Perceptions of New Teachers: A Case Study of a Mentoring Program in a Midwest

Semi-Rural Parochial School

by

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of Michigan-Flint in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the teacher-to-teacher mentoring experience of new teachers in a designated mentoring program through questionnaires, interviews, and an examination of archived teacher evaluations and administrator's notes. The results show that teacher-to-teacher mentoring at the research site does assist new teachers in acclimating to the school culture, working with parents, instructional content and teaching practices, and classroom management. Workplace relationships are an overarching theme that provides a lens to view all other support. This research found that the collegial friendship between mentors and mentees is the most important and most appreciated aspect of the studied teacher-to-teacher mentoring program.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF APPENDICES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

"The first year of teaching is difficult." This statement was spoken to me by one of my education professors before beginning student teaching. His prediction proved true. As I started my teaching career, working in isolation, I longed for help from a more experienced teacher. I left teaching after the first year, returning a year later. Upon my return to teaching in a different state, I found a supportive teacher in a neighboring classroom who befriended me, checked on me several times a week, and offered to help in any way. This relationship single-handedly renewed my passion for teaching, and I quickly improved as a teacher.

The turnover rate for teachers is higher than other professions, with nearly three in ten teachers changing schools or quitting teaching after the first year (Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll & Perda, 2010; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Twenty percent of teachers will leave the profession in the first three years (Henke & Zahn, 2001), and nearly half of new teachers will be in a different profession within five years (Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Murnane et al., 1991).

Facing major teacher shortages, school leaders will struggle to provide quality teachers for all students (Sutcher et al., 2019). Millions of new teachers are needed to serve the growing population of students and replace retiring baby boomers (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Yasin, 1999). Of those who migrate to other schools or leave the profession entirely, 25% report that they do so because of "dissatisfaction" (Ingersoll, 2001). The high rate of teacher attrition accounts for nearly 90% of teacher demand (Sutcher et al., 2019). Sutcher et al. (2019) also found that less than one-third of teacher vacancies are due to retirement.

Teacher migration and turnover harm students and the school environment (Boyd et al., 2012). Ronfeldt et al. (2013) found a direct link between teacher turnover and the math and reading scores of elementary students. The effects of teacher migration or teachers leaving the profession are most felt by schools in low-income communities (Haycock, 2000; Scafidi et al., 2007), often undermining school improvement efforts (Ingersoll, 1997). Title 1 schools experience a 50% greater turnover rate than non-Title 1 schools, and the turnover rate is 70% greater in schools with more than 55% students of color compared to schools with less than 10% students of color (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Each leaving teacher costs an urban district $20,000 or more (Sutcher et al., 2019).

While other professions induct new employees with close supervision, teachers often have little access to experienced teachers who could help them take their training and put it into practice (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007). Unfortunately, teachers often work in isolation, with new teachers expected to meet the same expectations as their more experienced counterparts (Hill & Barth, 2004; Smylie, 1996). Beginning teachers report feeling isolated (Stanulis et al., 2007) and overwhelmed (O'Neill, 2004; Rogers & Babinski, 1999). In addition, administrators often hire teachers late, even after the school year begins, making a successful first year an even bigger challenge (Liu & Johnson, 2006).

To address teacher retention issues and help new teachers better assimilate to the teaching profession, many schools and states have implemented teacher induction programs, recognizing new teachers need extra training and support to be successful. Teacher induction programs may include new employee orientation days, additional administrator observation and feedback cycles, and ongoing professional development. Teacher induction programs help new teachers better assimilate to their new profession (Reitman & Karge, 2019) and result in fewer teachers

changing schools or leaving the profession completely (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). The new teachers' perception of the support of the school environment, particularly from administrators, is the most predictive measure of teacher assimilation. (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

A high-quality teacher-to-teacher mentor program can also be a part of efforts to retain teachers (Callahan, 2016). Nasser and Fresko (2010) found mentoring support to be a predictor of the success of the first-year experience. In fact, support from mentors had the greatest impact on new teachers' assimilation. Teachers provided with mentors are less likely to move to other schools and more likely to stay in teaching after the first year (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004), thus saving time and money that would otherwise be spent on hiring and training new teachers. Johnson and Birkeland (2003) found a similar relationship in school cultures that support mentoring. Their study showed 83% of participants in these cultures remained in their first-year schools for at least another year. The above research on the first-year teaching experience demonstrates that mentoring programs have a significant and positive impact on new teachers.

Merrill (2006) found that while teaching is sometimes an isolated profession, teachers need the chance to work through problems with experienced colleagues. Andrews and Quinn (2005) found a statistically significant difference in the experiences of new teachers who reported a positive connection with their mentor, compared to those without mentor support. The importance of teacher mentoring, as an avenue of teacher induction and retention processes, interests me as a K-8 school administrator in charge of both a school's teaching staff and building administrators who interact with new teachers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of new teachers in a teacher-to-teacher mentoring program. Figure 1 illustrates how the study's focus on teacher-to-teacher mentoring is the first ring of support surrounding the new teacher.
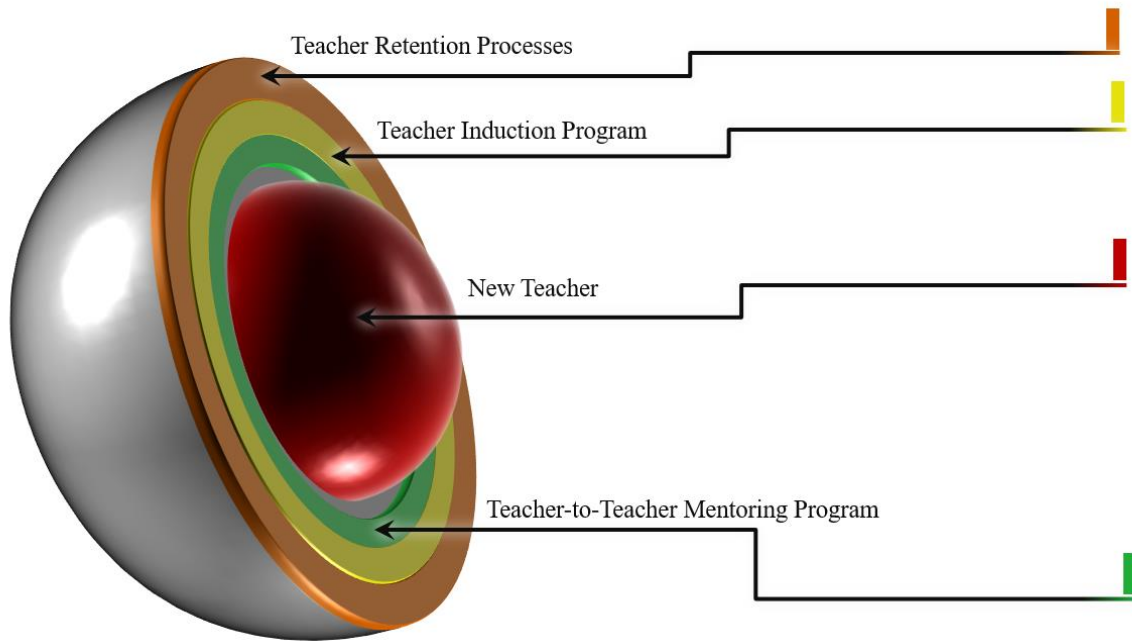
Figure 1 - Teacher Mentoring Programs Within Teacher Retention System Practices

Figure 1 demonstrates the support in place to ensure that every classroom has a high-quality teacher. Students have a right to quality instruction regardless of the experience of the teacher. School administrators cannot afford to wait several years for a novice teacher to fully grasp the curriculum and acclimate to the school's culture. A quality teacher-to-teacher mentoring program can be essential in accelerating teachers' progress. As Head of School, I see firsthand the importance of improving the experience and acclimation of teachers new to the school.

Teacher retention processes refer to the many ways the school supports all teachers regardless of years of experience. Teacher induction includes teacher orientation, curriculum

training and support, additional administrator observation and feedback cycles, and teacher mentoring from an experienced teacher. The school's teacher-to-teacher mentoring program assigns each new teacher with an experienced teacher mentor.

Administrators spend considerable time and effort to identify and hire quality teachers. The value of a successful teacher mentoring program from the perspective of the mentored new teacher has developed into my key research interest. This qualitative case study of a teacher-to-teacher mentoring program within a K-8 private parochial school focused on the experiences of the new teachers with their mentors.

Statement of the Problem

This research is concerned with the quality and process that happen within the first tier of influence for the new teacher, the teacher-to-teacher mentoring program. The school assigns a teacher mentor to each teacher new to the school, regardless of prior teaching experience. The purpose of the teacher-to-teacher mentoring program is to provide personal, professional, and curricular support. The study examined mentee teachers' experiences within one parochial school's teacher-to-teacher mentoring program to better understand their experiences and determine what they perceive to be the merits and/or deficits of the teacher-to-teacher mentoring program.

Supporting new teachers through teacher-to-teacher mentoring can address the documented teacher retention issue within the teaching profession (Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll & Perda, 2010; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Murnane, et al., 1991; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Teacher-to-teacher mentoring is one element to address the larger problem of teacher retention encompassing hiring practices; retention processes, which may include leadership teams and continuing education credit hours; and teacher induction programs, which may include

orientation and professional development; and mentoring programs – specifically teacher-to-teacher.

The school assigns a teacher mentor to each teacher new to the school, regardless of prior teaching experience. The purpose of the teacher-to-teacher mentoring program is to provide personal, professional, and curricular support. The study examined mentee teachers' experiences within one parochial school's teacher-to-teacher mentoring program to better understand their experiences and determine what they perceive to be the merits and/or deficits of the teacher-to-teacher mentoring program.

Research Question

The research question for this qualitative case study is, "What are the experiences of first-year mentee teachers in a Midwest preschool-8th grade parochial school's teacher-to-teacher mentoring program?" This case study will amplify the voices of novice teachers and add to the knowledge base on teacher mentorship. This research may be of interest to other private and public schools working through issues of teacher retention and interested in building an effective teacher-to-teacher mentoring program.

Significance of the Study

The research findings of this study will aid administrators in their aim to effectively acclimate and train new teachers. Administrators must properly acclimate and prepare teachers so they can properly support and take care of students. Improving the experience of new teachers at the school may also help reduce teacher turnover. This study adds to the current body of research on teacher-to-teacher mentoring, providing greater depth to the understanding of new teachers' perceptions of their mentors and the mentoring program.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the teacher-to-teacher mentoring experience of new teachers in one school. While teacher induction is a multi-faceted approach including mentoring to train and support new teachers, this research addresses the new teachers' perspective on the mentoring portion of their induction and training.

Providing effective assistance to new teachers should be the top priority of school administrators. Even as they seek to provide this assistance, the high rate of teachers leaving the profession or switching schools leaves administrators scrambling to find an effective teacher for every classroom. Teacher turnover and migration are harmful to students and the school environment.

New teachers are often left without the expert help of more experienced teachers, even as they are expected to perform the same responsibilities as veteran teachers. This leaves new teachers feeling isolated and overwhelmed. Schools have turned to teacher induction programs to address the problems of new teacher turnover and assimilation. The key component of many teacher induction programs is a teacher-to-teacher mentoring program (Reitman & Karge, 2019). Mentoring support is a predictor of the success of the new teacher in his or her first year (Nasser and Fresko, 2010). Additionally, teachers provided with a mentor are less likely to leave the profession or switch schools (Callahan, 2016). Therefore, it is important to the challenge of teacher retention to understand the experience of mentored teachers entering the field or new school. Specifically, this study explores the question, "What are the experiences of first-year mentee teachers in a Midwest preschool-8th grade parochial school's teacher-to-teacher mentoring program?"

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for effective mentoring can be found in the seminal work of Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. Vygotsky's theory asserts that the developmental process is affected by others in the learning environment and the culture in which the learning occurs (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Learning is social, so emphasis should be placed on the support of the learner by other individuals and the broader culture. In Vygotsky's theory, learning with others with more skill and experience, who Vygotsky calls the more knowledgeable other, is key in supporting the learner as she or he moves through the zone of proximal development. Providing the appropriate assistance in the right culture gives the learner the help needed to improve or achieve a task (Vygotsky, 1978).

McNeil et al. (2006) use Vygotsky's theory as a lens in which to view the needs of new teachers. Working with their mentors, over time new teachers build skills and confidence that lead them to see themselves as essential members of the learning community. Vygotsky (1978) wrote of the need for learning to be a pairing of the schooling and the spontaneous, meaning what is learned in books is paired with relevant experience. Teachers will learn best when their development, guided by a mentor, is done through formal and informal ways. (McNeil et al., 2006).

Conceptual Framework

The literature review is organized both within a research-based conceptual framework drawn from the research on new teachers in several key studies, and areas identified in Figure 1 (Andrews & Quinn, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Gonzalez-Mena &

Stonehouse, 2003; Malaspina, 1993; Rockoff, 2008; Sowell, 2017; Wenzell, 2009). Through literature review, I've identified four broad categories essential to effective teaching in which new teachers must be supported in their skill development: Classroom management, working with parents, instructional content and teaching practices, and acclimating to school culture. The four identified areas of this conceptual framework were used to drive and analyze the research. Other themes and subthemes emerged after the data was collected and evaluated; therefore, the conceptual framework is emergent with the collected qualitative data. As indicated in Figure 2 below, the conceptual framework is divided into four key areas, explored through questionnaires and interviews; observation notes were used to analyze and support emerging or absent themes.
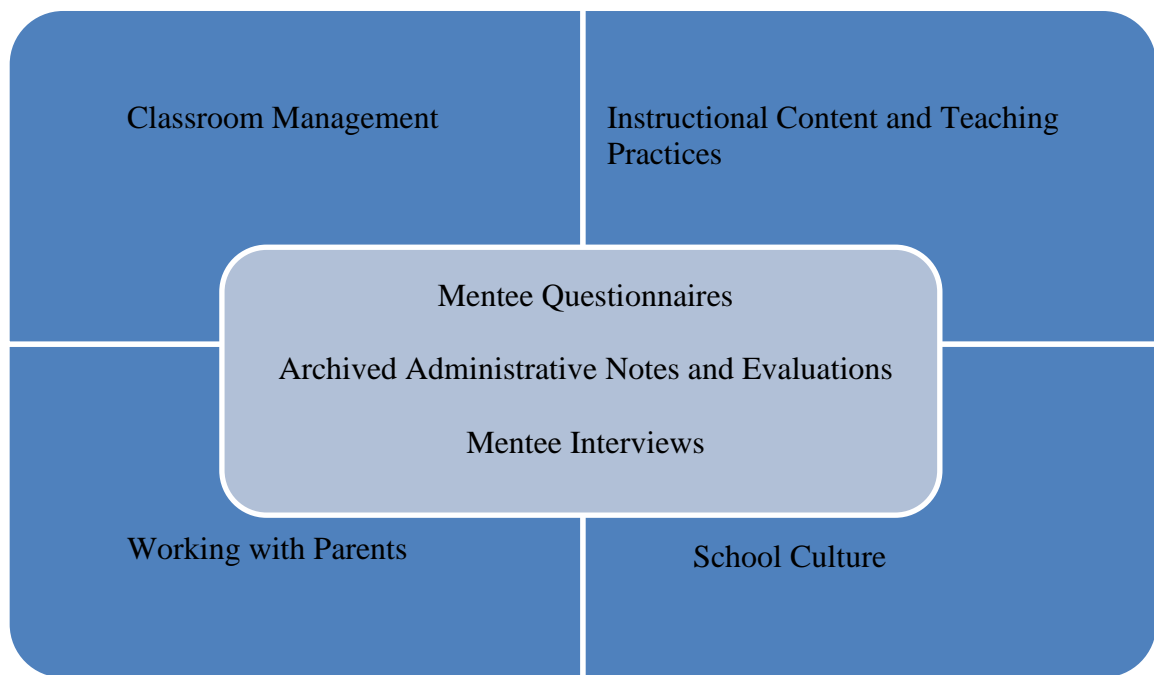
Figure 2 - Conceptual Framework of Mentoring Support for New Teacher

The four key areas listed above are essential to effective teaching. Through questionnaires, interviews, and archived administrative notes and evaluations, I sought to understand the help a mentor provides new teachers in these four key areas.

