Bridging the Professional Learning Gap

Enhancing the Beginning Teacher Experience Through an Induction-By-Mentoring Model

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Abstract

The overall objective of this research was to examine the effectiveness and sustainability of an induction-by-mentoring model of support for beginning teachers. In our mentorship model, the beginning teacher’s classroom was the central focus, with regularly scheduled classroom visits by the mentor providing structure, continuity, relationship building and professional development opportunities. Participants in this study included eight mentor/mentee pairs (four pairs in year one and four in year two) who were matched based on common subject-area interests, grade level taught (that is, elementary/middle-years/secondary) or on other particular areas of interest (e.g., special education). Mentors were provided with orientation training in a variety of mentorship skills and were provided with funds to cover release time from their own classrooms in order to visit their mentees’ schools/classrooms for approximately two half-days per month. Findings point out important insights regarding the sustainability of our model in a rural school division, indicating that:

1. Ensuring appropriate substitute teachers to provide release time for mentors can be problematic.

2. Proximity issues are challenging.

However, findings also illuminate the efficacy of the model, indicating that:

3. Some mentees wanted assistance with paperwork and routines; however, most wanted assistance in honing their practice, including fine-tuning their instructional approaches, feeling secure in risk-taking and enhancing ability to attend to individual learners.

4. Both mentors and mentees appreciated technologies that helped them to keep in touch and, in particular, for the face-to-face collaboration opportunities.

5. Our induction-by-mentoring model helped to ameliorate the impacts of isolation felt by teachers working in small schools in a rural school division where colleagues teaching the same subjects and/or grade levels can be in locations kilometres apart.

6. Co-learning and collaboration meant professional growth for both mentors and mentees.
Overall, this pilot project demonstrates that our induction-by-mentoring model offers a promising and effective approach to supporting beginning teachers, but that careful consideration must be given regarding the acquisition of personnel to provide release time for mentors and regarding proximity when matching mentor/mentee pairs in rural school divisions in order to ensure sustainability. We recommend that additional research continue to examine potential models of induction and mentorship across the variety of contexts within Saskatchewan (i.e., rural, urban, remote, northern) and that, ultimately, a provincial strategy be developed.
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Introduction

Teacher retention is an issue in education because teaching has a turnover rate higher than that of most professions (Carroll & Fulton, 2004; Ferriter & Norton, 2004; Fuller, 2002). Retention of beginning teachers is of particular concern (Watts Hull, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001) as it is estimated that 20 to 50 percent of beginning teachers resign during their first three to five years (Villani, 2002; Voke, 2002). As teachers typically require five to eight years of experience to master the profession (Scherer, 2001), classrooms become recurrent training grounds as teachers leave before becoming experts only to be replaced by novices. This cyclical turnover has been demonstrated to have a significant negative impact on student achievement that stretches beyond individual teachers and classrooms (Ronfelddt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013).

In order to ensure that beginning teachers thrive, we need to induct beginning teachers into a system, which from the very beginning, supports mentorship, collaboration (Howe, 2008) and continued growth and learning (Carroll, 2005). Effective mentorship has the ability to “bridge the gap that occurs when interns leave their teacher preparation programs and move into classroom responsibility, providing … access to best practices and resources beyond the classroom” (Carroll, 2005, p. 204). Hence, the purpose of this study was to examine the efficacy of an induction-by-mentoring model of beginning teacher mentorship. More specifically, this pilot project focused on studying the impact of a mentorship model that paired master teacher mentors and beginning teacher mentees, with a focus on collaboration in the beginning teachers’ schools and classrooms.

We focused our investigation by addressing the following overarching question: Is an induction-by-mentoring model that focuses on collaborative classroom connections in the beginning teacher’s classroom efficacious and sustainable? We also intended to address specific sub-questions including:

- What impact does a model of providing release time for mentor teachers to work one-to-one with beginning teachers in their classrooms have on mentors and beginning teachers?
- In what ways can release time be provided for mentor teachers in order to ensure the sustainability of a mentorship program?
Objectives

Our research objectives were to understand the efficacy and the sustainability of our induction-by-mentoring model. We posited that this model could assist in retaining and sustaining beginning teachers by creating collaborative relationships between beginning teachers and experienced mentor teachers. We also posited that this collaborative model could provide co-learning and supportive professional development for both the beginning teachers and their mentors. We hypothesize that our project will make an important contribution to teaching and learning by providing feedback to the profession and all interested stakeholders about the benefits of developing similar induction-by-mentoring programs in other school divisions in our province.
Rationale, Literature and Statement of Need

