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AN AUSTRALIAN MENTORING PROGRAM FOR BEGINNING TEACHERS; BENEFITS FOR MENTORS

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Mentoring programs for beginning teachers originated as response to the problems faced by novices in their transition from higher education to professional practice. However, with the spread of mentoring there has been increasing interest in the benefits of such programs for both novices and their teachers mentors. In the United States, where mentoring is a mass phenomenon, many programs provide mentors with formal training on topics such as communication, effective teaching, and theories of adult learning. Some provide rewards in the form of remuneration and/or professional credentials. The face-to-face mentoring experience itself is considered to provide many benefits for mentors, including renewal, reaffirmation of professional expertise, and opportunities for reflection.

Mentoring programs in Australian teacher training and induction are generally much younger and less formal than their American counterparts. Little has been written about their content or outcomes. This paper documents a recently established mentoring program for teacher interns in the School of Education at Charles Sturt University (CSU), Wagga Wagga. The program has been comprehensively evaluated, but our focus here is on the outcomes of the mentoring experience for mentors. In Australia as overseas, there is considerable interest in, and advocacy for, the use of mentoring programs as a form of professional development for qualified, practising teachers as well as novices. The benefits of these programs therefore demand careful scrutiny.

The paper describes the purpose and content of the new CSU program, reports what participating teachers say about the experience of mentoring a beginning teacher, and makes some comments concerning the preparation of teacher mentors. We begin with a brief overview of American research on the benefits of mentoring programs for teacher mentors.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

According to their advocates, mentoring programs for beginning teachers can have a wide range of benefits for the teachers who participate as mentors. These include;

- encouraging reflection on one's own
- knowledge, beliefs and practices;
- developing specific skills such as listening,
- observing and counselling;
- renewing and revitalising teachers, especially those who may be experiencing mid-career doldrums;
- providing appreciation and recognition of experienced teachers; and enhancing teachers' self-esteem and selfconfidence through the experience of shaping another's development (Kelly, Beck and Thomas, 1992; Killion, 1990; Schultz. 1995).

In the vast literature on mentoring in education, there is a small body of empirical research that attempts to assess the extent to which mentoring programs confer these benefits. Much of this work tends, like the literature on mentoring generally, to be couched in vague, 'feel good' terms such as 'growth' and 'development', which do not concretely document the outcomes of mentoring. In addition, some studies simply present subjects with a list of possible benefits of mentoring, against which the are asked to indicate their level of concurrence. The potential problems of response bias, inherent in research designs of this type, limits the value of these studies. Nevertheless the existing research does provide an essential starting point for any new investigation of the subject. Three American studies provide a representative flavour of the literature. Yossha (1991) examined the outcomes of mentoring in a beginning teacher induction program in Connecticut. She asked mentors to indicate, using a rating scale, whether and how the induction program had affected them. Almost 90 percent of mentors agreed 'strongly' or 'somewhat' that acting as a mentor had

provided increased opportunities for professional growth, increased their interaction with other professionals, made them feel that they had a positive impact on the teaching profession, and increased their sense of feeling respected as professionals. In addition, almost two thirds of respondents indicated that they had used the expertise they had gained as mentors in professional activities outside of the mentoring role.

Stevens (1995) surveyed teachers in Philadelphia who had served as mentors in teacher induction programs. She asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement, on a five-point scale, with a list of over 50 statements about the possible benefits of mentoring. Over 80 percent of the mentors agreed 'somewhat', 'very much' or ,extensively' with 20 of these statements. The statements which received the highest level of agreement (over 90 percent) included mentors' pride in transferring their skills and knowledge to another, contributing generally to the development of the profession, and undertaking deeper analysis of their own teaching practice.

Ganser (1994) used a more complicated research design to investigated how mentors perceived the value of mentoring for both mentors and beginning teachers. He asked mentors to assign a weighted rank to a list of possible benefits of mentoring, which had been originally derived from an open-ended survey. Interestingly, subjects judged the benefits of mentoring for the beginning teacher to be almost two and a half times those for the mentor. Among benefits for mentors, those assigned the highest ranking were reflection and introspection about teaching, learning new ideas and renewal, and the satisfaction of helping someone.

CSU PROGRAM

In 1996 CSU Wagga Wagga implemented an extended practicum program for final-year Bachelor of Education students. In this program, students, termed associate teachers or associates for short, are placed in a school for 10 weeks and assume total responsibility for a class after a short settling-in period. This is a far greater responsibility than students have hitherto undertaken so a mentoring program was also established to provide students with professional guidance and support throughout the placement. Each student is assigned mentor, who is not the normal class teacher, and with whom they meet at least weekly.