Classroom Management

Classroom management is "the actions teachers take to establish and sustain an environment that fosters students' academic achievement as well as their social, emotional, and moral growth" (Weinstein & Schafer, 2016, para. 1). Classroom management encompasses the techniques teachers use to create an effective learning environment. This environment includes, but is not limited to, the physical layout of the classroom, disciplinary procedures, transitions between subjects or activities, and classroom routines.

Studies indicate new teachers leave teacher education programs unprepared to manage their classrooms as well as their more experienced colleagues (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; Goodwin, 2012; Jones, 2006; Oliver & Reschly, 2007). Greenberg et al. (2014) found a disconnect between what is taught in teacher education programs and the classroom management needs of new teachers. Students in teacher education programs may receive very different levels of training in classroom management, even within the same teacher education program, based on their chosen field or level (Harrington, 2016). Goodwin reports classroom management is the greatest challenge teachers face. New teachers are three times as likely as more experienced teachers to report that student behavior is a problem in their classrooms (Melnick & Meister, 2008).

The ability to effectively manage a classroom has an impact on student learning and achievement (Freiberg et al., 2009; Marzano et al., 2003; Sprick, 2009). Freiberg et al.'s analysis of achievement scores in 14 elementary schools in an urban area found significant increases in students' math and reading scores in classrooms with teachers who implemented a specific classroom management plan. Student achievement is often impacted by behavioral problems in

the classroom (Freiberg, 1999). Additionally, student achievement is impacted when classroom behavior leads to suspension and expulsion (Freiberg & Reyes, 2008).

An induction program that includes mentoring increases the ability of new teachers to manage their classrooms (Evertson & Smithey, 2000; Stanulis & Floden, 2009; Thompson et al., 2004.) All new teachers in California participate in the California Formative Assessment and Support System for Teachers, of which mentoring is a core required element. A survey of over 1,000 teachers who participated in the program found increased use of effective classroom management techniques (Thompson et al., 2004). Whitaker et al. (2019) recommend that mentor teachers guide teachers in classroom management, helping new teachers know when it's time for a simple classroom "tweak" or a complete "reset." Help with classroom management is help new teachers desire (Klausmeier, 1994).

Instructional Content and Teaching Practices

The factors going into effectively delivering instructional content to students are referred to as instructional content and teaching practices. This includes, but is not limited to, content knowledge, creativity and variety of lessons, teaching techniques, grading procedures, and use of data to guide instruction. These key components of teacher quality make a significant difference in the success of students (Sanders & Rivers, 1996).

Effective instructional practice impacts student achievement in all subjects (Bitter et al., 2009; Lau & Lam, 2017; Nandwa et al., 2015; Park, 2013; Teodorovic, 2011). Liou (2021) and Hung et al. (2014) found instructional teaching practices also had an impact on students' attitudes towards the subject matter. Additionally, new teachers desire support in instructional practices (Wiebke & Bardin, 2009). Even as they desire this support, more than half of new teachers report planning and teaching in isolation (Kardos, 2003).

While instructional content knowledge was thought to be gained primarily through teacher education programs, there is a growing call for guidance in this area to be provided by qualified mentors (Achinstein & Davis, 2014; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Wang & Odell, 2002; Wang et al., 2004). Pairing a new teacher with a mentor knowledgeable in the subject areas of the new teacher has a positive result on student achievement (Boyd et al., 2012; Rockoff, 2008). Novice teachers with a mentor are quicker to implement instructional improvements and utilize a wider range of instructional strategies (Fluckiger et al., 2006). Especially effective is assigning mentors who teach in similar subject areas as the new teacher and providing time to plan and collaborate (Achinstein & Davis, 2014; Algozzine et al., 2007). However, Strong and Baron (2004) found only 2% of mentors' suggestions to new teachers focused on the subject matter.

Effective mentor programs need to focus, at least in part, on curriculum and instructional support (Andrews & Quinn, 2005; Sowell, 2017). Teachers indicate dissatisfaction with the overall support they received in curriculum and instruction (Andrews & Quinn, 2005). Processes are often not in place to encourage this instructional support. Mentors and new teachers are encouraged to observe each other; however, program coordinators report these observations often do not happen. Andrews and Quinn's (2005) recommendations include mentors spending time planning lessons with the new teachers, and mentors observing new teachers and conferencing after the observation.

It is important for mentors to model lessons and observe new teachers' instructions (Sowell, 2017). Gagen and Bowie (2005) make a similar argument based on their research in which mentor teachers were surveyed about perceived needs before and after training. Teacher mentors see the need to provide curricular support, but often feel unqualified to give it, especially if the new teacher does not teach in the same content area (Sowell, 2017).

20

Working with Parents

Working with parents is important to cultivate the partnership between home and school for the good of the child. Working with parents includes but is not limited to curriculum night parent meetings, parent-teacher conferences, weekly newsletters, and communication regarding academic or behavioral concerns.

There is an established connection between parental involvement and student achievement (Jeynes, 2005; Mahmood, 2013). However, a 1991 survey indicated that 70% of first-year teachers in the United States viewed parents as adversaries (Metropolitan Life, 2005). New teachers report communicating with parents can be difficult (Mahmood, 2013). Yet a collaborative relationship between school and home can help give early-education students a sense of security (Sheridan et al., 2010). Parents who set high expectations and talk to their children about school are parents who have the greatest impact on achievement; however, new teachers are not trained to help parents in this way (Jeynes, 2011).

Mentors can help new teachers know how to effectively work with parents. It is critical for new teachers to establish positive relationships with parents, and mentoring is a help to new teachers in this area (McCann & Johannessen, 2008). McCann and Johannessen's (2008) study revealed several areas in which mentors can help new teachers with parent interaction, including how to acknowledge fault after making a mistake, encouraging parents to be active participants in their child's learning, practicing empathy with parents, and being accessible to parents. Experienced teachers can also help new teachers effectively work with the broader school community (McCann & Johannessen, 2005). It is important to note that there is little research on the impact a mentor has on a new teacher's ability to work with parents.

School Culture/Environment

School culture comprises the explicit and sometimes implicit norms of the school environment. This includes, but is not limited to, understanding how to voice concerns to leadership or fellow teachers, school- and grade-level traditions, and even where to park and how to use the copier and other teacher tools.

It is important to note little research has been conducted on new teachers' ability to acclimate to the school culture and environment. Kardos (2003) found that 65% of new teachers believed they should be collaborating with colleagues, but more than half of these same teachers reported working primarily alone. Little (1982) reports there is a correlation between a new teacher's decision to pursue professional development and the collegiality they perceive in their school. High-poverty schools in urban areas are less likely to exhibit a strong community for teachers (Ingersoll, 2011).

Mentoring programs are a part of a broader supportive school environment (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010). This supportive environment includes not only designing an induction plan but having the leadership to implement the plan. A supportive environment includes making time for new teachers and mentors to meet together. Time together is also a key component of the Kentucky Teacher Intern Program (KTIP), in which teachers and mentors spend at least 20 hours of in-school time together and 50 hours outside of school hours (Appalachia Educational Lab, 1986). Schools often provide substitutes or other structural support to help make these hours possible.

Fletcher and Barrett's (2004) study found new teachers overwhelmingly reported their mentors helped them work more collaboratively with others in the school, including approaching their principal about challenging situations. McCann and Johannessen's (2008) research suggests that experienced teachers can help new teachers connect with a supportive network of other

teachers. However, the research on the support mentors give new teachers in acclimating to the school culture and environment is limited.

Teacher Mentoring Programs Within Teacher Retention System Practices

In addition to the conceptual framework of the four key teacher practices for success is the placement of the teacher-to-teacher mentoring program within the larger view of teacher retention. Figure 1 demonstrates how the new teacher is affected by teacher retention processes, teacher induction programs, and the study's focus on teacher-to-teacher mentoring programs. The new teacher needs support to develop into an effective teacher. The new teacher, being the center of the process, is best supported by a mentor teacher within the larger induction program and the retention practices and policies of the school district.

Teacher Turnover/Retention: The First Sphere

The research on teacher retention in the United States does not paint a pretty picture (Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll & Perda, 2010; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Murnane, et al., 1991; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). The literature points to new teacher retention as one of the larger challenges facing K-12 education. As stated above, nearly half of new teachers today will leave the profession in the next five years, with thirty percent of teachers changing schools or quitting teaching after the first year (Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Murnane et al., 1991; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). The high rate of teacher attrition accounts for close to 90% of annual teacher demand. Only one-third of teacher attrition is due to retirements (Sutcher et al., 2019).

A recent study by Sutcher et al. (2019) concluded retaining teachers is key in making sure there are enough qualified teachers to staff our nation's schools. The study found if the United States could lower its teacher attrition rate to that of countries like Singapore and Finland, "the resulting shift in annual demand would eliminate the nationwide shortfall of fully prepared

teachers, with the possible exception of some targeted needs in particular content areas and locations" (p. 3). It is important school administrators see teacher retention as an issue directly affecting the quality of schools and the success of students.

Teachers are leaving the profession prior to retirement for various reasons. A 1989 survey of teachers in urban schools who have left the profession cited discipline issues and inadequate support from the school as the top reasons for leaving (Haberman & Rickards, 1990). The pandemic has only exacerbated the problem of teachers leaving, with 1 in 4 teachers considering leaving the profession at the end of the 2020-21 school year (Steiner & Woo, 2021).

The Learning Policy Institute (2017) reports that 60% of new teachers are hired to replace teachers leaving the profession early. Their research shows that in addition to the learning cost due to teachers leaving the profession, each leaving teacher costs a district between $10,000-$20,000.

The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the teacher shortage. Districts are seeing a spike in resignations and are turning to large signing bonuses to attract teachers or returning to remote learning (Gecker, 2021). As the 2021-22 school year was set to begin, the state of Florida reported a shortage of 4,961 teachers (Florida Education Association, 2022). Gecker (2021) cites a June 2021 survey by the National Education Association that found over 30% of teachers are considering leaving the profession sooner than expected due to the pandemic

Teachers are leaving the profession prior to retirement. The cost is felt financially and in the progress of students. Within the realm of a school district's teacher retention practices, teacher induction, and more specifically teacher-to-teacher mentor programs, offer support to new teachers to help stem the tide of teacher attrition.

Teacher Induction Program: The Second Sphere

New teacher induction comprises a school's all-encompassing efforts and programs developed to guide newly hired teachers during their first few years of teaching. Induction includes such components as teacher orientation, curriculum training and support, and additional administrator observation and feedback cycles (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). It may include the assignment of a teacher mentor to the new teacher. Mentoring is not induction, but rather a component of the induction process (Wong, 2004). According to Ingersoll and Strong (2011), over 90% of teachers in the United States participated in some form of induction program during their first year of teaching, up from only 40% in 1990. In 2008, 22 states were funding induction programs for new teachers ("Quality Counts," 2008).

Teacher induction has a positive impact on teacher retention rates. Henke et al. (2000) found that 85% of new teachers who received the support of a teacher induction program stayed in the profession, compared to 74% of new teachers who did not. Texas teachers who participated in teacher induction programs had significantly higher rates of retention in their first three years of teaching than those who did not (Cohen & Fuller, 2006; Fuller, 2003). Ronfeldt and McQueen (2017) found induction support positively impacted teacher retention and teacher migration to other schools. Teacher induction impacts teacher retention more than a reduced teaching load or having a teacher aide (Fullan, 2001; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Smith and Ingersoll (2004) found the impact of induction increased as the number of types of support increased. Teachers receiving no support had a 40% turnover rate, compared to 18% for teachers receiving at least eight supports.

New teachers who received support through a teacher induction program showed improvement in their teaching practices. Evertson and Smithey (2000) conducted teacher observations of new teachers; observation showed a significant increase in classroom

organization and classroom management in teachers who received the support of teacher induction compared to those who did not. Induction support of new teachers from universities saw a rise in teacher effectiveness (Davis & Higdon, 2008). Stanulis and Floden (2009) found the intensity of the teacher support mattered in teachers' classroom practice. District support paired with university support was more effective than district-only support. Learning to teach is a developmental process that happens over many years, yet few schools report offering ongoing support (Kardos et al., 2001).

Teacher induction positively affects student achievement. Thompson et al. (2004) discovered higher test scores of students in classrooms with teachers who received induction support. Teacher induction has a significant effect on student reading scores, with new teachers' students showing gains similar to those with more experienced teachers (Fletcher et al., 2008). Students of teachers who received induction support also showed similar gains in math scores (Glazerman et al., 2008; Glazerman et al., 2010; Rockoff, 2008).

Teacher-to-Teacher Mentoring: The Third Sphere and Study Focus

In Greek mythology, when Odysseus leaves his family to lead his army in the Trojan War, he places his son Telemachus under the guidance of a guardian called Mentor. Mentor's job is to guide and protect Telemachus. While Mentor ultimately fails in the time of Telemachus's need, the label of "mentor" has become synonymous with someone appointed to lead, guide, and protect another (Wilson & Homer, 2018). In education, mentorship refers to the mentoring of a novice teacher by a more experienced teacher (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Sustained support from an assigned mentor is the most important part of teacher induction (Strong, 2009).