Induction involves the ways in which the teaching community acculturates beginning teachers and usually refers to structured programs (Wong, 2004; Wong, Britton, & Ganser, 2005) or informal processes that may vary across schools (Bolman & Deal, 1997). Most beginning teacher induction programs include some aspects of mentorship by experienced teachers but the composition of the programs and the training of the mentors varies widely (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of mentorship programs (Algozzine, Grets, Queen, & Cowan-Hathcock, 2007; Serpell, 2000; Carter & Francis, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2003) and their ability to improve teacher quality, which is one of the best predictors of student success (Davis & Higdon, 2008). Induction programs involving beginning teacher mentorship are often limited by lack of funds (Carver & Feiman-Nemser, 2008). However, additional mentorship research is needed due to limited existing research (Feiman-Nemser, Carver, Schwille, & Yusko, 1999; Certo, 2005).

Teaching is a demanding and challenging profession. As indicated above, approximately 20 to 50 percent of beginning teachers dropout of teaching within their first three to five years which can negatively impact student achievement. Mentoring beginning teachers is one method that has been shown to lower new teacher dropout rates.

We think that our project has particular significance in Saskatchewan at present because, unlike other provinces in Canada, Saskatchewan does not have a government-supported beginning teacher mentorship program. This means that mentorship programs, when they do indeed exist, vary widely between school divisions (Hellsten, Prytula, Ebanks, & Lai, 2009; Prytula, Makahonuk, Syrota, & Pesenti, 2009). Recommendations stemming from a review of existing mentorship programs in Saskatchewan include making formal mentorship programs a priority in education, providing release time for regularly scheduled meetings, providing opportunities for classroom visits and providing training to the personnel who will act as mentors (Olafson, Elaschuk, & Owens, 2002). Although different mentorship models have been proposed for use with beginning teachers (Anderson & Shannnon, 1988; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Hargreaves, 1998; Maynard & Furlong, 1995; Spindler & Biott, 2000), including two models developed in Saskatchewan (Ralph, 2002; Prytula et al., 2010), they don’t focus on the beginning teacher’s classroom or address the mentoring recommendations (Feiman-Nemser, Carver, Schwille, & Yusko, 1999).

Our mentorship model provided beginning teachers with the support of experienced master teacher mentors and we investigated how to implement recommendations in a sustainable way via a partnership between the College of Education at the University
of Saskatchewan and a suburban/rural school division. We think this investigation was necessary in order to demonstrate if the proposed mentorship program is effective and sustainable and, if so, our findings will provide the evidence that can be brought forward to the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education in the hope they will contribute financially to a wider-spread Saskatchewan new teacher mentorship program.
Description of Study Population

Altogether, there were eight beginning-teacher/mentor-teacher pairings (four pairings in year one and four in year two of the project). These pairs worked in elementary, middle years and secondary classrooms in a rural school division located near a larger urban centre in Saskatchewan. Two mentors who participated in year one of the project volunteered to serve as mentors during year two of the project. Participation by the 14 individuals was voluntary; however, to reduce travel costs and increase time in classrooms, every effort was made to select pairings based on proximity. Because the divisional definition of “beginning teachers” not only includes those who are in their first or second year of their careers, but also those who are new to the school division and those in new roles within the division, several beginning teacher participants in the first year of the project actually had several years of teaching experience.
In each of the two years of the project, mentorship training was offered in September/October for the master teachers selected to become mentors. In addition, a retreat was organized in late September/early October when the mentors and beginning teachers had an opportunity to meet and begin to build their collegial relationships. The retreat involved opportunities for co-planning and reflection. From October through May, the mentors were to spend two half-days or one full-day per month in their mentee’s school/classroom. Classroom experiences took a variety of forms including observations, co-teaching and coaching. Both the mentors and mentees were encouraged to informally document their experiences through the use of journaling and the collection of relevant artifacts. Individual interviews between 30 and 45 minutes in length were conducted with all participants in spring and these were conducted with the aid of an audio-recording device.

Interviews were scripted with questions co-constructed by members of the research team and the school division. Questions focused on professional and personal factors affecting teachers’ beliefs about competence and confidence in their new roles in their school communities such as teacher identity, self-efficacy, and desired supports and resources, as well as efficacy of the mentorship approach. Transcription of the interviews was conducted by a neutral third party and thematic analysis was used to identify repeated patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We attempted to ensure that the coding of the transcripts and the interpretations made from the codes were constructed from the raw data contained in the transcribed responses to the interview questions (Boyatzis, 1998).
Findings and Interpretations

The analysis of the transcribed interviews revealed six themes. The first two indicate issues of concern regarding the sustainability of our model:

1. Provision of appropriate substitute teachers can be problematic.
2. Proximity issues are challenging.

However, four themes illuminate the efficacy of the model, indicating that:

3. Some mentees wanted assistance with paperwork and routines; however, most wanted assistance in honing their practice.
4. Mentors and mentees appreciated technologies that helped them to keep in touch and the face-to-face collaboration opportunities.
5. Our mentorship model helped to ameliorate the impacts of isolation.
6. Co-learning and collaboration meant professional growth for both mentors and mentees.