In 1996, when this study was undertaken, the University was in transition from the three year Bachelor of Teaching to the new four year Education qualification. The extended practicum program therefore involved only those students who had already completed their practicum requirements as part of the old degree but had opted to take part in the new program so as to obtain additional experience.

Schools participated in the program by application. The majority of teacher participants became mentors by request form their school executive, although three mentors were Principals themselves, two teaching and one non-teaching. Teachers were asked to participate because of one or a number of characteristics, including ability, experience, interpersonal skills and capacity to benefit.

Twenty-two teachers participated as mentors in 1996, from schools around the University placement region. Fifteen members of this group took part in the study. Of these, all but two were aged over 40 years; the remainder were in the age groups 26-30 and 30-40. There were 11 females and all had previous experience in practicum supervision.

Mentor preparation consisted of single session, of about two hours, with the University's practicum co-ordinator. The following topics were discussed:

- the role of the mentor;
- establishing responsibilities and expectations in the mentoring relationship;
- practical arrangements for mentoring - regular meetings between mentored and mentor, suggestions for meeting content, and so on;
- documentation of the mentoring process;
- the competency-based framework used as the criteria for evaluation;
- the evaluation process; and

- procedures to be adopted in the event of problems.

Mentors were conceived as having multiple roles. Most importantly, they were expected to be a 'critical friend' - to provide both psychological support and be a 'safe' source of constructive professional criticism. They were also expected to mediate between the associate teacher and the normal teacher of the associate's class. Mentors were responsible for evaluating the associate teacher's beginning teachers is controversial, and outside the scope of this paper. In this program, evaluation of associates by mentors was considered both acceptable and desirable.

At the conclusion of the extended practicum each mentor was asked to submitted a brief (one to two page) report to the practicum coordinator which documented how they carried out the mentoring role and how they had benefited from it. Fifteen mentors provided reports and these were the principal source of data for this study. The report involved answering a series of open-ended questions about the mentoring experience. Subjects' responses to these questions were categorised, tallied and grouped into broader categories.

After the reports had been received the coordinator conducted semi-structured interviews of 30 to 60 minutes with a random sub-sample of six mentors. During the interview mentors were encouraged to elaborate on their written comments about the benefits of mentoring. Towards the end of the interview the coordinator asked mentors to comment on a prepared list of possible benefits of mentoring, drawn up from the American research

literature. The mentors were sent the list prior to the interview, but it was only raised after mentors had already spoken at length, so as to avoid or at least minimise prompting mentors' answers. The interviews were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed.

FINDINGS

Mentoring activities

All of the mentors reported they had held regular, scheduled meetings with their associate. Eleven of the mentors stated that these meetings took place on a weekly basis. At these meetings a frequent approach (I I mentors) was to work through the competency framework, dealing with a different part each week. Four mentors mentioned that the meetings were used as an opportunity for the associate to discuss any areas of concern to them. Ten mentors stated that they had frequent informal discussions with the associate, in addition to the scheduled meetings; these discussions took place on occasions such as recess, lunch, and in the playground. Five mentors stated that the final evaluation report on the associate was prepared on a joint basis, with the associate contributing notes and comments.

Mentors also mentioned a wide range of other activities they had undertaken with the associate. These included:

- having the mentor take charge of 'problem' children so as to give the associate time to teach (one mentor);
- taking time lo talk to the associate when he or
- she had had a bad day (one mentor);
- giving demonstrations of classroom practice
- (two mentors);
- organising joint rostering in the playground to provide time for discussion (two mentors); and
- visiting the associate's classroom (one mentor).

Five mentors described how they had taken special care at the beginning of the placement to developrapport with the associate and to provide practical orientation on matters such as school policies and practices.

BENEFITS OF MENTORING

Written reports

One of the questions in the written report asked participants to describe how they had benefited from acting as a mentor. The table below sets out the final categorisation of answer to this question, alongside findings from the American studies for comparison purposes. In this study, like Ganser's, the most frequently mentioned benefit of mentoring, mentioned by two thirds of mentors, was that serving as a mentor had caused teachers to reflect on their own teaching knowledge, beliefs and practices. The following comments are typical;

'Mentoring, for me, enabled me to analyse Why am I doing this? I felt I had to explain the purpose of my suggestions to the Associate teacher. I could then look at my own practices and find a possible need for improvement or a needed injection of a new course of action.'