According to Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005), mentoring has a positive impact on classroom management, working with parents, and many other aspects of teaching. They write that new teachers should:

> Learn to teach in a community that enables them to develop a *vision* for their practice; a set of *understandings* about teaching, learning, and children; *dispositions* about how to use this knowledge; *practices* that allow them to act on their intentions and beliefs; and *tools* that support their effort (p. 385).

Mentoring can help provide new teachers with needed support in key areas that are difficult to learn before they have their own classroom.

Dempsey and Christenson-Foggett (2011) report new teachers appreciate the personal nature of the mentor-mentee relationship, even when the support is from someone in a different building. This is an encouragement for administrators that are unable to find effective mentors in their own buildings. Feelings about mentors are overwhelmingly positive, seeing the mentor program as the best part of the induction program (Gilles et al., 2013). Picucci (2016) found being assigned a mentor, meeting frequently, and focusing on activities such as observations and feedback have a positive impact on teacher retention. Mentors can help new teachers navigate the areas of teaching often not included in a traditional teacher education program (McNamara, 1996).

Beginning teachers start their careers with the same responsibilities as more experienced teachers, even though it is recognized they need more support (Darling-Hammond, 2010; LeMaistre & Pare, 2010). As we seek to keep good teachers in the profession, we must remember that people crave connection (Wong, 2003). Teachers remain in teaching longer when they belong to communities with strong relationships built on professional respect (Wong, 2004).

Teacher-to-teacher mentoring programs have a significant and positive impact on new teachers. Mentoring is a significant factor in beginning teachers' job satisfaction (Carter & Francis, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Evertson & Smithey, 2000). Nasser and Fresko (2010) found mentoring support to be a predictor of the success of the first-year experience. Additionally, mentor teachers report that mentoring causes them to reflect on their own practice (LeMaistre & Pare, 2010).

Support from mentors had the greatest impact on new teachers' assimilation. Teachers provided with a mentor are less likely to move to other schools and more likely to stay in teaching after the first year (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Mentoring provides opportunities for new teachers to receive assistance in the areas of highest need, such as locating instructional materials, planning instruction, and improving instructional techniques (Algozzine et al., 2007). Beginning teachers who participated in a mentoring program found teaching to be a more desirable profession than those who did not have a mentor (Hellsten et al., 2009).

Johnson and Birkeland (2003) found a similar relationship in "integrated professional cultures" which support mentoring and teacher retention. Their study showed 83% of participants in these cultures remained in their first-year schools for at least another year. Mentoring has a positive impact on teacher retention especially when the mentor teaches in the same subject area (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

Schools should work to make teaching less isolated and allow new teachers to work through problems in a more collaborative environment (Merril, 2006). Collaborating with other teachers makes new teachers more likely to stay in the profession (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Andrews and Quinn (2005) found a statistically significant difference in the total support score for new teachers with a mentor compared to those without.

The literature reviewed above demonstrates the impact a mentor has on new teachers. Unfortunately, Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2007) found:

> Unlike some other professions, where new entrants are formally inducted into the profession by careful supervision, mentoring, and other apprenticeship-like experiences, teachers too often are put into a classroom and left on their own without access to more seasoned teachers or formalized ways to work through with others the difficulties of any new professional confronted with the hard realities of transforming "book knowledge" into action. (p. 65)

Mentoring is an accepted best practice in many other professions and may give beginning teachers the skills and dispositions needed to be successful. Mentoring in the educational setting may be especially helpful in teaching skills that go beyond the academic knowledge of new teachers.

Additional Elements of an Effective Mentoring Program

While simply providing a mentor to a new teacher has a positive impact, there are elements that make a mentoring program more effective. They are proximity and mentor training. Each has an impact on the new teacher's experience.

Proximity

Adkins and Oakes (1995) found teachers' satisfaction with the mentor-teacher relationship higher when the mentor teacher is in the same building. While not always possible, administrators should make efforts to secure mentors in close proximity to the mentees. Hertzog's (2002) results also indicate proximity to possible mentors makes a difference, and "teachers often reported going to the grade-level teacher next door...developing a relationship with that person" (p. 31). Assigned mentors are important; however, closeness to other

experienced teachers and even other first-year teachers had a significant positive impact on first-year teachers' feelings of support. Additionally, Johnson & Birkeland (2003) report new teachers working within a supportive environment are more likely to stay in their current teaching settings. However, as noted above, if an administrator cannot provide a mentor in close proximity to the new teachers, a mentor from another building is better than no mentor at all (Dempsey & Christenson-Foggett, 2011).

Mentor Training

In addition to meeting the needs of a new teacher, effective mentoring programs also provide training for the mentor teachers. Proper training includes clear expectations (job description) of the mentoring process, as well as other areas, such as instructional strategies, lesson planning, and classroom management, that may depend on the qualifications and comfort of the mentor teacher (Gagen & Bowie, 2005). Gagen and Bowie report teacher mentors' feelings of effectiveness rose significantly after training. Training gives mentors a chance to think through what good teaching practice looks like, develop observation skills, and learn how to assess the intern's progress (Feiman-Nemser, 2003).

Summary

This literature review introduces and brings into focus the importance of supporting new teachers in order to ensure each classroom and every student has a qualified teacher. Drawing on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, mentoring presupposes learning is social, and individuals learn best when paired with someone more knowledgeable. Teachers will learn best when their formal training is paired with a guide throughout their beginning experiences.

New teachers need and desire support in four key areas: classroom management (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; Goodwin, 2012; Jones, 2006; Oliver & Reschly, 2007),

instructional content and teaching practices (Boyd et al., 2012; Rockoff, 2008), working with parents (McCann & Johannessen, 2008), and acclimating to the school culture/environment (Fletcher & Barrett, 2004; McCann & Johannessen, 2008). This review examined each of these areas demonstrating how essential each is to effective teaching. Also, new teachers desire support in these areas, and having a mentor has been shown to help new teachers in these areas.

In addition to meeting the needs of new teachers in the four key areas listed above, the proximity of the mentor and mentor training are two key components to be considered when seeking to provide help to mentees. Mentoring makes a positive difference in teacher retention and the experience of new teachers (Carter & Francis, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Evertson & Smithey, 2000; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Unfortunately, new teachers have the same responsibilities as their more experienced colleagues, even as they need more support. Mentoring helps teachers feel connected to other members and to the unspoken nuances of the school, giving mentoring an important impact on new teachers' assimilation. Mentoring increases collaboration among teachers, helping new teachers feel less isolated (Merril, 2006; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004)

Furthermore, mentoring can aid administrators who are seeking to keep teachers in the profession. Therefore, schools have implemented teacher induction programs to, in part, help turn the tide of a growing national teacher shortage (Callahan, 2016). While induction programs usually include curriculum training, teacher orientation days, and additional administrator observations and feedback cycles, teaching mentoring is often the key and critical component of teacher induction programs (Andrews & Quinn, 2005).

31

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

When implementing a school-based teacher-to-teacher mentoring program, one key area

to gain insight into is how these programs are perceived by new teachers. Mentoring may cover

key areas identified in the conceptual framework; however, this case study is not limited to these

areas. Findings may emerge that may expand or add to the initial conceptual framework. The

framework's key preconceived categories may be adjusted to the emerging data. The research

sought to answer the overarching question, "What are the experiences of first-year mentee

teachers in a Midwest K-8 parochial school's teacher-to-teacher mentoring program?"

Rationale for Qualitative Paradigm and Methods Selected

The need to gain a deep understanding of the challenges of our new teachers makes

qualitative research the appropriate choice in answering the research question (Creswell, 2007).

Qualitative research places value on the perspective of the participant (Hatch, 2002). McMillan

and Schumacher (2006) state, "The researcher interprets phenomena in terms of the meanings

that people assign to them" (p. 315). Researchers ask what is happening in a particular context at

a specific moment and what these events mean to the people in the setting (Hatch, 2002). These

meanings guide actions and feelings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006), thus being able to

formulate understanding by collecting and examining each participant's story in their own

words, opinions, and reflections.

Case Study Research

Case study research is the examination of a single subject, event, or setting (Bogdan &

Biklen, 2007). In this research, the boundaries of the research site make case study research an

appropriate choice by specifically seeking to understand the experience and perceptions only of

teachers new to this private, parochial, K-8 school located in the Midwest. In qualitative case study design, data are typically gathered through interviews and observations, providing insight on a specific social phenomenon (Glesne, 2006). Case study research is appropriate when seeking to give greater detail to a known social phenomenon (Yin, 2009) such as a school's mentoring program. The case study design is chosen in cases where quantitative designs may be insufficient and a more explanatory description is needed (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The experiences of new teachers with the school's teacher-to-teacher mentoring program can better be understood through case study research with questions of "why" and "how." The research problem and question of the study seek to improve teacher-to-teacher mentoring practices for the case study school and other interested schools, thus requiring a thorough description of what effective programs look like from the perspective of the participants.

Study Validity Measures

Steps are necessary to assure the validity, or trustworthiness, of the entire research design and implementation. Creswell (2007) identifies verification procedures often used in qualitative research. Among these is the procedure of data triangulation, which is the collection of multiple data sources which serve to confirm or contradict the findings of a single source (Yin, 2009). To pursue validity in the project, data were triangulated by collecting data in three multiple layers using questionnaires, interviews, and administrators' notes and observation records.

Negative case analysis was used to search for evidence inconsistent with other findings, refining the data collection process as necessary. Member checking as a validity technique was not used, as I wanted participants' insights without a participant worrying later if something "sounds bad." Preliminary themes emerging from coding the data were peer-reviewed by another qualified researcher. This validity measure coincides with Hatch (2002), who writes on the

emerging design of qualitative research. A qualitative study, including questions, methods, and other design elements, may change as research is gathered and analyzed (Hatch, 2002). Rather than create a hypothesis that is affirmed or rejected, the researcher collected data and coded for patterns of relationship. The three avenues of data collection are explained in greater detail below in the design section.

Role of Researcher

In my role as Head of School and my proximity to the teachers within the study, I took measures to minimize my impact on the data collected. Even with these specifically designed efforts, I recognize my proximity to the participants and my role within the school may have an impact on the research; however, I feel my role is also an asset to the research as I have a deep understanding and history within the school's culture and the design and implementation of the mentor program being studied. The process of being aware of my influence on the research process and setting is known as reflexivity (Goodall, 2000; Hatch, 2002). This admittance of influence requires me to take steps not to influence the research but also to be close enough to participants that I fully understand what is happening and/or is being said. Their trust in me will also lead them to be honest with the outside interviewer.

Definition of Terms

Below is a list of terms relevant to the research:

- *Teacher Induction*: The systematic support provided to new teachers in the early years of their teaching. Teacher induction includes such things as new teacher orientation day; administrative support such as group meetings, extra observations and feedback cycles, and curriculum support; and may include the assignment of a teacher mentor.

- *New Teacher:* Any teacher in her or his first year, or first year of teaching at the research site. Teachers in their first three years of teaching at the site were invited to participate, reflecting on their first-year experience in the teacher-to-teacher mentoring program.

- *Mentor Teacher:* Teacher assigned to provide structured and unstructured support to a new teacher.

- *Mentor Program*: The entirety of support provided to a new teacher by her or his mentor teacher. This includes, but is not limited to, weekly meetings following the monthly checklists in the Mentor Handbook, observations and feedback by the mentor, instructional observations of the mentor teacher by the new teacher, and any informal support.

Setting and Background

The setting for the study is a Midwest, semi-rural private parochial school. Established over a hundred years ago, the school is in a small town of approximately five thousand people. In the 2020-21 school year, over 1,000 students in preschool through eighth grade are enrolled and taught by approximately 75 full or part-time faculty. In the last 15 years, the school has begun to attract families from throughout the region with its language immersion program and commitment to inclusive special education. Today, over half of the school's students learn in a language other than English through the school's Spanish and Mandarin immersion programs. The ethnically diverse staff represents 12 different countries of origin. Many language immersion teachers completed teacher education programs in other countries and came to teaching through alternative programs. The diverse staff contrasts with a student population that is over 95% white.

Since June of 2017, I have served as Head of School. My position as Head of School might best be described as a combination of the superintendent role with numerous principal duties. I have daily connections with students, parents, faculty, and staff; however, my role in student discipline and teacher supervision is advisory only.

As Head of School, I supervise a leadership team of nine leaders.

- *Preschool Director.* The Preschool Director supervises preschool teachers (three-year-old and four-year-old preschool) at three locations.

- *Elementary Principal.* The Elementary Principal supervises teachers of grades young 5s through fifth grade.

- *Middle School Principal.* The Middle School Principal supervises sixth through eighth grade teachers.

- *Immersion Director.* The Immersion Director oversees the language immersion program. The immersion teachers are supervised by the Preschool Director, Elementary Principal, and Middle School Principal, with the Immersion Director coming alongside each of them to help support the teachers.

- *Student Support Services Director.* The Student Support Services Director serves as a teacher with the school's special education inclusion program, as well as supervises three special education teachers.

- *Director of Learning Innovation.* The Director of Learning Innovation oversees the school's curriculum, leads teacher leaders who serve on the curriculum teams, and leads professional development implementation.

Other members of the leadership team focus on the operational side of the school and have no direct or indirect supervision of teachers. They include the Advancement Director, Director of Operations, and Office Manager.

With the ongoing shift of my role from principal to Head of School, most of my work is in support of the leadership team as they lead our faculty. My role once included organizing our mentoring program; however, as the program has developed the leadership of the mentoring program has shifted to the elementary and middle school principals and the preschool director.

I implemented the teacher-to-teacher mentor program in the fall of 2016 in my first year as Head of School in 2016. My intent was to help new teachers with curriculum, student discipline, working with parents, understanding the culture of the school and community, and anything else that might assist teachers new to the school. Additionally, the hope is to provide the new teacher with the support of a friend in the school. In the first year, mentors were assigned to help new teachers, but I provided little support or accountability to the mentors or new teachers.

After the first year, the leadership of the program shifted to the elementary and middle school principals and the preschool director, and the level of accountability and support has increased. Mentors are now included in the new teacher orientation day, meet several times over the summer with the new teachers, and meet weekly for at least thirty minutes throughout the school year. Mentor teachers are provided a handbook to guide their support of the new teacher. The handbook includes monthly checklists to guide their meetings. Principals or directors meet at least quarterly with the new teachers and the mentors, respectively, to better understand the challenges the new teachers may be facing. Administrators often take notes at these meetings. These notes are one of the three pieces of data analyzed and triangulated for in the research.

Mentors are handpicked by the principal or director. Preference is given to teachers who have taught at the school for at least five years. Ideally, the appointed mentor teaches the same grade level or subjects and teaches in the same language immersion program as the new teacher. However, this is not always possible. Other factors considered when choosing a mentor are the proximity of the mentor's classroom to the new teacher, overall disposition, and willingness to be a mentor.

