

A Survey of Mentoring Programs for Novice K-12 Teachers in West Virginia Public Schools

By

Kristina R. Weimer
West Virginia University
Morgantown, West Virginia

Abstract

During the first three years of teaching, most novice teachers are still learning how to apply the principles of teaching to the practice of teaching. Lack of personal experience often places novice teachers at a disadvantage when issues arise. Many find themselves unprepared for the daily mental and physical demands of the profession and become overwhelmed. Novice teachers need consistent support in order to be successful. Those who have access to support networks will be better equipped to gain the knowledge and experience required to meet the needs of their students and prosper in the profession. Mentoring is one such form of support that increases the effectiveness and retention of novice teachers. The purpose of this study was to investigate mentoring programs currently in existence for novice K-12 teachers in West Virginia public schools by exploring the nature, structure, and content of these mentoring programs with a survey of all 55 county school districts in the state. The study showed that nearly 100% of responding districts had mentoring programs that had been in place anywhere from one to 20 years. Other findings reflected the goals and timeframe of mentoring programs, mentor qualifications, mentor compensation, program assessment, and participant perceptions of the programs. The results of this survey may inform policy-makers and program designers in developing new or modifying existing mentoring programs to better assist novice teachers, especially novice music teachers, in their first years of teaching.

A main purpose of college and university teacher education programs is to prepare competent teachers. However, it is not possible for teacher education programs to provide teachers with all of the knowledge, skills, understandings, and experiences they need before they begin their professional teaching careers.

Novice teachers are generally considered to be those who are non-tenured, typically in their first four years of teaching (Blair, 2008, p. 113). Several of the challenges novice teachers face relate to instruction, assessment, instructional materials, classroom management, administrative duties, and interactions with parents (Conway, 2006). Many find themselves unprepared for the daily mental and physical demands of the profession and become frustrated and overwhelmed. Often, they do not receive the professional support they need in their first years of teaching in order to be effective. Benson's (2008) analysis of literature regarding mentoring programs for new music teachers revealed that this lack of support is a main reason why many new teachers leave the profession.

In response to the need to support and retain novice teachers, school districts have implemented several induction programs to assist new teachers as they begin their careers. Conway (2003) defined "induction" as "a time of transition/socialization when teachers are moving from teacher preparation to teaching practice" (p. 29). Wong (2005) defined induction as "a comprehensive, coherent, and sustained professional development process that is originated by a school district to train, support, and retain new teachers, which then seamlessly guides them into a lifelong learning program" (p. 43). Induction provides a hands-on opportunity for novice teachers to connect the theories and practice of

instruction learned in a teacher preparation program with the actual practice of teaching (American Federation of Teachers, 2001).

Mentoring is at the center of many teacher induction programs. Mentoring relationships date from ancient Greece and can be found throughout history in education, religion, the arts, guilds and apprenticeship systems, business and industry, literature, and other media. It originated as a nurturing, insightful, supportive, and affirming relationship, and it remains largely the same today (Haack & Smith, 2000).

For purposes of this study, “mentoring program” describes the pairing of a novice teacher with a more experienced teacher to assist in easing the transition into the teaching profession and improving the quality of teaching. Other aspects of a mentoring program may include increasing the confidence of new teachers and increasing the retention rate of new teachers (American Federation of Teachers, 1998).

The importance of mentoring is evident in music education literature. Hill said, “the most powerful way of retaining teachers in the profession is by mentoring. Teachers in their first three years need a helping hand, a friendly guide through the rough terrain of the profession. Teaching is an art, not a science, and those who become successful often are the ones with a mentor who helps make teaching a positive experience” (Ponick, Keating, Pontiff, & Wilcox, 2003, p. 24).

Mentors facilitate the growth of novice teachers beyond the teacher education curriculum. They give concrete advice, pose questions to prompt reflection, model teaching techniques in the classroom, and offer feedback from observations of novice teachers. Mentors create an environment based on collaboration, exchange of ideas, and professionalism. Their experience helps the novice teacher balance professional

development with day-to-day details (Moir, 2005). Those who have access to support networks will be better equipped to gain the knowledge and experience required to meet the needs of their students and feel more positive about their commitment to teaching (Krueger, 1999; 2003).

Review of Related Literature

Literature reveals several points relevant to the present study. First, mentoring is an important aspect of teacher induction programs. Teacher mentoring as a part of induction has a positive impact on teachers. Second, mentoring is one way to increase the effectiveness and retention of novice teachers. Research has shown an association between whether novice teachers received induction and mentoring support and their likelihood of remaining in the profession. Novice teachers who were assisted by a mentor appear to have fewer problems in the first year of teaching than those without a mentor. Third, mentoring assists novice teachers with curriculum, planning, assessment, classroom management, school policy, and teacher-parent interactions. Fourth, most novice teachers in the United States experience inadequate services and a lack of consistency in their mentoring programs. Studies indicate that educators at the state and local levels should be responsible for the design and implementation of mentoring programs.