Theme 1: Provision of appropriate substitute teachers can be problematic.

In order to reduce the demands on our mentors, we had anticipated providing mentors with access to specific substitute teachers. These substitute teachers were to have received additional professional development and we had planned to provide some time for the mentors and substitute teachers to co-plan. However, we encountered problems putting this idea into practice since our partner school division had to approve all substitute teachers and because some mentors had preferred substitute teachers in place who could not commit to joining our study.

Travel logistics in a large rural division also led to some difficulties. For instance, distances from one another in winter weather conditions can cause problems in arranging and carrying through with visits. For example, a mentor commented:
I use the same sub all the time and usually she’s really good. But if it’s ever like the highways are too bad she’ll just—you know it’s not worth the two hundred dollars to drive and possible smash into the ditch. That was the big one because it seemed to be the days we planned to get together were the days that it kinda dumped snow on us and made the highways a wreck.

In order to enhance the sustainability of our mentorship model, ways in which to ensure provision of appropriate substitute teachers will need to be carefully considered.

**Theme 2: Proximity issues are challenging.**

There were some drawbacks of having mentor-mentee pairs working in schools at a relatively far distance apart. For example, one mentee commented:

> Just being in totally separate schools was a huge challenge and being so far apart. I think if I had maybe a mentor in [name of town] that would have been a totally different story because it’s 15 minutes down the road. We could have met up even for lunch or just to talk. But having him be so far away and maybe not knowing him personally ...

In contrast, a mentor in a same-school pairing noted that scheduling mentorship times was an important consideration:

> Mentor: One of the requests I had by going into this was being in the same school and I was mostly doing that selfishly again of busyness. I coach a lot and stuff like that. Pros of that was definitely just the regular connection. I think we could develop that relationship beyond just that one day.

Another different school mentor concurred and also expressed concern regarding scheduling:

> Again the big challenge is just scheduling. Trying to find times especially if we’re wanting the in-class, in-school part of it to occur. That’s always the biggest thing. Then the proximity; I mean me driving to [name of town] versus me driving to [name of town] is different, just those sorts of things, and just finding times within two people’s very different schedules of extra curr and everything else that’s going on and to find meaningful times to meet.
Another mentor suggested that while being in the same school was not necessary, proximity was very important and that proximity would affect the type of mentoring he/she was able to provide:

I mean we all get busy and busy at different times with different things. Finding those times to actually connect school to school it’s sometimes difficult. That’s the biggest thing. Like that’s one thing I think that definitely if something like this is moved forward with in our division, proximity definitely has to be—like last year I had probably I would say I had a more successful time because I did the mentorship last year as well. It was way more successful being paired up with someone in [name of town] because it’s a ten-minute drive. It’s just easier. Proximity is pretty key to something like this. If I was trying to mentor someone in [name of town] it would be email.

Another mentor agreed:

I think my biggest recommendation is the proximity. I think for this to work in terms of—if that’s the goal, if that’s the end goal that comes out of this is we’re thinking in-classroom mentorship then I think proximity is crucial. [F]or the in-person part, for me to go to [name of town] or [name of town] or something like that is so much easier especially just if I wanted to shoot out there for an afternoon which is what [mentee] and I did a bit last year. I would just go up there for the morning and then I could come back for the afternoon or just shoot off there for the afternoon. I can’t do that going to [name of town].

Although several mentors and mentees did agree that proximity and scheduling could be problematic when they did not normally work in the same school, these individuals also recognized that the pros of in-school mentorships could be diminished if there were not grade-level or subject-matter commonalities between the mentor and mentee. For example, one mentor commented:

Like a grade-two teacher can talk to a grade-three teacher and they can figure things out but a science teacher can’t talk to an English teacher and figure things out.

In another example, when questioned about whether he/she would prefer an in-school mentor or a mentor with similar subject-area/grade-level interests, the mentee replied:

Subject I think. In elementary the grade two teacher can go to the grade three teacher and say do you have ideas for this. But high-school-specific subjects it’s tough to say to the English teacher, “How about this fetal pig lab?”
In addition, when considering the pros and cons of in-school and between-school mentorships, participants recognized that their perspectives can be shaped by the size of the school in which they work.