Other than administrator notes from mentor and new teacher meetings, no evaluation, formal or informal, has been done to gauge the effectiveness of the program. Even when feedback is solicited from new teachers, it's possible that they are reluctant to give candid feedback to their direct supervisors. If one of the main purposes of teacher-to-teacher mentoring programs is to keep new teachers in the profession, it is critical to understand their experiences.

Participants

Study participants are teachers in the school who are new to the school in the last three years. Over the last three years, 25 full or part-time teachers have either begun their careers at the school or have previously taught in another school and moved to the school. All but two teachers remain employed at the school. Nineteen interested participants completed questionnaires.

Three participants were also selected for interviews from those who indicated an interest in participating in a follow-up interview. The three teachers chosen each represent one of the languages of instruction in the school. The first interview participant is Evelyn. Born in China, Evelyn teaches in the school's Mandarin immersion program. Evelyn emigrated to the United States to pursue a Master's degree. She is in her mid-20s and had no prior teaching experience. The second participant, Albert, in his early-20s, came to the research site immediately upon completing a traditional four-year teacher education program at a local university. Albert

attended schools similar to the research site throughout his elementary and secondary school years. Albert teaches in the English-based program at the school. The third participant, Sheila, was born and raised in a South American country and moved to the United States to complete undergraduate and graduate degrees. She had previous experience teaching at the graduate level. Sheila is in her early-30s.

I collected data using three qualitative methods: questionnaires with open-ended questions, interviews, and leadership team members' observations and documented interactions with new teachers. I distributed questionnaires to each teacher in the school who was new to the profession at the research site in the last three years and who volunteered to participate. Three semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to dive deeper into questionnaire themes. Archival administrator data was overlaid with the teacher-directed emerging qualitative themes from the questionnaires and interviews. Triangulation of data using the observational notes provided data validity and shed light on connections or disconnections between teacher perception data and the leadership team observations. Clarifications were not necessary; therefore, additional follow-up data was not necessary.

Following IRB approval, the questionnaires were distributed to all voluntary participants. These questionnaires provided a beginning understanding of participants' first-year experience at the school, giving insight into relationships and processes with mentor teachers. The questionnaires were used to guide the development of in-depth interview questions.

Case study interviews are designed to create a conversation through open-ended questions. Interviews are typically one of the most important sources of case study research (Yin, 2009). The interviews are typically semi-structured, with the actual questions flexible rather than prescribed (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Participants are encouraged to share their perspectives on the

studied phenomena. While interviewers begin the interview with designed questions, questions are created or modified during the interview based on the responses of the participants (Hatch, 2002).

Yin (2009) lists the strengths and weaknesses of interviews in case study research. First, the interview is focused on the studied phenomena. Interviews are also insightful, giving in-depth explanations from key participants. However, interviews have weaknesses as well. Bias can occur from poorly constructed or articulated questions. The researcher's inability to recall responses accurately is another weakness. Also, a participant may provide the interviewer with responses he or she thinks the interviewer wants to hear. I worked to offset these concerns by using an outside researcher trained in qualitative research methods to help develop questionnaire and interview questions, conduct interviews, and peer-check analyzed data.

Especially when documentation is archival, it offers the advantage of not being created specifically for the case study. Documentation may include notes or minutes from meetings, the mentor handbook, communication such as memos or email, evaluations, or other records (Yin, 2009). Therefore, a third research source, administrator evaluations, observation notes from meetings with mentors and/or new teachers, and anecdotal administrator observation notes regarding new teachers and mentors were used to overlay the data-driven themes from questionnaires and interviews. Documentation is an important source in case study research.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began within the design phase. Following the submission of questionnaires to the larger group of teachers, answers were analyzed, themed, and used in the development of questions for the individual interviews. Following interview transcription, the researcher looked for emerging interview themes through coding. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) define coding as the

analytic work of linking segments in the data. Coding allows the researcher to differentiate and combine data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data from questionnaires and interview transcripts was analyzed for patterns and themes. I then utilized administrative observation notes to confirm findings or discover discrepancies. Discrepancies and unanswered questions did not arise from the research collection or theming; therefore, I did not have to go back to the participants for clarification.

Following the collection of data through questionnaires, interviews, and administrative observation notes, I completed the following steps for data analysis:

- Participant background: I completed a general background description of participants filling out the questionnaire and more specific biographies for those participating in individual interviews.

- Transcripts: The individual interviews were transcribed.

- Researcher review: I read and reread the interview transcriptions and questionnaires, coding the data and identifying emergent themes. During this process, I labeled themes and noted common words and phrases.

- Data Comparison: Emerging themes from each data source were compared with the leadership team observation notes and teacher evaluations.

- Peer review: Dr. Elaine Makas, a qualitative researcher, peer-reviewed the emergent themes.

- Researcher insight: After the themes were formalized, I drew insights and synthesized the experiences of new teachers in the school's teacher-to-teacher mentoring program.

- Implications for future research: Part of the data analysis process will be the identification of questions that require further research, findings that need further clarification, or conflicting themes.

The section above shows the procedures followed to better understand the experiences of new teachers within one school's teacher-to-teacher mentoring program. Through questionnaires, interviews, and archived documents in Chapter 5, I provide a greater understanding of the experiences of new teachers, leading to recommendations for the improved experiences for and retention of new teachers.

Assumptions

I entered this research with several assumptions about the teacher-to-teacher mentoring program of the research site and the findings of this study. First, I assumed the majority of the needs of the new teachers would fall in one of the four quadrants: classroom management, instructional content and practices, working with parents, or school culture. Second, I expected, based on my experience and observations of new teachers in private parochial schools, that school culture is the area of greatest need for a new teacher. My third assumption was that mentoring does help new teachers and that new teachers appreciate the support and friendship that the school's teacher-to-teacher mentoring program provides.

Even with these assumptions, the emergent nature of qualitative research requires that I am open to my assumptions being shown to be incomplete, too narrow, or simply wrong. The prospect of being wrong makes this research even more compelling and necessary. If the mentoring program is not a help to new teachers or does not offer help in areas new teachers identify as important, findings can be used to immediately improve the program and may be of

42

use to other schools looking to improve or develop an effective teacher-to-teacher mentoring program.

Limitations

There were several identified limitations to the research which were intentionally addressed. First, I am employed as the lead administrator at the research site. I addressed this limitation by making participation voluntary, anonymizing questionnaire data, and using an outside researcher to conduct interviews. Second, the boundaries of the research and the number of participants keep the findings from being generalizable to other settings. Lack of generalizable findings is a limitation of qualitative research, but the layers of understanding typically provided by qualitative research serve a purpose as useful as generalizability. Finally, the invited participants are new teachers to the research site in the last three years; however, some of the participants have many years of experience in other schools. Their previous experiences certainly have shaped them as teachers and may have impacted the way they receive help from the mentor teacher. However, including experienced teachers in this study is important, even with this limitation, as the school hires many experienced teachers.

Summary

Many new teachers leave teaching after only a few years. While teacher induction programs are shown to help new teachers acclimate to their profession, a key component of induction programs is a teacher-to-teacher mentoring program. This research sought to specifically study novice teachers' experiences with one parochial school's teacher-to-teacher mentoring program.

The research seeks to answer the question, "What are the experiences of first-year mentee teachers in a Midwest K-8 parochial school's teacher-to-teacher mentoring program?"

Participants in this study are teachers in the school who were new to the school in the last three years. Through questionnaires, interviews, and observation notes, I gained a deeper understanding of the experiences of new teachers in their first year at the studied site. The study uses a conceptual framework from Darling-Hammond's (2015) research that shows new teachers need assistance in areas of classroom management, working with parents, working with students, and school culture.

As Head of School, I preach to my leadership team the need for us to "take care of teachers, so they can take care of kids." This research is at the heart of this need, and the findings add to the existing knowledge base and will assist the research site in caring for new teachers. The research findings may also be of interest to other private and public schools working through issues of teacher retention and interested in building an effective teacher-to-teacher mentoring program.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Restatement of the Problem

Teacher retention is a significant problem facing schools. Administrators address this larger problem through improved hiring practices and retention processes. These retention processes may include continuing education and broader teacher induction programs. A common and critical part of teacher induction is teacher-to-teacher mentoring. As mentioned in Chapter 1 Introduction and shown in Figure 1, teacher-to-teacher mentoring is nested within hiring and retaining new teachers in the field. The teacher-to-teacher mentor program cradles the new teacher within the teacher induction program, which is nested in the teaching retention practices of schools. Each area of the teacher retention system practices referenced in Figure 1 must work together using best practices for the entire system to operate at peak efficiency.

This research is concerned with the quality and process within the first tier of influence, the teacher-to-teacher mentoring program. The teacher-to-teacher mentoring program aims to provide personal, professional, and curricular support. Therefore, the study examined mentee teachers' experiences within one parochial school's teacher-to-teacher mentoring program to better understand their experiences and determine what they perceive to be the merits and deficits of the teacher-to-teacher mentoring program.

Research Question

The research question for this qualitative case study is, "What are the experiences of first-year mentee teachers in a Midwest preschool-8th grade parochial school's teacher-to-teacher mentoring program?" This case study amplifies novice teachers' voices and adds to the knowledge base on teacher mentorship. This research may be of interest to other private and

public schools working through teacher retention issues and interested in building an effective teacher-to-teacher mentoring program.

Conceptual Framework

Through literature review, I identified four broad categories in which schools must support new teachers in their skill development: Classroom management, working with parents, instructional content and teaching practices, and acclimating to school culture. These are demonstrated in Figure 2. I used the four identified areas of the conceptual framework to drive and analyze the research. During data analysis, other themes and subthemes emerged.

A new conceptual framework emerged through questionnaires, interviews, and interfacing of administrators' documents.
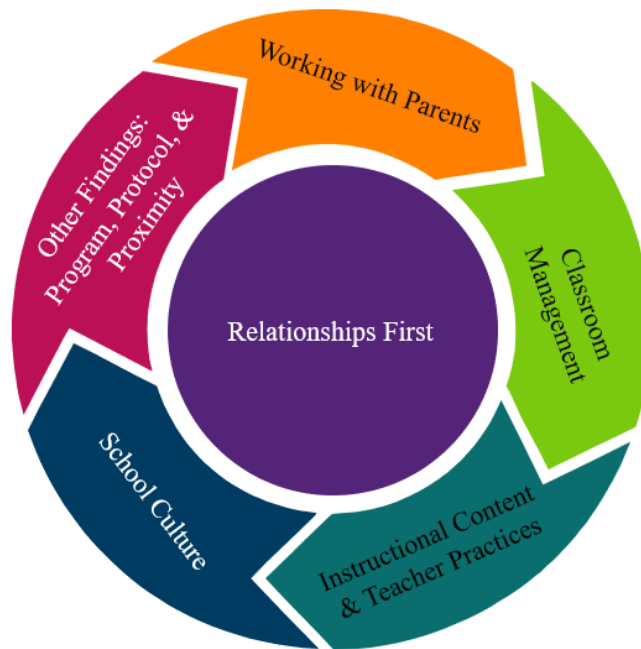
Figure 3. Teacher-to-teacher mentoring program conceptual framework after theming

Encompassing all other areas, the personal relationship between the mentor and new teacher emerged as the- foundational sphere of the mentor and mentee program. Through this lens of personal relationship, the other four areas of the conceptual framework proved essential to varying extents with new teachers. These areas include acclimation to the school culture, classroom management, working with parents, and providing assistance with curriculum and instruction. Lastly, I found other areas as a component of the program which illuminated the program's practices, protocols, and mentor-mentee environmental proximity.

Findings

Relationships First

> *"I think the relationship piece is so key. It got to the point, you know, where, my mentor's like my best friend here, you know, at school…And it got to the point where, during the school year, we would have our scheduled meetings and everything, but we would have so many conversations—where I wouldn't feel afraid to go and ask him just a random, quick question or advice on something. He was just there. And he was just so outgoing, you know, to want to get to know me, and want to be—he wanted to help me."*

At the heart of relationships is connection. Throughout this research, participants commented on the importance of feeling connected in their new environment. New teachers overwhelmingly appreciated the aspect of the mentoring relationship, which left new teachers feeling like the school had assigned a friend. This theme served as a thread tying together all other areas of help received by the new teacher.

Questionnaire. What is striking about the comments on the questionnaire about friendship or connection is that these answers came up in response to many different questions. In answering the general question, "Tell me about your mentor," one elementary teacher participant spoke of her connection with her mentor. The new teacher commented, "She is the mom of three adult children and became more than a teacher mentor but a spiritual and personal mentor for me as I navigate parenting my own three children." Another participant teaching in his first placement out of college answered the same question with a comment about building relationships, saying, "My mentor was not afraid to share about mistakes they made in a lesson or an embarrassing story that happened in their career. I liked that since it made me feel like I did not have to feel down if I made a mistake or had a bad lesson." Whether connecting over similar family circumstances or mistakes made in the past, relating to their mentor on a personal level helped these new teachers find support.

This friendship, even though assigned by the administration, is overwhelmingly meaningful. One participant wrote, "I can definitely say that my mentor is my closest friend at (the school)." Another participant with years of prior experience wrote, "This was a way to really get to know someone at the school...Having friends in the workplace makes it better!" Another wrote, "It was helpful to connect once a week, sometimes just to talk." Others wrote phrases such as "(She) became a friend as well," "(S)he was also a friend and personal mentor, and I could go to her for prayer," and "We got to know each other as people, not just (as) teachers." Another wrote, "(She was) "a person I could rely on," and one more said, "She makes me feel welcomed and supported." This theme of friendship shone through in nearly every questionnaire.

This friendship extended to other settings, helping new teachers feel more comfortable in their new work environment. "My mentor and I went to the teacher's lounge for most lunches.

This was helpful in meeting other teachers," said one participant, with another adding, "In large group/full faculty settings, my mentor was a friendly face I could chat with if I did not have someone else to talk with." One participant simply wrote, "She made me feel included," and another, "This was also a way…for me to feel known and welcomed." The mentor has the potential to accelerate the new teacher's level of comfort in their new school.

The mentor also proved to be a bridge between the new teacher and the larger school community. "She introduced me to many staff members at the beginning of the year," and another said, "One of the first things my mentor did when I first visited was she introduced me to most of the staff throughout the day." In his first year of teaching and unfamiliar with the new school environment, one participant wrote, "He was really good about introducing me to people and helping people get to know me." Another wrote, "I had someone who I could quickly go to and ask who someone was if I couldn't remember who they were." Finally, another said, "(My mentor) was quite helpful in making me feel at home very quickly. She made it a point to help me get to know the other teachers in my area early on." New teachers appreciated the connection with their mentor and the link the new mentor gave them with the rest of the school community.