With regard to novice music teachers, the literature suggests that: a) they have unique needs; b) their feelings of isolation are common; c) they have specific ideas about what types of assistance they find most and least helpful; d) they find mentors and colleagues with whom they can collaborate, discuss problems, and share ideas to be most beneficial; and e) the most effective mentoring programs match mentor by subject matter

and grade, have clearly defined qualifications for choosing mentors, provide adequate training and stipends for mentors, and provide mentors time to leave their classes and observe their mentees in action.

Problem of the Study

Mentoring programs for novice teachers, including novice music teachers, vary greatly in their design and implementation. The West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) states that it is “committed to having a highly qualified and highly effective teacher in every classroom in West Virginia” (West Virginia Department of Education, 2009). In light of this commitment, it is important to know the status of mentoring programs for novice K-12 teachers in West Virginia public schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate mentoring programs currently in existence for novice K-12 teachers in West Virginia public schools. The study explored the nature, structure, and content of these mentoring programs with a survey of all 55 county school districts in the state. This survey revealed information that will be useful to West Virginia Department of Education officials and West Virginia K-12 school administrators who are considering implementation of novice teacher mentoring programs. In particular, data from this study may be used in developing new or enhancing existing mentoring programs to address the unique needs of novice K-12 music teachers. The principal research question was: What is the status of mentoring programs for novice K-12 teachers in West Virginia public schools?

Procedures

This study employed a survey adapted from instruments utilized by the Montana Certification Standards and Practices Advisory Council (CSPAC)/Office of Public Instruction (Montana Certification Standards and Practices Advisory Council (CSPAC)/Office of Public Instruction, 2007), and the Nevada Legislature Legislative Committee on Education (Nevada Legislative Counsel Bureau, 2008). The survey was mailed to the appropriate administrator in charge of curriculum and instruction or professional development for each county school district in West Virginia ($N=66$).

Prior to mailing the survey, a pilot study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of the survey instrument. Current music education graduate students at West Virginia University ($n=4$) were invited to participate in the pilot process. After analyzing their responses, the researcher made any necessary modifications to the survey instrument.

The researcher mailed a cover letter and survey document with a self-addressed, stamped envelope to each appropriate administrator to facilitate response, resulting in a response rate of 43.93% ($n=29$). The researcher compiled all responses in a database and analyzed these data using appropriate survey analysis techniques under the guidance of a faculty advisor.

Analysis

Data indicate that 28 of 29 responding school districts have a county-wide mentoring program for novice teachers. These programs have been in place anywhere from one to over 20 years. These data may suggest a response bias in favor of mentoring.

Designs of these mentoring programs vary and include West Virginia Center for Professional Development (WVCPD), West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE), Regional Education Service Agencies (RESA), personnel departments, curriculum and instruction departments, and assistant superintendents. Administrators of these programs also vary and include personnel officers or personnel directors, curriculum coordinators, assistant superintendents, superintendents, directors of instructional services, and principals.

The statements that best describe the teacher mentoring program activities in each school district fall into three main categories: formal county-wide mentoring activities planned and implemented by district administration (67.85%), formal county-wide mentoring activities planned and implemented by building administration (57.14%), and informal county-wide mentoring activities planned and implemented by building administration (42.85%).

According to the data, the main goals of most of these mentoring programs are to support teachers, to help them transition into the teaching profession, and to retain them in their teaching positions. The main goals for the mentors are to provide support; to assist with instructional strategies, lesson planning, and classroom management; and to observe the mentees. The main goals for the mentees are to become familiar with school and county policies, to receive support, and to develop skills.

Twenty-eight of 29 of responding school districts stated that all first-year teachers receive mentoring, and in 25 of these districts they receive this mentoring for one year.

The qualifications a teacher must possess in order to serve as a mentor and the procedures for identifying mentor teachers vary throughout the state. To be qualified,

nearly all teachers must attend state-mandated training and must have a minimum of three to five years of teaching experience. Identification of prospective mentors occurs when interested teachers bid on the position as a job posting and/or when the school or county administration selects them.

Over half of the responding districts ($n=16$) stated that the mentor teacher is not required to be a teacher of the same subject as the mentee, and 11 stated that a mentor must be of the same subject. Respondent comments indicate that a mentor and a mentee should be teachers of the same subject whenever possible. Data indicate that mentors and mentees are often paired according to both school and subject.

Every responding district stated that mentor teachers receive formal training as mentors. Mentors are trained by the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE), the West Virginia Center for Professional Development (WVCPD), the Regional Education Service Agencies (RESA) department, or a combination of each of these organizations. The format and content of the mentor teacher training vary greatly.

The types of mentoring activities that occur in the teacher mentoring programs fit into several categories: regular one-on-one meetings of mentor and mentee (100%), orientations for novice teachers and/or teachers new to the district (89.29%), mentor observations of mentee teaching (82.14%), mentor coaching of mentee classroom management (78.57%), mentee observations of mentor teaching (71.42%), mentor coaching of mentee non-teaching responsibilities (64.28%), and collaborative lesson planning (60.71%). A variety of resources, including books, curriculum coaches, and websites are available to support the mentor and the mentee.