'Best practice of teaching is a concept. I was grateful to be able to act in a mentoring role that allowed me to re-visit and articulate what I believed good teaching to be all about.'

'A mentor could not assist a beginning teacher become a reflective thinker and learn to critically appraise his/her own teaching without engaging in the same processes. As a mentor, I was constantly evaluation my own teaching competencies, acknowledging my weakness, and seeking alternative strategies, resources and approaches. This to me, is a vital aspect of teaching and will always be ongoing. Critical self evaluation does not mean failure, rather to the contrary, it is a sign of professional growth. As a mentor, I needed to demonstrate that I was happy to be a "risk-taker", and will always be engaging in self-appraisal.'

The second most frequently mentioned benefit of mentoring, cited by nine respondents, was that mentors had broadened their knowledge and / or practice of teaching as a result of participating in the program. Some of these mentors felt that they had benefited from the campus-based learning of the associate teachers, which they considered more up to date than their own knowledge about teaching;

'It was good to see the latest developments in what the University considers to be appropriate planning and good teaching practice. I always enjoy getting new ideas from different teachers to enhance my own teaching. (The associate teacher) was able to offer some new and innovative ideas.'

'(I)t was beneficial to see new ideas that are based upon the theory that is taught at university.'

'(The associate teacher) initiated some very effective classroom schemes and I proposed to continue with some of these. We never stop learning.'

Three mentors specifically mentioned that they had gained valuable knowledge from the competency framework which was used as a basis for join planning, review and evaluation by associate teacher and mentor.

Only about one quarter of mentors mentioned the experience of rejuvenation that is so frequently mentioned by advocated of mentoring. However, for these mentors the experience of renewal does appear to have been particularly regarding:

'The simple fact of being able to work with a teacher, full of fresh ideas, vitality and keenness was a worthwhile professional experience in its own right.'

'Professionally it was great to get to know other beginning teachers and to listen and learn from them. Their enthusiasm for teaching was infectious!'

Reported benefits of mentoring for mentors:

Comparison of CSU and American programs

CSU Program- Written Reports		American Studies - Five Most Highly Rated Benefits Yosha(1991)
Reflection on one's beliefs and practices	10	Increased opportunities for professional growth
		Increased interaction with other education professionals
New knowledge	9	Sense of having an impact on the profession
		Sense of feeling respected
Rejuvenation/renewal elsewhere	5	Development of expertise that can be applied
Development of skills in communication/supervision etc	4	Stevens (1995):
		Sense of pride in helping another to get started in the profession
		Satisfaction in transferring knowledge

		and skills to another
Greater understanding of beginning teachers	3	Sense of pride in contributing to improvement of the profession Greater awareness of the problems and stress of new teachers
Satisfaction of helping another	1	New friendships
		Ganser (1994):
Affirmation of one's expertise	1	Reflection and introspection about teaching Learning new ideas, renewal Satisfaction of helping someone Challenge of a new role Honour and recognition, boost to self-esteem

'In the current educational climate I wondered if it was going to be too difficult to keep a positive light on teaching. The last thing an associate teacher needs is a disillusioned mentor, lacking inspiration. At the end of my role, I have rediscovered my enthusiasm and aptitude for working closely with colleagues. I have honed my listening skills. I know I am capable of a support role and have regained my positive attitude. I am enjoying a feeling of great job satisfaction.'

The same proportion of mentors stated that they had acquired or sharpened specific skills as a result of participation in the mentoring programs. These included time management, interpersonal, observation, report writing and supervisory skills.

Three mentors mentioned that they now had a much better appreciation of the situation of beginning teachers. The following comment is representative:

'I found being a mentor an invaluable experience, it helped me to get in touch with some of the issues that plague beginning teachers, things that you forget about as time goes on and then expect beginning teachers to know. The reality is many teachers on their first class have to discover solutions to many problems on their own, when just next doormay be someone who has the experience and is willing to help.'

In contrast with Stevens' findings, only one teacher in this study explicitly indicated that mentoring had provided a sense of satisfaction in helping another. Similarly, only one teacher mentioned that mentoring had provided a feeling of affirmation of her professional competence.

INTERVIEWS

The interviews enabled the six selected mentors to elaborate at length on the comments they had made in the written report. A striking feature of the interviews was the spontaneous comments of nearly all of the mentors focussed on only one benefit of mentoring or one cluster of closely related benefits.