Interviews. The lens of relationships and connection came through in more depth in the three participant interviews, particularly in two interviews. For example, one participant, "Albert," who volunteered for an interview, recently graduated and began his teaching career at the case study research site. Even though his mentor had over 30 years of teaching experience at the site, Albert found a connection with his mentor.

I can remember like in the first week, or one of the first couple of days… I'm making these lessons, and I'm teaching these lessons, and you know, I had done my student teaching, and I had done stuff in college, but I had never really, like had my own

class before and taught lesson after lesson after lesson after lesson, and my mentor came

over and told me how he just, you know, he had been teaching for over thirty-plus years,

and how he had this terrible lesson and how it went really bad. And I had thought that

was—you know, I had had a couple of those, you know, in my first week of teaching, and

I thought that was so great to hear. Because, you know, I was like, you know, that might

happen, and that's ok. Like, things might fall apart, and I think hearing it from him made

me feel more at ease, that, you know, it's ok, that might happen. And I think that too just

came from like, the relationship that we had formed. You know? That we got to know

each other.

By being vulnerable about his struggles, Albert's mentor gave Albert comfort and support, giving

Albert a person with whom he could relate.

Albert's friendship with his mentor continued to evolve. "I think the relationship piece is

so key. It got to the point, you know, where he's like my best friend here, you know, at school.

And we're just right next door to each other." He continued by saying that he "hit the jackpot"

with the assignment of his mentor and that the mentor "was just there. And he was just so

outgoing, you know, to want to get to know me, and want to be—he wanted to help me; I could

tell that he wanted to be that person for me." Like other participants, Albert also mentioned his

mentor's help connecting with others in the building. "He did a nice job… introducing me to

everybody (during the first few days of the year)." Albert's mentor could then offer the help that

Albert needed by being friendly and available.

Albert's friendship with his mentor allowed the mentoring to occur at times other than the

formal meetings.

And it got to the point where, during the school year, we wouldn't—we would have our

scheduled meetings, and everything, but we would have so many conversations—where I

wouldn't feel afraid to go and ask him just a random, quick question, or advice on

something.

These conversations became a part of Albert's morning routine. "I think it's just so great that (we)

would spend 10 minutes talking to each other each morning." Casual, informal times of

connection set the stage for Albert to find a meaningful relationship and help from his mentor.

Even as this relationship developed into a critical piece of Albert's mentoring experience,

he suggested improving the mentoring program by accelerating the relationship. "I would

encourage the mentor-mentee to just have lunch together, or some sort of thing where it was just

them…get(ting) to know each other…not talking (about) school-related (things)." Albert saw the

importance of the mentor and new teacher connecting as friends as a foundation for other help to

be given and received.

Another interview participant, "Sheila," came to teaching as a second career. Born in a

South American country, she connected to her mentor partly due to their similar backgrounds.

"What I liked about my mentor is that she is a woman of color like me. And so, having

that one-to-one experience in a Christian school setting, where most of the other teachers

are white, was very valuable to me…Like we struggled in similar ways, and she already

had stuff figured out."

It was essential to Sheila that she felt connected, which gave her needed extra support in the area

of diversity within her new environment.

Sheila's first year at the school was the first full school year of the pandemic. Sheila

commented how this made the mentor relationship even more important. "It was just nice to have

a relationship with somebody, especially in the time that, you know, (that) was so isolating."

This year, due to pandemic restrictions, teachers were not eating in the faculty lounge or

gathering socially.

> And especially last year? Like, we couldn't eat (together)—I didn't have a classroom,
>
> so I was eating lunch in the teachers' lounge by myself. And I'm not extroverted—but
>
> I needed at least a warm body to like, you know, look at.

In times of isolation, the mentor becomes an even more critical friend for the new teacher.

The third interview participant, "Evelyn," is self-described as an introvert who didn't feel

the need for small talk with her mentor. She appreciated that her mentor did not seem to need or

desire this as well. However, they found a connection in this.

> (My mentor and I) were kind of similar in the way that we are not super
>
> social…we don't need to have to talk about some personal life or do a little chat. I
>
> know she doesn't want to be…like she's not really a social, talkative person, and I
>
> am neither. So I don't feel the pressure that every time I go to her, I have to hold a
>
> long conversation. Like I just go to her, we talk about the problem, and it's solved.
>
> And then I leave (laughs).

Evelyn also connected with the mentor by being a similar age and teaching the same-age

students. "They (picked) the (mentor) that was more suitable for me, so that was really

important." Like Sheila, Evelyn emphasized the importance of having things in common with her

mentor.

Knowing the mentor is assigned to help the new teacher is important, but the new teacher

must feel comfortable in the relationship to ask for help. Evelyn said,

Like her character is…open, welcoming, and friendly. That's really helpful for

me, because I know—I always just, like, go to her classroom and knock on the

door and ask her some questions. But knowing that she is that way, really helpful;

it takes the pressure off of me. So I know I can always go to her. I can…count on

her support. She is always there.

Prescribed tasks and topics for discussion may be helpful to the new teacher, but Evelyn

found support simply by knowing she could approach her mentor for help on any subject

at any time.

Evelyn's mentor also provided her with relief from stress.

(My mentor) was a big help for stress relief. Like sometimes, I forget about some

important event, and I will talk to her, and she will tell me, 'Oh, it's fine, it's your first

year.' And she will comfort me. So that really helped.

Immediate help in time of need is vital to the new teacher and having a mentor they can relate to

makes this help more effective.

As other participants mentioned, the relationship Evelyn felt with her mentor gave her

comfort in new social situations.

I know her better than all the other teachers… So every time there is a big school event

when everyone is all in the same place…people, they know each other…(and are) talking

to each other, but I sometimes feel a little stressed because there are so many people I

barely know. So it's helped me in those big, social gatherings.

Evelyn was experiencing the adage of "nothing like a friendly face in a crowd."

While the administration assigns the mentor for one year, Evelyn found this connection

meaningful into her second year.

Oh! Just one more small thing I want to add. If, after the first year, like even up to now, if

I have a question…like she's not my mentor anymore, like not an official mentor, but

she's still the first one I go to whenever I have a question.

The relationship between the new teacher and the mentor continues to pay dividends beyond the

first year of teaching, thus reinforcing the value of a teacher-to-teacher mentoring program.

School Culture

"My mentor did a great job walking me through each and every day the culture,

student interactions, expectations, coworker interactions, and much more."

Acclimating to the culture of their new school can be difficult for novice teachers. My

research shows mentoring helps with this acclimation. While some of the new teachers' feedback

regarding adapting to the school culture falls under the "relationships first" category, there were

enough comments related to the help mentors provided in helping the teacher understand the

school's culture that warrants its own finding.

Questionnaires. Mentors provided new teachers with a safe place to ask questions. "(I

could) ask them anything without feeling embarrassed or ashamed about the question." While

this is important for any new teacher, one participant's comment indicates this might be

especially important for teachers raised in other cultures. "I even asked my mentor cultural

questions, and my mentor would explain different aspects to me." Helping new teachers

acclimate to the culture could have more than one meaning in a school with teachers born in

many different countries.

Two participants attended the school as students in which they are now teaching. These

participants were the only two to indicate that they did not feel they needed help acclimating to

the school culture. One reported, "I don't think she had to help too much in this area because I went to (the school) all my life as a student. This allowed me to walk into the building knowing the cultures of (the school)." The other teacher who attended the school as a student indicated much the same but contradicted herself, writing, "She helped me with some of those school culture things that had changed since I went here." Mentoring played a role in helping new teachers acclimate to the school culture even if they had attended the school as a child.

Mentors helped new teachers understand the rules that might not be obvious but exist in any organization. One participant said, "She reminded me about rules and procedures I did not know or was not following." Another said, "He did a great job keeping me in the loop with how things work at (the school)." The mentor provided comfort to their mentees in helping them know some of the unspoken norms and rules of the school.

One wrote that this help was the most important thing her mentor did for her: "More than anything, my mentor was able to tell me how things work at the school." One mentor served as a school history teacher: "(My mentor) helped (me) thoroughly understand the history of (the school)." The questionnaire asked participants if there was anything else they wanted to share. One participant wrote, "I think the mentoring program is really important to new teachers because it's an effective way to learn the things that we don't know but which already exist at (the school), such as tradition (and) culture..." Others wrote of help remembering meeting times, how recess works, or being ready for special events.

Interviews. While data from the questionnaire clearly shows the guidance new teachers received from their mentors, the interviews with the three participants did not show the same importance. However, it is important to note that all three interview participants spoke

extensively about their connection with their mentors. This friendship certainly can be seen as helping the new teachers acclimate to the school culture.

Albert expressed his appreciation for his mentor's friendship and guidance. As written above, Albert described his mentor, a teacher over 30 years older than him, as his best friend at work. Albert said his mentor helped him "(get) acquainted with the (school) culture…(and) what do I need to know that is different about (this school) than another school that I could possibly have taught at?" While Albert only made this one comment about acclimation to the school culture during his interview, he spoke extensively about how his mentor helped him feel welcomed throughout the school.

Evelyn's interview focused on the commonality she shared with her mentor, specifically that they are both introverts. This relationship laid a foundation for help in other areas. During their regular check-ins, Evelyn said her mentor helped her know "what's happening in the near future so that I can be prepared." Like one of the questionnaire participants, Evelyn especially appreciated her mentor's assistance because she grew up in another country. She said,

> I am not a U.S. -- I was not born and raised in the U.S., so there are a lot of things like ah, language barrier, or cultural barrier, where I don't know how to properly communicate. I don't want to come up too, um, straightforward, or too vague, about certain issues related to the kids.

Evelyn's mentor was able to help her bridge this cultural divide.

As noted above, Sheila connected with her mentor because they were women of color born outside the United States. Her mentor, having worked in the school for several years, "had (school cultural) stuff figured out." The mentor had what Sheila described as "knowledge, empathy, and a lot of information on the politics of the school, I guess is what you call it."

Sheila's connection with her mentor may have been more significant because they were the only two faculty members of color in their part of the building.

Instructional Content and Teaching Practices

> *"I believe this was the biggest area of support my mentor offered. She made sure we were close to the same units, and we discussed different methods of assessments to give."*

Teaching is multi-faceted. This study shows that teachers must know how to communicate well, work with parents, and manage the students' behavior. All these things are foundational, allowing instruction to happen in the classroom. Not surprisingly, participants in this study found their mentors helpful in instructional content and teaching practices.

Questionnaire. For this study, "instructional content and teaching practices" is a broad category that includes, but is not limited to, lesson planning, assessment (including report cards), teaching methods, and grading. The handbook addresses this category for mentors and new teachers starting the school year. It is clear from questionnaire data that mentors and new teachers are giving time to these topics.

Participants in this study found the mentor helpful in instructional content and teaching practice. Sixteen of nineteen participants described the mentor's assistance in this area as useful. One of the three who did not find help simply wrote, "We didn't talk about this area." Another of the three attributed the lack of assistance to the mentor and new teacher teaching different subjects and grade levels. The third wrote, "He offered lots of ideas, but I ended up doing most things myself because our styles were just a little different." The other sixteen participants were specific in their descriptions of how their mentors helped in this area.

New teachers' comments showed that help was especially practical when the mentor and new teacher taught the same subjects, grade level, or in the same language. For example, with a mentor and new teacher in the same grade level and teaching the same curriculum, one participant commented,

> I believe this was the biggest area of support my mentor offered. She made sure we were close to the same units, and we discussed different methods of assessments to give. We also often discussed the strategies we used to teach content to students who were struggling.

As another participant points out, teaching in similar areas allows for true collaboration between mentors and mentees. "(My mentor) had many resources already prepared from previous years and shared both digital and physical resources. She also listened to my ideas, and together we collaborated on every unit in every subject." Teaching in similar subjects and grade levels also allowed the mentor to give the new teacher a better understanding of the school year ahead related to curriculum and assessment. One participant wrote,

> My mentor sat down with me before the year started, and we talked about each subject and how they looked throughout the year. We talked about when each of the projects and field trips would take place, as well as the pacing for each of the subjects.

New teacher participants who taught the same subject as their mentors found help in instructional content and teaching practices.

In contrast, participants who taught different subjects than their mentor commented on the lack of support in this area. One noted, "Because we teach different subjects and grades, some things didn't always translate well." Another wrote, "We didn't talk about this (curriculum

content)." Another participant noted the lack of help with the curriculum but support in instructional strategies.

> She was a great help with logistics, but we teach different subjects, so there wasn't much help to speak of in terms of curriculum help. She was helpful with certain strategies that have proven to be successful for her over the years that I tried and found useful.

Administrators should consider the subject and grade levels taught by the new teacher and mentor when choosing mentors for new teachers.

Two participants mentioned being helped with instructional practice through mentors observing new teachers or observing their mentors teach.

> I got to observe twice in my mentor's classroom...The first time, I observed a reading benchmark at the beginning of the year. Towards the end of the year, I observed a math lesson and gained more tips on how I could improve and work on centers during the summer for the following year.

Another found help in being observed, "She observed me teaching and offered helpful feedback. It's nice to have that." This collaboration benefitted both the new teacher and the mentor. One wrote, "She also listened to my ideas, and together we collaborated on every unit in every subject." Another wrote, "Sometimes I would make things and share them with her. We worked well as a team." Whether through observation or other collaboration, the mentor-mentee relationship assisted the mentor and new teacher.

While the questionnaire responses centered on curriculum help, participants noted support with instructional practices. "She let me use some of the teaching tools that I don't have, especially for math. She often shows me how to teach a concept in a more effective way…." Another said, "My mentor taught me strategies such as using games and doing small groups."

Help with instructional practices included assistance with assessment. "(My mentor) did a great job making sure I was fully supported in…the use of different assessments (the school) does." One mentor helped the new teacher broaden her idea of the assessments used. "Throughout the year, my mentor would share how they would give and record their assessments for different subjects. I liked having another idea on how to record grades other than what my initial idea was." Another wrote, "He (helped) me with the MAP growth assessment and reading the test results." While guidance with curriculum materials was helpful, mentors' assistance with specific instructional practices, including assessment, helped new teachers transition to their school.

Interviews. Assistance with instructional content and teaching practices emerged as a topic of conversation in each of the new teachers' interviews. While the help each received differed among the participants, the mentoring relationship assisted their classroom instruction.

Evelyn, a new immersion teacher, commented on how meaningful it was to have a mentor who also is an immersion teacher.

> I teach immersion, (and) she teaches immersion, too, so she would understand what it is
> to be like, to have activity, like, immerse—like, connected with language. So it's not just
> like a normal, regular, basic game. It's something related to the language we are teaching.