Data revealed that mentor teachers in 26 of the 28 responding districts are compensated for their service as mentors, with most receiving a state stipend of \$600.00 per year. In two responding districts, teacher mentors are compensated a different amount – \$500.00 in one district and \$1,000.00 in the other.

In 17 of 27 responding school districts that indicated mentoring programs, fewer than half of the teachers who are qualified to serve as mentors actually do so. In the remaining 10 of 27 responding school districts, more than half of the teachers who are qualified to serve as mentors actually do so.

Regular assessment of mentoring programs occurs in over half of the responding districts ($n=16$). The format and content of teacher mentoring program assessment vary, but some respondents state that documentation in the form of mentor/mentee logs, surveys, and other paperwork is submitted throughout the school year.

When asked if there is any evidence from the teacher mentoring program to suggest any relationship of mentoring to retention of teachers, 15 of 28 districts responded. Eight of the 15 answered “yes”; seven of the 15 answered “no.” Of the districts that responded yes, six stated that their districts experienced either a turnover rate of teachers lower than the national average or lower than had occurred in that district before the implementation of a mentoring program.

According to this survey, nearly 90% of respondents believe that participating teachers perceive the mentoring program positively. Respondent recommendations for future improvements to the teacher mentoring programs in various school districts included more training, more time with the mentees, more pay for mentors, more activities for mentor and mentee, better program evaluation, and more program accountability.

Discussion

Data indicate that almost 100% of responding school districts in West Virginia have a county-wide mentoring program, and that many of these programs have been in place since the state mandated them in 1991. However, a number of differences in various aspects of the mentoring programs exist across school districts. Variations exist in the following areas: program design and administration, program goals, goals for mentors, goals for mentees, qualifications of prospective mentors, procedures for identifying mentors, pairings of mentors and mentees, training of mentors, and assessment of mentoring program.

Mentoring programs are regularly assessed in only 16 of responding school districts. In many cases, the assessment is informal and includes surveys, mentor and mentee logs, interviews, and other documentation. Assessments are completed by teachers, principals, or other administrators. Few responses indicate that districts make any program adjustments based on the assessments.

Survey results indicated the need for improvements in existing mentoring programs. When asked “in your opinion, what improvements to the teacher mentoring program in your district should be considered for the future?,” respondents indicated “more accountability,” “better compensation,” “updated training,” and “more collaboration time.” One respondent indicated that the district was working toward improving the teacher mentoring program. Another respondent stated that “forms are being made to better address the needs of the mentees,” and another stated “seeking grant funding to provide a county-based mini-academy based on the work of H. Wong.”

One responding district stated “WV has very specific requirements related to mentors. The WV Center for Professional Development is charged with mentor training. They establish guidelines.” However, results of this survey indicate variations in the guidelines for mentoring programs. This discrepancy suggests that the West Virginia State Department of Education needs to have clearly articulated, published requirements for novice teacher mentoring programs, and that school districts need to be aware of these requirements and held accountable for implementing them.

Related research reveals that more than 30 states presently have some form of teacher mentoring. However, this does not guarantee that those programs are comprehensive or complete. Model mentoring programs are currently in place in other states, such as the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) program in California, the Teacher Assistance Program (TAP) in Washington, and the Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) program in Connecticut.

The beginning years of teaching can do much to determine an educator’s future path. Policy-makers and program designers must realize that novice teachers need programs in place to help them examine, reflect upon, and grow in the teaching profession. If novice teachers emerge from the first years feeling positive about their accomplishments, they are more likely to remain in the profession.

Summary

This study revealed that nearly 90% of West Virginia teachers who participate in their district mentoring program do so for only one year. However, according to Conway, Krueger, Robinson, Haack and Smith (2002), the second year of teaching may actually be

more challenging than the first year. During the second year, teachers typically become more reflective about student learning and more concerned with longer-term curricular planning (Randall, 2010). During the first three years of teaching, most novice teachers are still learning how to apply the principles of teaching to the practice of teaching. They do not always have the wisdom gained from personal experience to manage issues with students, parents, and administrators. Novice teachers should be required to participate in induction programs, including mentoring programs for more than one year so they may grow and succeed in the teaching profession.

The results of this survey of novice teacher mentoring programs in West Virginia public schools may assist policy-makers and program designers in strengthening mentoring programs by providing valuable information regarding the nature, structure, and content of mentoring programs. This information may also inform policy-makers and program designers in developing new mentoring programs or modifying existing mentoring programs to better assist novice teachers, especially novice music teachers, in their first years of teaching.

Although this study provides useful insight into novice teacher mentoring programs in West Virginia public schools, its broader application is somewhat limited. In order to provide a broader look at the nature and content of mentoring programs, future research should investigate a larger sample of novice teacher mentoring programs. In order to provide a more in-depth look, future research should study novice teacher mentoring programs longitudinally. Continued research on mentoring programs is crucial if school districts are to improve the support necessary to develop and retain successful teachers in the education profession.

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