of teaching practices the veteran teacher may feel is routine. “Mentor teachers emphasize that working with a beginning teacher requires continual self-analysis of their own work, as they are asked to make explicit what has become automatic over the years in terms of procedural matters, curricular matters, instructional matters, and classroom management matters” (Bauer and LeBlanc, 2001, p. 8). Rethinking the how and why of a lesson benefits all parties involved. I can remember an instance when Denise asked me why I used certain research-based practices for my reading lessons. Because I had not thought about it for awhile, I was not able to answer her right away. After a day or so, with time to reflect on what I had been doing, I approached Denise with a feeble explanation of “because that was the way I had always done it”. That did not set well with me, so we discussed alternative practices to use and agreed for both of us to try them. We discussed the advantages and disadvantages and in the end we both used a mixture of research-based practices to enhance our lessons. The point of mentoring is that it is a relationship between both the mentor and mentee because they both play a critical role in the process in which they both learn. “The way a team plays as a whole determines its success. You may have the greatest bunch of individual stars in the world, but if they don’t play together, the club won’t be worth a dime” (Babe Ruth quoted from Creative Quotations, 2002: Rudney and Guillaume, 2003, p. 157). Sometimes the mentor may have to research and read articles written on the subject, attend workshops with the mentee, and/or discuss the question with other veteran teachers to obtain their opinions on the topic.
Another wonderful benefit to mentoring is asking the mentee to observe and conference with the veteran teacher about his/her own teaching practices. So many times the lessons become routine and intuitive that the veteran teacher may not even think about what is happening in the classroom. Having another set of eyes and ears to discuss the lesson with is so beneficial. The mentee may ask questions about certain aspects of the lesson that the mentor is not even aware of. Drawing attention to such matters forces the mentor to "reflect on their practices, unpack their decision-making process and choices, and articulate at a conscious level what was occurring almost unconsciously. It is a process that mentors find so exciting and beneficial" (Sweeney, 2001, p. 140). People become teachers because they love learning and that is also the case for the mentors. "The good mentor is a model of a continuous learner" (Rudney and Guillaume, 2003, p. 153). I found I had other veteran teachers asking me if I had learned any new research-based practices. This is a benefit in itself.

Challenges to a Mentoring Program

As with any great program, nothing is perfect. Mentoring has several challenges to a mentoring program. "Classroom expertise, hope, and good intentions, however, will not by themselves guarantee effective and accomplished performance as a mentor" (Portner, 2001, p. 5). When one stops and thinks about teachers he/she has had in the past, not every teacher would have been an effective mentor even though the years of experience justified being considered. Mentors need training to become effective mentors. Effective mentors posses the proper skills, including interpersonal skills. Mentors need to understand their role and the purpose for becoming a mentor. Working
Mentoring takes time and patience. It is not a simple, mechanical process that either party should take lightly.

Another challenge of mentoring is being placed in the position to formally assess their mentees. Mentors are to be facilitators of the learning process, not the assessor to assure final licensure. Louisiana made this change in their program after I completed the program in 1994-1995. My mentor was also my assessor. Differing roles did cause a conflict, but the other assessors understood this dilemma so I was able to complete the program. In 1998, I became a state certified assessor and mentor. I did not assess my mentees to determine employment because that would not have been fair for my mentee or for me. I was there to assist them during the first year of teaching, guide them through the assessment process, and to be there for them when they needed me. I believe Louisiana recognized that mentors must be separated from the assessor role much like others have also. Portner listed some strong distinctions between the role of the mentor and assessor as:

1. Mentoring is collegial; evaluating is hierarchical.
2. Mentoring is ongoing; evaluating visits are set by policy.
4. Mentoring keeps data confidential; evaluating files it and makes it available.
5. Mentoring uses data to reflect; evaluating uses it to judge.
6. In mentoring, value judgments are made by the teachers; in evaluation, they are made by the supervisor (Portner, 2001, p. 6).

If these lines are blurred, the novice teacher is put in the position of losing out on the true mentoring experiences.
Other challenge to the system comes into play when the mentor is placed in the position of having to fix a problem. This happened to me during my second year of mentoring. My mentee was in his second year of the assessment program due to the fact he failed the first year. My principal wanted me to “fix” his discipline problems. How was I to do this when he did not see his class as being unruly! After several post-conferences with him, he began to understand what I was talking about. I felt I was placed in an awkward position because I had the principal asking me questions that I felt I needed to keep confidential between my mentee and myself, but I was also accountable to her and the school district. Once again the fine line between being the mentor and having administration wanting certain tasks to be “fixed” was difficult to walk. I just kept reminding myself that my mentee was my first priority.

Challenges to a mentoring program also arise when the mentor feels superior to the novice teacher. The feeling of superiority can cause the mentee to turn to others for assistance. The mentee must feel that the mentor is there for him/her and their needs, not to fulfill the mentor’s own personal agenda. The job of the mentor is to develop the novice teacher’s profession, not slow down the process. I believe that proper training will help eliminate this thought process.