Evelyn described assistance in the teaching content as the most significant benefit of the mentoring program, saying, "The thing I needed the most was the content-based part…So having the meeting with her weekly helped me ensure that I know what to do so I can be prepared." Sheila also found assistance in being paired with another immersion teacher who taught similar content.

So, the other positive thing…was that we both taught Spanish immersion classes…I guess that was very helpful to me, to have somebody that thought like me, and that, you know, and she was adamant-you need to hold (students) accountable (for their lack of knowledge or effort).

Teaching content in a language different from most students' first language presents challenges mentoring may help new teachers overcome.

Sheila's interview focused mainly on the help she received from her mentor while working with her students' parents. However, her answers regarding parents revealed assistance with instructional content and teaching practices, namely, guidance with grading. She said of assessing students' language ability, "(I asked my mentor), 'Have you noticed the same thing (that students' language ability was subpar), or am I just imagining things?'" Sheila's mentor encouraged her to give the grade a student deserved but that she should prepare for parent pushback.

Having a mentor who taught similar content encouraged Sheila to be more rigorous in her teaching, saying, "We (my mentor and I) were very rigorous-and we still are-very rigorous. This is Spanish, yes, you speak it, but this is how we're going to teach it." Two interview participants were immersion teachers, one in Spanish and one in Mandarin, and both appreciated that administrators paired them with a mentor who also was an immersion teacher as one of the most helpful things about the mentoring program.

As noted above, Albert expressed the personal, constant connection he felt with his mentor was what he most appreciated about the school's mentoring program. Albert described this connection as laying a foundation of help in several areas, including teaching practices. He said, "Things might fall apart (during a lesson), and I think hearing (things had fallen apart for

him) made me feel more at ease…And I think that, too, just came from the relationship we had formed." It's worth noting that Albert and his mentor taught the same grade and subjects.

Working with Parents

> *"I had some strong personalities in the area of parents. My mentor gave advice on what she would do if she were in my situation and proofread many of my more challenging emails..."*

Effectively partnering with parents is an integral part of every teacher's success. This partnership may be even more critical in a school such as the research setting, a school where parents attend field trips, pay tuition, volunteer in classrooms, and frequently gather socially within the school walls after school has begun. Mentoring helps new teachers effectively work with parents, which is also the case in this research.

Questionnaire. Seventeen of the eighteen participants' questionnaire responses described their mentors' guidance in working with parents as helpful. This help often centers on communication, historical information on specific parents, and working through difficult situations with parents.

Communication with parents was a recurring theme among participants. One participant said, "(My mentor shows me) how to communicate with parents in a proper way." Another participant wrote, "My mentor guided me in writing my first parent letter…." This help from a mentor was sometimes as simple as helping the new teacher find the proper tone with parents, with one participant stating, "She was extremely helpful in giving me some ideas for kind wording to use with parents." Similarly, another said, "My mentor also emphasized how to still be honest with parents even when it is more negative news." The mentee participants in the study

did not come into the teaching field with general communications skills when interacting with parents. The skill of working with parents became an essential aspect of the mentor-mentee relationship.

Participants often described communication help with parents when responding to challenging emails. Eight of the eighteen participants commented on having the mentor read an email response to a parent before they sent it. One participant said, "(My mentor) proofread many of my more challenging emails before sending them to parents." New teachers with little experience appreciate help responding to parent emails. One recently graduated teacher said, "(My mentor helped me) handle each situation with a Christ-centered response that made each parent feel loved and heard." Another added, "She helped me a lot with (working with parents) because communicating with parents is new to me, so she helped me find the proper way for that." Mentors' modeling even went as deep as to assist their mentees with essential details of the skills.

Participants specifically appreciated the prior knowledge mentors had of specific parents. One said, "She knows some parents personally after having worked at (the school) for several years and having taught the siblings." Another said, "(My mentor would) provide background information on parents if she knew them," with a third adding, "She was able to tell me which parents were problematic…." Mentors also helped new teachers with the parents with stronger personalities. One said, "This year, I had some strong personalities in the area of parents. My mentor gave advice on what she would do if she were in my situation…." One commented, "(My mentor) just helped me brush off the tougher emails I received." In education, we emphasize to teachers the importance of knowing the students' prior knowledge when introducing or teaching

a new lesson. This same principle emerged from the mentor's understanding of the new teacher's

mentee's lack of previous knowledge.

        Interviews. While questionnaire data clearly showed new teachers received help from

their mentors working with parents, interview data were more limited. Only one interview

participant, Sheila, spoke about receiving support in working with parents. However, the help

she received from her mentor with her students' parents was significant to her.

        Like other questionnaire participants, Sheila spoke of her mentor's prior knowledge of

parents in the school.

> Nobody had told me how parents are so involved in the lives of their children…probably
>
> that was one of my biggest struggles from (my first) year. So, my mentor, from day one,
>
> told me, 'These are the parents you're going to struggle with.' And she gave me a list of
>
> five parents—and sure enough (those were the ones I heard from)!"

Later in the interview, Sheila spoke for several minutes about her mentor's prior knowledge,

continuing with, "I didn't believe her, when she gave me that—the list of those five names? But

they truly had not changed from (the last year). They were the same parents, so I benefited from

her knowledge..." Sheila returned to the topic of her mentor's prior knowledge several times

throughout the interview, indicating this indeed was an essential piece of the relationship for her.

> Sheila's mentor also encouraged her to be proactive with these same parents.
>
> Like, (she told me) if a parent asks why you are doing this in this way, then this
>
> should be your response, or you can point them in this direction. And so that was
>
> invaluable…(T)hat goes back to the (prior) knowledge…She told me, 'These
>
> parents are going to ask you these questions. So I suggest you respond to these
>
> questions before they even ask them.'

Sheila continued this theme of being proactive later in the interview. "She told me, 'If you're going to give this kid a C, the parents are going to call you or email you.' And they did. And I started to learn—one of the things she taught me was to email parents before they see a grade…That was so, so, so helpful." Sheila's mentor's prior knowledge of problematic parents allowed Sheila to get ahead of problems.

Even as Sheila spoke extensively of the help her mentor gave her with working with her students' parents, she desired even more help in this area. When asked how the administration could improve the program, she said,

> I think a lot more time should have been spent on how to build good relationships
> with the parents. I think that should be… emphasized a lot more in the mentoring
> program. Especially since this is a private school, and parents are paying money
> for their kids to be here, they're more entitled to inquire, or, having these sorts of,
> like, you know…they are just very involved. Like parents here are super, super
> involved. And, I would have liked to spend more time getting tools to better
> interact with parents. I think that's one thing that we could do better.

While it is likely each new teacher might need something different from the mentor, Sheila's interview indicates the help a mentor can provide in this area.

Classroom Management

> *"My mentor really helped me to consider thinking through classroom management*
> *strategies before implementing them. I also came to my mentor about two struggles that I*
> *had, and my mentor was very kind by reassuring me that it is normal to have something*

go wrong. My mentor gave me great advice on how to handle these situations in the future."

Classroom management is the nurturing and sustaining of an environment conducive to a child's academic and emotional growth (Weinstein & Schafer, 2016). New teachers in this study found support from their mentors in classroom management. Participants who taught in similar areas or shared the same students were more specific with the help they received. Only two participants with several years of previous teaching experience in other schools mentioned they did not require assistance in this area.

Questionnaire. Participants frequently commented on the help their mentors provided regarding setting up classroom systems and remaining consistent in classroom management. Of the 19 participants, 17 commented that their mentor was helpful in classroom management. One participant said, "My mentor was great at emphasizing how we should motivate students intrinsically versus extrinsically. She really helped me to consider thinking (through) classroom management strategies before implementing them." Even while recognizing management can take on different styles, the mentor's help in management was well-received. "We do things a little differently, but she always reminded me to hold high expectations and set high standards to see success."

One participant saw the connection between management and instructional practice with the help of her mentor. "My mentor helped me better understand the necessity for effective time management (bell to bell teaching) in my classroom by simply being a great model in this area." Another said, "She (suggested) asking students to 'try again' if something was inappropriate the

first time." Classroom management assistance helped participants be better able to focus on the instruction of their students.

The relationship between the mentor and new teacher provided the framework for the help one participant received. She said, "There were some challenging moments throughout the year; my mentor walked alongside me offering ideas, thoughts, and encouragement, giving specific strategies to overcome the problem." The phrase "walked alongside" provides a powerful metaphor for the help that a mentor can provide. The relationship with the mentor moved from formal to informal, laying a foundation for receiving other support.

The theme of classroom management advice connected to the answers of nearly every participant in the study. "When I had problems with students, we would talk about it, and she would give me some ideas or next steps to take." Another said,

> I also came to my mentor about two struggles that I had, and my mentor was very kind by
> reassuring me that it is normal to have something go wrong. My mentor gave me great
> advice on how to handle these situations in the future.

Specific advice in the time of need impacted the new teacher.

Another survey participant commented on the classroom management help from watching her mentor teach. "I think the biggest thing that helped me was simply seeing my mentor teach (her) students…I gained ideas just by seeing my mentor in front of the students, especially when a child misbehaved." The inverse was true for other mentees whose mentors were unavailable to assist with classroom management. Two participants mentioned being unable to visit each other's classrooms (mentee and mentor) and cited this as a hindrance for help in this area.

It (was) hard for (my) mentor to help in classroom management because he was always

teaching when I was and could never really observe me. That's one thing that would have

been really helpful. But as far as classroom management goes, he tried to offer advice,

but I can't say it was incredibly helpful.

The other said, "My mentor could not come and visit my class because of COVID…."

Specifically for help in classroom management, observations were particularly helpful.

Interviews. The research question for this qualitative case study is, "What are the

experiences of first-year mentee teachers in a Midwest preschool-8th grade parochial school's

teacher-to-teacher mentoring program?" The interviews intentionally were open-ended, seeking

to understand, from the new teacher's perspective, what help was the most meaningful to the new

teacher.

While prior reviewed research indicates new teachers need support in classroom

management, support did not emerge in any of the three interviews, even vaguely. While 17 of

the 19 questionnaire participants found their mentors helpful in classroom management, their

answers were in response to a direct question regarding classroom management. As noted above,

questionnaire participants commented on their relationship with their mentor, which allowed

them to ask for advice when needed. However, no questionnaire participants specifically

mentioned classroom management in their answers as to what was the most helpful in the mentor

relationship, nor were they asked a direct question regarding classroom management. Therefore,

the interviews did not add further depth to the mentor and mentee's understanding of the

classroom management component.

Other Findings

Mentor Program Structure Benefits. Several participants commented not on the specifics of the mentor program but on the school's simple act of having a mentoring program. For example, one new teacher appreciated the "lists of things to discuss each month. This just helped us remember what was going on that month." Another also commented that having an assigned list of topics to discuss was helpful.

Participants also found help in the program's formal requirement of a weekly meeting. One said, "The most helpful aspect of the mentoring program was the weekly scheduled meetings…It was helpful to connect once a week, sometimes just to talk." Another echoed this sentiment, saying,

> The most helpful thing I did with my mentor was meet once a week just the two of us.
> This allowed me to collect any questions I might have…(and) we could talk about our
> upcoming week and any events that were coming up.

Eight participants replied the weekly meetings were the most valuable part of the mentoring program. Four participants, when asked what could improve the program, answered they were disappointed their mentors did not meet regularly with them and suggested that instating a mandatory weekly meeting would be how they would improve the program. The weekly meeting was an essential part of the mentoring program for new teachers.

Proximity. While no research question specifically asked about the location of the new teacher's classroom in relation to the mentor's, several participants alluded to proximity when discussing the help received. For example, one participant said the most valuable part of the mentoring relationship was "just working in the same room while we both had prep." Another new teacher wrote she especially appreciated the multiple daily check-ins. Several other

participants commented on quick, everyday conversations or going across the hall to get a quick answer.

Each of the three interview participants mentioned proximity during their interviews. Sheila said,

> If I needed her, her classroom was like maybe 20, 30 meters away from me. Which is really nice because the building here is like, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade are all together. So if I was teaching sixth grade, she was really close.

Later in the interview, she brought up the topic again, saying,

> All of the classrooms have glass windows, so we can see if a teacher is in their classroom…I could easily see if she was there. And I would—it was not only that we met every week, but she was always accessible.

Evelyn also benefited from having her mentor nearby, saying, "Her classroom is next door…So, if there is anything (that) comes up, like before the class, even during the class, I can always just quickly run to her classroom and ask her about some question." Albert's mentor also taught near his classroom, allowing for help beyond scheduled meetings. He said,

> It got to the point where during the school year…we would have our scheduled meetings…, but we would have so many conversations where I wouldn't feel afraid to go and ask him just a random, quick question, or advice on something. He was just there… (We) would spend 10 minutes talking to each other each morning.

As discussed in Chapter 5, the results of this study indicate that administrators should consider the proximity between the mentor's and new teacher's classrooms when pairing new teachers with mentors.

Partnership/Collaboration. While not a significant finding, three participants mentioned they felt the mentor-mentee relationship was a collaborative partnership, possibly benefitting the mentor and the new teacher. One participant wrote, "Sometimes I would make things and share them with her. We worked well as a team." Another said, "Honestly, just the way that we did it together, it felt less of a 'program' and more of a 'partnership.'" In his interview, Albert commented,

> It was kind of funny because he felt like he learned things from me, just because he—his Google Drive was a bunch of folders, you know, and my Google Drive was everything on my computer…we would just talk about different things each morning.

The collaborative nature of the mentor and mentee relationship may benefit the new teacher and their mentor.

Archived Administrative Notes and Evaluations - A Disconnect

The intent was to triangulate the questionnaire and interview data using administrators' archived documentation of new teachers' evaluations and notes from check-ins with the mentors and mentees. The school permitted the researcher to use archived data for this study. However, the attempt to collect meaningful data from these documents showed a gap in what new teachers say they need help with and how the school gives feedback, specifically through evaluations. The exception was data collected from administrator notes from informal check-ins with new teachers. However, these check-ins were infrequent, or administrators did not take notes during these encounters.

Every teacher in the school is evaluated each spring, with the final evaluation placed in the personnel file. Administrators rate teachers on several areas divided into four sections. Administrators can leave comments in each section and at the end of the evaluation. At the first

review, administrators commented on the new teachers' ability in planning, classroom management, classroom instruction, and other professional responsibilities. However, a thorough study revealed administrators frequently used the same comments for most, if not all, of the evaluations they completed. Additionally, the evaluations were filled out once at the end of the year, leaving no way to measure growth in any measured areas. Nor was there an added section within the evaluation process form to view or discuss the mentoring program with the new teacher.