Each mentor appears to have been 'struck' predominantly by one aspect of the mentoring experience.

One teacher enthused about the sheer pleasure of working with young people and had established an ongoing friendship with her associate teacher. The associate had given her flowers at the end of the practicum and she in turn had provided the associate with references and continued to keep track of her career. She mentioned that because of the aging of the teaching profession there was little opportunity to work with young professionals. The overwhelming impression from this interview was the pleasure this mentor had experienced working with a beginning teacher.

Another teacher was equally enthusiastic about the way mentoring had caused her to deeply question, justify and extend her understanding of teaching. For example, she had spent a long time with the associate discussing different philosophies of assessment and approaches to report writing;

'To do that I then had to rethink everything. Am I doing things that I believe in or am I contradicting myself? Is this valid? Why do I believe this? And I was substantiating my own ideas on that.'

For this mentor, participation in the program appears to have been a highly challenging and rewarding experience. It was striking, however, that she too did not spontaneously talk about the other possible benefits of mentoring. When the coordinator asked her to comment on the prepared list, she did indicate that she had experienced some of the other benefits of mentoring, but her comments were brief and at times indifferent - 'not so much there', 'don't know', 'yes, but it's mainly the student's work, not mine'.

This pattern was repeated throughout the interview. Mentors were enthusiastic about one or two ways in which they had benefited from the program, but were generally half-hearted in their response to the other possible benefits on the prepared list.

For the mentors interviewed in this study, therefore, the experiencing of mentoring was a very individual one; mentoring was not all things to all people, as is the impression conveyed in some of the American studies. This finding is perhaps not surprising, but it highlights how variable the process of mentoring is, with the influence of multiple individual factors such as personality, experience, teaching style and philosophy. This has possible implications for mentor preparation which are discussed below.

DISCUSSION

The perceived benefits of the CSU program were similar in nature and breadth to those identified in the American research. They confirm that mentoring programs for beginning teachers can be a valuable form of school-based professional development for teachers participating as mentors. In particular, the responsibilities required of a mentor appear to be particularly potent in encouraging teachers to reflect on their own teaching assumptions, beliefs and practices. Thus mentoring may be a valuable means of promoting reflective, critical practice, so widely acknowledged as an essential element of effective teaching. One significant difference between the CSU program and mentoring programs in the United States is the degree of preparation undertaken by mentors. According to Feiman-Nemser (1996), most American mentoring programs provide some orientation or training. In the studies cited above, training ranged from short courses of one day or longer to university courses in mentoring. As described above, the teacher mentors in the CSU program participated in a discussion and briefing session but did have any formal training.

Notwithstanding the positive outcomes of the Australian program, it is likely that the teacher mentors would have benefited more had some form of training be provided. Feiman-Nemser emphasises the importance of training before mentoring commences and in addition the provision of opportunities during the mentoring process for mentors to discuss questions and problems that arise. As she points out, the work of teaching does not equip teachers well for the task of mentoring;

“Mentor teachers have little experience with the core activities of mentoring - observing and discussing teaching with colleagues. Most teachers work alone, in the privacy of their classrooms, protected by norms of autonomy and noninterference. Nor does the culture of teaching encourage distinctions among teachers based on expertise. The persistence of privacy, the lack of opportunities to observe and discuss each other's, and the tendency to treat all teachers as equal limits what mentors can do” (p.3).

It is worth noting in this regard that one of the teacher mentors stated emphatically in her interview that she would not have derived nearly as much benefit from mentoring had she not recently undertaken relevant tertiary studies. Another of the interviewed mentors felt that he would have benefited much more from the experience had the preparation been more extensive.

In the current fiscal climate it is unlikely that resources will be available to provide elaborate training for teacher mentors. However, it should be possible to develop short, cost-effective courses, particularly given the availability of technologies that facilitate distance education and interactive learning.

Finally, the limitations of the study should be noted. This first year of the CSU program involved a small group of

teacher mentors, coming from schools that participated by choice. The individual mentors were likely to benefit from participation because of their personal and professional characteristics. Not all mentoring or school-based teacher training takes place under such auspicious circumstances. Research on other mentoring programs would assist in developing a representative picture of the outcomes of mentoring. Another issue which warrants future research is the question of the obstacles to effective mentoring. This was not investigated in the present study, although several participants mentioned that lack of time had hampered the mentoring process to some degree. Future studies on these issues, together with the development of appropriate training programs, would enhance the outcomes of mentoring for all participants.

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