Not having a choice of mentors could potentially be a challenge. The “luck of the draw” does not work for all participants. Personality conflicts can greatly diminish the effectiveness of the program. If the mentee is not able to talk to the mentor and feel comfortable that the conversation will stay in the room and/or that the mentor will not be receptive to the mentee, the process will begin to erode for the novice teacher. One way to eliminate this problem is to let the new teachers meet with potential mentors before the
program begins. Within a matter of a few minutes, the two should be able to know whether or not they will be able to work together. Professionals do not want “the luck of the draw” to determine success or failure.

The challenges continue to arise when the classroom teacher is not able to receive release time to observe the first year teacher. The principal must play an active role in providing substitutes or coverage or the teachers will have more difficulty observing each other. Most principals do not want the extra expense for release time, so the mentor must be the one to step up and firmly ask for the scheduled observations to be a priority for the principal. I found if I worked with the principal several weeks in advance, I was more readily accommodated than if I approached her at the last minute. Planning is the key to successful release time.

Overworked mentors are another challenge to a mentoring program. So many teachers are asked to take on many roles. The principals tend to turn to the same people to assist him/her with many different tasks in the school. This is another time when the mentor must put the novice teacher first. Overworked mentors are not able to adequately assist the mentee with all of the needs the mentee naturally has. Being on multiple committees, having a classroom of his/her own, and then taking on the role of a mentor will leave everyone from the other committee members, students and parents, along with the novice teacher lacking for enough attention. Lack of time is a major factor in feeling whether the mentee is important or not. The mentor will not be able to be everything to everyone. Saying no to some of the principal’s requests is difficult, but must be done when entering the mentoring program. Trying to achieve a positive experience for the novice teacher is the goal of the mentor. If the novice teacher does not have a positive
experience, he/she may ultimately leave the profession because of feelings of inequity or unfairness (Bauer and LeBlanc, 2002).

Lastly, not having a formal program at all is a strong challenge of the mentoring program. “The mentoring of new teachers will never reach its potential unless it is guided by a deeper conceptualization that treats it as central to the task of transforming the teaching profession itself” (Bauer and LeBlanc, 2002, p. 9). Poor policies or program design will ultimately fail the novice teacher and/or the teaching profession as a whole if formal programs are not created.

Conclusion and Recommendations

After careful research and exploration of the mentoring programs, I believe that mentoring first year teachers is critical to the teaching profession. There are many variations of mentoring programs being used at the time, but many states are still having difficulty retaining quality teachers. Mentoring for first year teachers is essential in order to retain qualified teachers. This, in turn, will benefit the students give the expectations of No Child Left Behind’s expectations. Novice teachers develop into more informed teachers with the assistance of a mentor. These more informed teachers become veteran teachers who in turn become mentors to incoming first year teachers. School districts who properly train their mentors have more successful programs. Funding is an issue for most states, but the outcome of retaining quality teachers far exceeds the cost of the training. States that have cut the funding for mentoring programs are discovering that training large numbers of new teachers every year ends up costing the states more in the end.
Furthermore, I believe that the creation of a nationwide mentoring program would be beneficial to the teaching profession in the future. By creating a nationwide program, this would ensure all first year teachers, no matter where they live, will have the same opportunities to succeed in the teaching profession as any one else. Lower socio-economic or urban school districts are at the greatest risk of losing quality teachers because of the lack of mentoring. If all school districts mentored their novice teachers following the same program, I believe the US Department of Education would notice a decrease in the turnover rate in the urban areas.

For me, mentoring was a gift that was given to me by the state of Louisiana. My first year of teaching was with the assistance of a mentor. I learned a lot from her that helped me maintain my sanity during those very trying times of being a first year teacher. Since the 1994-1995 school year was the induction year for the mentoring program, I did experience some difficulties, but my assessment team was very supportive and made many suggestions that I carried through to the end of my teaching career in Louisiana. That was the first gift I received from the state. My second gift came in the form of training me to be a state certified assessor and mentor. Through my principal’s guidance and support, I was able to complete the training in a relatively short period of time. My first mentee was assigned to me shortly there after and so my mentoring experience began. This valuable skill that I have obtained has guided me through tough teaching times and into my master’s program. I can honestly say that I am a better teacher for having gone through the mentoring program as a first year teacher and then as a veteran teacher to assist others. I believe every first year teacher in this country should have the
opportunity to experience his/her first year of teaching with the assistance of a veteran teacher as a mentor.
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Appendix A

List of states with formal mentoring programs:

Alabama
Alaska
Arkansas
California
Connecticut
Delaware
District of Columbia
Florida
Georgia
Indiana
Idaho
Illinois
Iowa
Louisiana
Maine
Maryland
Massachusetts
Michigan
Mississippi
Missouri
New Hampshire
New Jersey
New Mexico
New York
North Carolina
Ohio
Oregon
Pennsylvania
Rhode Island
South Carolina
South Dakota
Tennessee
Texas
Utah
Vermont
Virginia
Washington
West Virginia
Wisconsin