In November 2020, the former elementary principal conducted check-in meetings with a group of new teachers and mentors. While the notes from these meetings are limited, a few comments from the mentors' meeting confirm data collected from the new teachers' questionnaires and interviews. In one note, the principal wrote mentors' meetings with new teachers centered on "curriculum, survival, lesson planning, classroom management, behavior management, (and) parent conversations." According to the principal's notes, one mentor commented, "the month-to-month checklist is very helpful, guiding more formal conversations."

The principal's check-in with the new teachers in the fall of 2020 also confirms data collected from new teachers in the study. The principal's notes state new teachers "appreciate the weekly meetings with their mentor to share, learn, (and) grow." The notes also confirm new teachers appreciate help working with parents. The principal's notes state, "Each one is learning how to navigate parent conversations. They have a new appreciation for parent communication...especially (in a pandemic year where contact with parents is limited)." Other notes from the meeting mention curriculum and navigating the pandemic.

During the 2021-22 school year, the middle school and elementary principals and the preschool director asked mentors and mentees about their reflections on the mentoring program.

One middle school teacher serving as a mentor noted he and the new teacher taught in the same classroom, making frequent connections and helping easier. However, both he and his mentee commented with regret about failing to sit down for more formal meetings. The mentor wrote, "The only negative I can think of is that we haven't had a formal sit down yet, but we connect on a near-daily basis since we work so closely with one another." His mentee echoed the mentor's comment, writing, "Looking through the handbook, I was reminded that I will need to intentionally sit down with (my mentor) and talk about…exams." One new preschool teacher commented on the help regularly-scheduled meetings with her mentor provided. She wrote, "This (the regular meeting) is very helpful as we talk about upcoming (teaching) units and share ideas for other activities...(My mentor) also shares her weekly (parent) newsletter with me (to make) sure I am not missing any important dates or information." The preschool teacher speaks of her friendship with and proximity to her mentor: "This has been a very comfortable mentor relationship as I have known (my mentor) for a long time, and we work on the same days." Another mentor commented on the benefits that mentoring provided for herself, saying, "I feel very refreshed and encouraged by (my mentee). He has lots of fresh energy and ideas, and I'm impressed with how he has taken on teaching…." Relationships, curriculum help, collaboration, and proximity were common themes in these informal check-ins with new teachers and mentors. The above findings indicate it may be worthwhile for the check-in meetings, the weekly mentor-mentee meetings, and the formal evaluations to have a connected ebb and flow.

Summary

Through questionnaires, interviews, and a review of archived administrative notes and evaluations, I sought to answer the question, "What are the experiences of first-year mentee teachers in a Midwest preschool-8th grade parochial school's teacher-to-teacher mentoring

program?" Research (Achinstein & Davis, 2014; Algozzine et al., 2007; Boyd et al., 2012; Evertson & Smithey, 2000; Fletcher and Barrett, 2004; Fluckiger et al., 2006; McCann & Johannessen, 2008 McCann & Johannessen, 2005; Rockoff, 2008; Stanulis & Floden, 2009; Thompson et al., 2004) indicated new teachers receive help from their mentors with classroom management, instructional content and teacher practices, working with parents, and acclimating to the school culture. However, while showing support in these four areas, this research found a more powerful, overarching theme, "relationships first."

Participants commented on their friendship with their mentors in response to various questions. For example, participants described their mentor as their best friend at work, a "spiritual and personal mentor," and the person who "makes me feel welcome and supported." Another participant said, "Having friends in the workplace makes it better!" Mentors also helped new teachers feel welcome in the school, often introducing them to other employees or being a person the new teacher could sit with during faculty meetings or other events. The mentor-mentee relationship theme demonstrated in answers related to the original four themes caused me to create a new emergent conceptual framework to better support the study's results. Reexamining the revised conceptual framework as shown in Figure 3 places the help the new teacher receives from the mentor first through the lens of the relationship between mentor and new teacher. All other themes connected to relationships.

New teachers found support from their mentors in understanding their new school culture. Participants described mentors as teachers of the history of the school, instructors not only of school culture but American culture to some born and raised in other countries, and people who helped the new teacher "learn the things that we don't know but which already exist (at the school)." All three interview participants expressed appreciation for their mentors' role in

helping them acclimate to the culture of their new school. One interview participant, Sheila, said her mentor helped her with "information on the politics of the school." Albert, another interview participant, said his mentor helped him "(get) acquainted with the (school) culture…(and) what do I need to know that is different about (this school) than another school that I could possibly have taught at?" Mentors in the study played an essential role in helping their mentees understand the unique culture of their new school.

Mentors at the research site helped their mentees find support in instructional content and teaching practices. When the mentor and new teacher taught the same subject and students in the same language, the mentee rated the help as more valuable. Participants who did not teach the same subjects or students as their mentors found less support in instructional content and teaching practices. New teachers received assistance in assessment, understanding available teaching resources, and instructional methods. Participants also commented on the benefit of watching their mentor teach. One interview participant, Sheila, appreciated her mentor was as rigorous of a teacher as she is, confirming her feelings that students' language ability was below expectations.

Effectively partnering with parents is vital for any teacher, and working with parents was another theme of this research. Seventeen questionnaire participants found their mentors helpful in working with parents. Specifically, mentors helped new teachers in their communication with parents. One wrote, "My mentor helped me write my first parent letter…." Others commented on the help they received responding to emails or finding the right tone for a response to a parent. Three participants specifically wrote their appreciation of their mentors' prior knowledge of certain parents. Previous knowledge of parents came up in Sheila's interview as well. She said,

"She told me, 'These are the parents you're going to struggle with'" While possible that this type of warning might not be healthy organizationally, Sheila found this knowledge helpful.

The fifth area in which participants received help is classroom management. Interestingly, while all but two questionnaire participants (both long-term teachers in other schools) found their mentor helpful in classroom management, none described classroom management as the most beneficial. None of the three interview participants discussed classroom management in their interviews. Questionnaire responses centered on a theme of advice with challenging students rather than on systems of classroom management. Two participants mentioned they felt hindered in receiving assistance from their mentors in classroom management because they could not observe their mentors' classrooms due to the pandemic.

Other findings of the study do not fit within the main themes but are still worth noting. Participants found help simply in the mentoring program rhythms of meeting together and having a checklist of things to discuss. Participants who did not meet regularly mentioned disappointedly that the meetings did not occur. Another finding indicated by participants is that physical distance from their classroom to their mentor's (proximity) made a difference in the frequency and quality of check-ins. Another study finding is that participants enjoyed the collaborative nature of the mentor-mentee relationship, feeling as if their mentor benefitted from working with the new teacher. Finally, one finding worth noting is that there is a gap between what new teachers say they need help with and the feedback they receive from administrators.

As Chapter Five discusses, the study findings help add to the knowledge on supporting new teachers. Specifically, the research site school will be able to use the study results to modify and improve its teacher-to-teacher mentoring program. Also discussed in Chapter Five: the

76

research shines a light on areas that deserve further exploration. Future research will continue to

assist the school's administrators as they seek to improve the school's support of new teachers.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of new teachers in a teacher-to-teacher mentoring program. This chapter includes a discussion of the major findings of this research. Teacher-to-teacher mentoring is typically part of teacher induction. Teacher induction is a multi-faceted approach to training and supporting new teachers. My focus for this research was centered on the layer of support received through the teacher-to-teacher mentoring program from the perspective of the new teachers. The research question for this qualitative case study is, "What are the experiences of first-year mentee teachers in a Midwest preschool-8th grade parochial school's teacher-to-teacher mentoring program?"

The research results show an overarching theme I've labeled "Relationships First." Participants overwhelmingly appreciated the friendship and personal support they received from their assigned mentors. This support came up in several responses to many different questions. Also, in line with previous research (Achinstein & Davis, 2014; Algozzine et al., 2007; Boyd et al., 2012; Evertson & Smithey, 2000; Fletcher and Barrett, 2004; Fluckiger et al., 2006; McCann & Johannessen, 2008 McCann & Johannessen, 2005; Rockoff, 2008; Stanulis & Floden, 2009; Thompson et al., 2004), participants in this study found support in acclimating to the school culture, instructional content and teaching practices, working with parents, and classroom management. Finally, other findings included teachers receiving support in the mentoring program and processes, especially the provided handbook and checklists; protocols such as regular meetings; and the new teachers' classroom proximity to the mentor's classroom. Following this research, a new conceptual framework emerged. Reexamining the revised

conceptual framework places the help the new teacher receives from the mentor first through the lens of the relationship between the mentor and the new teacher. All themes connect to relationships.

Related Literature

This research's findings strengthen the conclusion that mentoring assists new teachers as they adapt to the teaching profession. I identified four areas for this research from previous studies, illustrated in Figure 2. These areas are Classroom Management, Instructional Content and Teaching Practices, Working with Parents, and School Culture.

As discussed in Chapter Four, participants in this study found help in these same four areas. However, a more prominent theme of "Relationships First" emerged. This theme showed the most critical part of the mentor-mentee relationship is the collegial friendship new teachers find with their mentors.

As discussed in Chapter Two, new teachers enter the teaching profession unprepared to manage their classrooms as well as more experienced teachers (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; Goodwin, 2012; Jones, 2006; Oliver & Reschly, 2007). Participants in this study commented on the questionnaire that their mentors were helpful with classroom management. However, in interviews that focused on the most valuable part of the mentoring program, no participant mentioned classroom management. Further research is needed to see if there is a disconnect between what new teachers need and what they perceive themselves to need.

In the area of Instructional Content and Teaching Practices, reviewed studies indicate that new teachers paired with a mentor knowledgeable in the subject areas of the new teacher had a positive result on student achievement (Boyd et al., 2012; Rockoff, 2008). This research concluded that new teachers did indeed find assistance in the area of Instructional Content and

79

Teaching Practices when they taught the same subjects as their mentors. This research also confirmed Andrews and Quinn's (2005) findings that it is helpful for mentees to observe their mentors' teaching. However, Andrews and Quinn also found that new teachers desire more support in Instructional Content and Teaching Practices than given, but the results of this study did not reflect these findings.

The third area of the expected conceptual framework is Working with Parents. There is a connection between parental involvement and student achievement (Jeynes, 2005; Mahmood, 2013). Mentoring helps new teachers establish positive relationships with colleagues (McCann & Johannessen, 2008). Mahmood (2013) found that communicating with parents can be difficult for new teachers, which was true for participants in this study. The study's results in the area of Working with Parents focused almost exclusively on communicating with parents. While there were mentions of parent-teacher conferences or parent meetings, communication, specifically responding to a problematic parent email, was a recurring theme in my study.

The fourth area of the expected conceptual framework is School Culture. There is not a substantial amount of previous research on the assistance a mentor provides new teachers in acclimating to the school culture. The research I reviewed centered on the benefit to new teachers when employed in a supportive environment that gives the induction program the time and attention it needs (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010). Other reviewed research includes Fletcher and Barrett's (2004) study that found new teachers reported mentors helping new teachers work more collaboratively in their new school environment. In this study, the help mentors provide to the new teachers in school culture focused on the school's history and expected behavior that is not explicitly stated (unwritten rules).

Interpretation and Implications of the Findings

Relationships First

As discussed in Chapter Four, the theme of "relationships first" was not only the strongest of the themes but the theme which serves as a lens for readers to view all other findings. Participants mentioned their positive relationship with their mentor in response to various questions. This relationship allowed new teachers to accept or amplify assistance in other areas.

Participant Albert called his mentor his best friend at work and later mentioned opportunities for mentors and new teachers to connect socially before the school year as his only suggestion to improve the mentoring program. Other participants mentioned finding connections with their mentors because of being of the same race, teaching the same students, and having the same personality type. Teachers at this research site appreciate having a collegial friend at work.

Based on this finding of "relationships first," I recommend school administrators prioritize fostering the relationship between the mentor and mentee. Fostering this relationship should begin immediately upon the hiring of the new teacher. Administrators could host a social gathering with all mentors and new teachers, following this with the expectation that mentors connect several more times informally before the school year begins. I recommend administrators also share the importance of this shared relationship with mentors and mentees. Administrator check-ins with the mentees could include questions about the mentees' connections with others in the school.

School Culture

Acclimating to the culture of their new school can be difficult for novice teachers, but this research showed mentoring helps with this transition. Every school has its own culture with unwritten rules. However, the mentor handbook for the school's mentoring program does not

mention mentors helping new teachers in this area. Even still, new teachers want to know these things and seek help from their mentors in this area.

Two participants attended the school as students and mentioned this in their questionnaire. One said that attending the school made help in this area unnecessary, but the other recognized that things may have changed, and she still needed help in this area. Administrators should encourage mentors to provide assistance acclimating to the school culture regardless of where the mentee attended school.

I did not separate participants based on years of teaching experience. Answering some questions, participants mentioned their experience in other schools because they did not need help in a particular area. However, no participants said their prior experience was a reason for not needing help acclimating to the school culture. Regardless of teaching experience, participants found their mentors helpful in this area. Whether in knowing there is someone to sit with in a faculty meeting (as described in the first theme) or in understanding the unique characteristics of their new school, new teachers find comfort in the mentoring relationship.

Based on this theme, the school should consider including a lesson for mentees and mentors on the school's history. The lesson could also be lighthearted, including some of the organization's unwritten rules. Administrators should also include a list of commonly used terms, phrases, and acronyms used at the school. Providing this list could be a part of a discussion of "How Things Are Done Around Here."

Instructional Content and Teaching Practices

Within the findings themed under the heading "Instructional Content and Teaching Practices," all but three participants described their mentor as helpful in this area. However, participants who taught the same subjects and students as their mentors described this assistance

in greater depth and detail. One participant who described her mentor's aid in this area as unhelpful specifically mentioned not teaching the same students or grade as her mentor.

I also noted that when teachers describe the mentors' help, it seems to focus more on instructional content than teaching practices. Specifically, no new teacher mentioned the teaching methods used to teach a lesson. It makes sense, then, that new teachers are looking for help mostly from mentors who teach the same content if they see this as assistance with *what* they teach rather than *how* they teach. The exception to this would be in assessments. Still, new teachers were not specific in telling if mentors guided them in the use of specific assessments or rather in how to assess students effectively.

The school should consider specific instruction to mentors and mentees on best instructional practices. Leaders should emphasize the need for teachers to constantly be thinking about *how* they teach as much as *what* they teach. Additionally, the administration should get the curriculum into the hands of the new teacher immediately upon hire, communicating expectations to the new teachers to review the curriculum and connect with their mentors before school begins. Administrators should prioritize pairing new teachers with mentors who teach the same students and subjects as the new teacher.