Mentee: I just think it’s more not overly natural if you’re having an issue in that moment to be like well I’m just going to email it to someone away when you have five other people in the [subject area] department in your hall. Because why wouldn’t you just walk down there, right? So if you’re at a school where you were the only [subject area] teacher, then I can see this being a very valuable experience because it’s like I need another [subject area] teacher to bounce this off. But my experience because I have several other [subject area] teachers right next to me, I never really had to ask [mentor] for help or problems because I had many other people there. So I feel like if he and I had been in the same school it would have been much more enriched because it would have been, “Hey you know this class. This is going on.”

A second mentee made similar comments but recognized that in small schools the possibility for in-school mentorship might not exist:

So to me it because it wasn’t like he’s in the same wing and I’m having an issue and I need help right now, it wasn’t like this authentic, natural like, “Hey I need you to come in and help me with this.” I’d be like a, “Yeah can you come in on like this day, such and such.” It was just inauthentic is how I felt. … I think all mentors and mentees should be put in the same school unless it’s that there’s only one English teacher, one history teacher. … [S]o I feel like they should be in the same school unless that’s not a possibility.

In order to enhance the sustainability of our mentorship model, the distance between schools where mentors and mentees work needs to be reduced and, when possible, the pairing of mentors with mentees who work in the same school will need to be carefully considered.

**Theme 3: Some mentees wanted assistance with paperwork and routines; however, most wanted assistance in honing their practice.**

Mentees were not all at the same place or stage with respect to their need for assistance in learning divisional customs and procedures. While many mentees spoke of learning about the culture of the school, only a few mentioned their need for learning basic but necessary routines.
I think that I never really realized how much teachers did behind the scenes coming out of my internship. So I guess that was maybe an assumption that I had was that “I did my internship, I’m almost there” kind of thing. But then what I found difficulty was the paper work or the meetings and the outside-of-school stuff. And then she was kind of there to help me through ...

Several mentees indicated they did not need support regarding policies, classroom management or in the establishing of day-to-day routines, and they seemed to be very strong with respect to the “craft” of teaching (lesson planning and so on); however, they wanted assistance in honing their practice, including: fine-tuning their instructional approaches, feeling secure in risk-taking and enhancing their ability to attend to individual learners. For example, one mentee declared:

This basically was an opportunity for me to have some—some planning time with a master teacher just to sit down and ask the questions and how do we achieve those goals of the division in the most effective way? And being given the time to have someone to work with and plan with and bounce ideas off of and get ideas from. ... When he came to me and said, “you know just take something that you’re interested in and make it work within the curricular objectives.” — that completely switched in my mind.

One of our mentors spoke to the impact the relationship had on his mentee:

The biggest thing was just for [mentee] to—I guess for me to re-affirm that what he was doing was good, was strong. He wasn’t sure how things were going. But he’s very strong for this stage in his career so I think he just needed a confidence booster. With [mentee] it was like he already had the building blocks in place. He wanted refinement. He just wanted to polish things up.

However, one mentor, who was working with a mentee with three years of teaching experience, was asked to take on a second mentee - a first-year teacher who obtained a contract in February of the year. The mentor reported that experiences with the two mentees were hugely different and thinks that the biggest impact of mentoring would be felt by first-year mentees.

With [mentee’s name] it’s been very different because she’s treading water. It’s a terrible situation. You know you’re dropped in this new school, new curricula ... You really need an experienced teacher to walk in and share a tool box. So with [mentee] it’s not about student engagement. It’s not about big picture stuff. You know this is survival. This is just keep your mouth and nose above water. I mean I think she has the potential to be an excellent teacher someday. She’s very, very bright.
Providing reassurance was one of the most appreciated impacts of the mentorship relationships. One mentee stated:

One of the big things that he said at our meeting at the beginning of the year was to not let those kids kind of destroy how I’m thinking about my teaching because they’re hard kids; it’s not because I’m a bad teacher, it’s because they’re hard kids. And that lifted a lot of weight off my shoulders ...

Whether mentees wanted assistance with paperwork and routines, dealing with a start-up mid-year or if they wanted assistance in honing their practice, it appears that our mentorship model was effective in meeting their needs.

**Theme 4: Mentors and mentees appreciated technologies that helped them to keep in touch and the face-to-face collaboration opportunities.**

Mentors and mentees indicated their appreciation of technologies that helped them to keep in touch and they were particularly grateful for the opportunities to meet face-to-face to collaborate. The importance of the use of email to consult became very evident for both mentors and mentees. As one mentee suggested:

I just e-mail whenever something comes up. I email her and say hey this is the story. What do you suggest or what do I do from here? And that’s probably been the most helpful for me is that she’s just really fast at getting back to me.