Working with Parents

Eighteen of nineteen participants found assistance from their mentor in the theme, "Working with Parents." The specificity of the mentees' comments in this area supports the notion that this help was significant. Additionally, new teachers described this help primarily in communicating with parents. Mentees commented on help with regular communication, such as newsletters or a parent letter to begin the year.

More participants described this assistance as a response to a problem or a potential problem. For example, several participants described working with their mentor to respond to a parent's challenging email. In her interview, Sheila spoke extensively about her mentor's knowledge of parents she might find difficult and the need to be proactive in communicating with them. New teachers mentioned receiving help with weekly newsletters, but there was little mention of other types of communication.

There are several implications of these findings. First, mentors or administrators should provide opportunities for new teachers to practice working through difficult situations with parents. Mentors or administrators could provide sample emails from parents and walk-through responses. Similarly, effective parent communication should be a topic in new teacher orientation. Teachers whose primary language is not English should have a mentor or other staff member who is comfortable proofreading communication for them. Finally, administrators should guide mentors about what is appropriate to share with new teachers about prior knowledge of specific parents. These conversations can be helpful; however, they can also lead quickly to gossip or other unhelpful discussions.

Classroom Management

Results led to a theme of "Classroom Management." Similar to the help participants described with working with parents, this help focused, with a few exceptions, on the reactionary rather than the theoretical. For example, participants spoke of assistance in the area of classroom management because they taught the same students as their mentors. Discussion centered on help with specific situations or students, not typically on setting up systems or working proactively to deter inappropriate behaviors.

One experienced teacher participant said they did not need help in this area. This was not a surprise to me. Again, similar to the comments regarding the mentor's help with instructional content and teaching practices, participants attribute their help or lack of assistance in classroom management with whether or not they taught the same students as their mentor.

New teachers found their mentors helpful in the area of classroom management. Still, there are implications for administrators in this area. First, administrators should communicate the need for mentors and mentees to watch each other teach. Administrators must provide accountability and possibly classroom coverage to help this happen. Next, mentees and mentors should discuss the mentee's specific classroom management plan before the school year begins. Finally, administrators should stress ongoing classroom management support more for those new teachers who demonstrate a particular need for help in this area through classroom observations and mentor feedback.

Other Findings.

Participants in this study commented on the support they felt from the mentor program structure itself. For example, teachers remarked on the checklist in the mentor handbook and the weekly meeting with their mentor. New teachers who did not meet regularly with their mentors commented on their desire to do so. The simple implication of this finding is that administrators should hold mentors and mentees accountable to the expectation of weekly meetings.

Another finding relates to the physical distance between the new teacher's and mentor's classrooms, or proximity. New teachers commented on being able to simply pop into their mentor's classroom with a quick question. All three interview participants mentioned proximity in their interviews. The closeness allowed participants to have more frequent, casual

conversations with their mentors. I recommend administrators at the research site take this finding under consideration when placing new teachers with mentors.

Mentees may see their relationship with their mentor as a collaborative partnership. One participant commented on the help he perceived he provided to his mentor. Another described the relationship as a partnership. More research is needed in this area to determine what benefits exist that help mentor teachers become better teachers. If these benefits exist, administrators should use this information to recruit mentors.

Finally, my expectation was that formal evaluations and administrator's notes from mentor and mentee meetings to check the needs of the mentors and mentees would provide triangulation of the data collected from the questionnaires and the interviews. While I, as the Head of School, know that these check-in meetings are happening, I expected the administrator's notes from these meetings to have greater detail and depth. There were no notes or records of check-ins occurring in the middle school and only one note from check-in with preschool mentees and mentors. The discovery is itself helpful for the school going forward.

Implications for the field

Throughout the study, I sought to understand mentors' assistance to new teachers. When I step back and look at the problem of teacher retention that is facing new teachers, I see teacher-to-teacher mentoring as playing an essential role in keeping new teachers in the profession. Teacher-to-teacher mentoring is not only for increasing the job satisfaction of new teachers. As administrators hire new and inexperienced teachers in the field and educational environment, teacher-to-teacher mentoring programs can provide an avenue for new teachers to receive additional support and training during their critical first years.

The following suggestions and steps may be helpful to districts, as reflected in the study results:

1. Develop a handbook, protocol, and practices to create consistency in the new teacher mentoring program.

2. Make it a priority to match, as much as possible, mentors and mentees with shared personal and professional characteristics whose classrooms are near one another.

3. Conduct training or prompts to first develop the relationships between mentors and mentees.

4. Create discussion prompts related to classroom management; working with parents; curriculum and instruction; school history and culture.

5. Require mentors and mentees to meet weekly.

6. Require administrators to have check-in meetings with groups of mentors and mentees, respectively, at least once per quarter.

7. Be intentional in aligning the goals of the mentoring program with teacher feedback cycles of observation and evaluation.

Using the results of this and other studies, school administrators can improve teacher-to-teacher mentoring programs for the good of the new teacher and the school's interest.

Limitations

The knowledge I gained through this research will be helpful as the school works to better support new teachers; however, the research, data collection, and results revealed two limitations. The first limitation relates to my roles as researcher and Head of School at the research site. As discussed in Chapter Two I took steps to limit my Head of School's impact on the research, but it would be naive to think I had no effect. Even with this impact, my role as

Head of School served more as an asset to the research than a detriment. I deeply understand the school's culture and the design and implementation of the mentor program studied.

The other limitation is that some participants recalled their first year well after that year had ended. While time passed may help new teachers reflect on their first year, they may not vividly remember their first-year struggles or how the mentor helped them. Including all new teachers in the first three years of teaching at the research site allowed me to have more participants, but it is possible this hurt the quality of the data collected.

Suggestions for Future Research

The research process and results led me to several suggestions for future research that would benefit the research site and possibly the broader educational community. More research is needed to better understand what needs differ between new teachers in their first teaching placement and teachers new to the research site but not new to the profession. The school in which this research took place provides mentors to all teachers new to the school, so I included both teachers new to the profession and experienced teachers in this research. However, differentiating their data would help them seek to meet the needs of their mentees better.

Another interesting research path would be to follow new teachers through their first year of teaching, beginning with their hiring in the summer before their first year. Through regular interviews, questionnaires, and journals, researchers could gain a greater understanding of how the needs of the new teachers evolve over the year. Administrators would use this knowledge to adapt the support they and the mentor provide. Similar research to this study could include the perspective of the mentors and school administrators. Researchers could compare and contrast this data to that collected from the mentees, painting a clearer picture of the areas in which mentees need support.

Further research is needed to determine the extent to which cultural similarities and differences play in the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship. In this study, Sheila's feedback on the helpfulness of the characteristics she shared with her mentor, specifically both being women of color, was compelling. It would be interesting to know if other similarities have the same effect, or even if there are differences that might help the relationship.

Research is needed to better understand the impact of mentoring on the mentor. One participant in this study commented on the help he perceived he provided his mentor. Little research on the benefit of mentoring for the mentor exists and learning more could lead to compelling research.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of new teachers in a teacher-to-teacher mentoring program. I did so by answering the question, "What are the experiences of first-year mentee teachers in a Midwest preschool-8th grade parochial school's teacher-to-teacher mentoring program?" I hoped to improve the support the research site provides new teachers, helping teachers quickly adapt to their new profession. I also hoped to add to the knowledge on teacher mentoring to help stem the tide of teachers changing schools or leaving the profession altogether.

My research found that new teachers who participated in this study overwhelmingly found their mentors helpful in various ways. Most significant was the friendship the mentor provided the new teacher. This friendship provides the lens through which others can understand all other help. Even with this importance, mentoring is more than a friend at work. In this study, mentoring was found to assist new teachers in acclimating to the school culture, instructional

content and teacher practices, working with parents, and classroom management. This research will lead to improvements in the site's mentoring program in every one of these areas.

It seems fitting to close with a quote from one of the participants, who said, "There were some challenging moments throughout the year; my mentor walked alongside me offering ideas, thoughts, and encouragement, giving specific strategies to overcome the problem." I hope that this work allows all of us who care for teachers to better come alongside new teachers.

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91

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for agreeing to fill out this questionnaire. The job of school leaders is to take care of teachers, so teachers can then take better care of the students. The school's new teacher mentoring program is one way the school is trying to take care of teachers. Your perceptions and experiences in the mentoring program need to be understood so we can improve the experience of teachers in the future. It's helpful for us to know what helped you, but just as helpful to know what help you needed and didn't receive. The hope is to improve the experience of new teachers. All answers are anonymous, and this data will not be used to evaluate you or the teacher who mentored you.

You should expect this questionnaire to take approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Which statement best describes you?

- I was a new teacher when I began employment at my current school.
- I had previous experience as a teacher in another school before beginning employment in my current school.

The answers below should reflect only on the experiences during your first year at your current school.

- How would you describe your overall first-year teaching experience at your current school?
- Tell me about your mentor.
- How frequently did you and your mentor meet in pre-scheduled meetings?

- How frequently did you informally connect with your mentor for support?

- How would you describe the relationship with your mentor?

- How would you describe the help your mentor provided/attempted to provide in the area of classroom management?

- How would you describe the help your mentor provided/attempted to provide in the area of instructional content and teaching practices (curriculum support, teaching strategies, use of assessment, etc.)?

- How would you describe the help your mentor provided/attempted to provide in the area of working with parents?

- How would you describe the help your mentor provided/attempted to provide in the area of acclimating to the school culture?

- Describe the most helpful aspect of the mentoring relationship.

- What was the most helpful thing you did with the mentor?

- Describe the least helpful aspect of the mentoring relationship and/or anything you felt was missing.

- Describe an aspect of the mentoring relationship that wasn't effective or could be improved.

- Overall, did/do you think positively of the support you received from your mentor? Why or why not?

- Please add any other comments you would like to share.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Perceptions of New Teachers: A Case Study of a Mentoring Program in a Midwest Semi-

Rural Parochial School

Interview Questions:

- After participating in the teacher-to-teacher mentoring program what is your perspective

  and/or experience on:

- Essential factors in a successful teacher-to-teacher mentoring relationship?

- Essential factors that hinder a teacher-to-teacher mentoring relationship?

- What do you perceive was the most helpful to you within your teacher-to-teacher

  mentoring experience?

- What do you perceive was the least helpful to you within your teacher-to-teacher

  mentoring experience?

- Are there any other comments or thoughts you would like to share concerning the

  school's teacher-to-teacher mentoring program or your experience in the program?

 DEFINITIONS:

       Teacher retention: Teachers staying in their same classroom/subject area/grade level

from one year to the next.

       Teacher induction: The systematic support provided to new teachers in the early years

of their teaching. Teacher induction includes such things as new teacher orientation day;

administrative support such as group meetings, extra observations and feedback cycles, and

curriculum support; and the assignment of a teacher mentor.

Teacher-to-teacher mentoring: The entirety of support provided to a new teacher by her or his mentor teacher. This includes, but is not limited to, weekly meetings following the monthly checklists in the Mentor Handbook, observations and feedback by the mentor, observations of the mentor teacher by the new teacher, and any informal support.

Four areas of teacher-to-teacher mentoring:

- Classroom management:

- Classroom instruction/working with students:

- Working with parents:

- District/school culture and climate:

NOTE: Please use the provided notepaper to "jot" down any notes you may have during the interaction to focus and remember your thoughts for sharing.

APPENDIX C

SURVEY AND INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

Dear Survey and/or Interview Participant:

I am conducting a study to uncover important aspects of an effective teacher-to-teacher

mentoring program. The study will consist of a survey and interviews in order to gain the

perspective of the mentored teacher. Participation in the survey is voluntary and is not a

requirement of the participant's employment.

The survey will consist of several open-ended questions and distributed to all teachers

who have joined our district within the past three years. The survey should take approximately

20-30 minutes to complete. The survey will be done on Google documents without any

demographic identifying information so as to sustain all survey participants' anonymity. Three to

five interviews will be conducted following the completion and review of the survey results.

Interviewees will be chosen from the group of surveyed responders and those who express a

desire to be interviewed. Each interview should take approximately 90 minutes.

All results of these activities of the survey and interview participants will be confidential

and will not be released in any individually identifiable form. Pseudonyms will be used in any

reports of the study and neither the school district nor the individual participants will be

identified. The survey and interview responses/or transcripts will be destroyed by December 31,

2021.

For the purposes of my study, I would like to use your verbal responses as data for my

dissertation. I also hope to publish an article on the results of the study. I anticipate the study will

benefit you in the short-term by helping to explore the phenomenon of your own mentoring

experience. Hopefully, the study will have long-term benefits by providing to the field aspects of effective teacher-to-teaching mentoring programs.

Again, participation is **voluntary**, refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits, and you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. You are free to withdraw your consent at any time by contacting me at 630.639.9226 or timmcaboy@gmail.com. Any further questions about the research now or during the course of the project will be answered by me the researcher or my advisor Dr. Pamela Ross at 248.370.3095 or at rosspam@umich.edu. For questions regarding the rights of human subjects in research you may contact Ken Sylvester, Director, UMF Office of Research at 810.766.6842 or at kenms@umich.edu.

Timothy J. McAboy

I hereby consent to participate in the study Perception of New Teachers: A Case Study of a Mentoring Program in a Midwest Semi-Rural Parochial School and allow the use of my responses for the study data.

_____ _____ _____

Please Print Your Name   Signature   Date

SCHOOL APPROVAL

March 29, 2021

Dear ZCS Board of Trustees:

As you are aware, I am working on my doctorate degree at the University of Michigan-Flint and am interested in using Zeeland Christian School as part of a qualitative case study. The study will focus on the experiences of new teachers in the district's teacher-to-teaching mentoring program from the perspective of the mentored teachers.

In order to complete the dissertation using data from Zeeland Christian School, I need your approval as the school's president of the board of education to use both archival and current data for the years 2020-2021. This data could include:

- historical & demographic information on the school and new teachers being mentored.

- historical & demographic information of the teacher mentors and mentees.

- leadership team observation notes.

- my personal notes and/or observations in regards to the teacher induction and mentoring program.

Any data will only be used for the purpose of research for my dissertation. The district will not be named or identified, and as much as possible, the identity of Zeeland Christian School will not be disclosed. Individual consent forms will also be used for any administrator or teacher-involved in data collections (such as surveys, interviews and/or observation data). I would greatly appreciate your interest in forwarding educational research by the participation of the

school in my dissertation. If you have any questions regarding this research you may contact me at 630-639-9226 or my committee chairperson, Dr. Pamela Ross at rosspam@umich.edu.

Sincerely,

Timothy J. McAboy

Head of School

As Zeeland Christian School's president of the board of trustees, I approve the above listed data for the use in Timothy McAboy's dissertation research at University of Michigan-Flint.

_____   _____

Geoff Bremer, Board President   Date