Another mentee described the use of email to connect.

I did email him specifically about—I did a fetal pig dissection with my grade twelves and I’d never done it before. I’m not a biology teacher. I’m a chemistry teacher. I was just like I want to do this because it’s cool and the kids want to do cool things but I’ve never done it. And he’s a chemistry guy too so he went to the biology teacher at their school and got the biology teacher to send me his lab. It was awesome! It worked perfectly.

Although both mentors and mentees used technology to keep in touch, in-person relationships were also important.

I like the face-to-face. Actually sitting with somebody and talking. I guess if relationships are the most important factor, which I think they probably are, I don’t think you can develop that over Skype or over the internet or even e-mails. It’s not the same.
In providing opportunities for face-to-face relationship building and collaboration, our mentorship model appears to have been effective in enhancing the use of technologies by mentors and mentees to keep in touch with each other despite the physical distances between schools.

**Theme 5: Our mentorship model helped to ameliorate the impacts of isolation.**

Results demonstrate that our mentorship model helps to ameliorate the impacts of isolation felt by teachers working in rural school divisions where colleagues teaching the same subjects and/or grade levels can be in locations kilometres apart. As one mentee shared:

> My first year of teaching I was petrified. I felt very much alone in my staff. Um ... everybody’s busy in a school. You don’t really wanna be asking too much of somebody else in the school. Everybody’s already kinda got a full plate. So having that person [mentor] there that was—I knew that was part of her job was to support me—And to help me, so I knew I could go to her. When I think back to my first year it was tough—especially I was in a new community.

Mentors and mentees liked working together because, in small rural schools, they often feel isolated as the only one teaching their particular subject area(s) in their school. Mentors enjoyed the time to talk with another teacher with similar interests and these experiences helped them to learn too. As one mentor commented:

> I’ve been teaching for nine years and it’s nice to just sit down and talk with another teacher who teaches the same things as you. We don’t get a chance to do that enough.

Similarly, another mentor concluded:

> I see that’s where a lot of merit is in the mentorship program, is it just gives you that extra and it gives you an extra contact, right? Someone that’s working in a similar field, in a similar maybe size of school or whatever it happens to be because in schools like this as a math department or a science department you’re fairly isolated in your work. I mean I am the math department from grade nine to twelve, right? There’s a bio teacher so like the two of us together are the science department. For some schools there’s not a whole lot of people that you can actually talk to or ask questions, content-specific questions. So that’s where I see the main thing.
This mentor later went on to say:

[W]ithin a small school it’s nice to have the name of a similar colleague in another school even just so that you can—it’s another way to access information and answer questions that maybe other people in your building might not be able to answer for you. Even just things like maybe it’s your first time at a school and you’re thrown into a 30-level class. Maybe you have questions about departmentals or things like that. Because if you don’t and if other teachers aren’t familiar with giving a departmental or whatever—it’s a daunting thing having a department science course. It’s nice to have someone you can ask questions to.

Another mentor concluded:

I was involved with the new teacher induction for the … division wide I should say. And I kind of gave some feedback to some of the administrators last year that I thought that not just my mentee but the other new teachers there appreciated having me just even in the content areas. I know like in my school I’m the only [subject area] teacher so if you’re a beginning teacher you’ve got no one to talk to, you’ve got no one to ask questions. So I think that was helpful and I kind of recommended that our division take a look at that and have some more experienced teachers at the new teacher induction.

One of the mentees suggested that having access to extra resources and subject-specific things made a difference for them.

Having access to extra resources and subject-specific things was a huge help because I’m the only [subject area] teacher here. It would have been hours and hours and hours of online research to try and find something that fit and that would work. But to know that someone else had done it and had worked well for them, that was a great help for sure.

It appears that our mentorship model was effective in ameliorating the sense of professional isolation felt by teachers who were in locations kilometres away from colleagues teaching the same subjects and/or grade levels.
Theme 6: Co-learning for both mentors and mentees meant professional growth for both.

Both mentors and mentees discussed how working within the mentorship relationship was a co-learning experience, leading to professional growth for both. One mentor commented:

I would say it was beneficial. I think any time you talk to another teacher about teaching and learning it’s a two-way street even if one is more experienced than the other.

A mentee concurred:

I just feel like this [mentorship] is more of a—there’s that colleague to colleague type vibe. Like maybe more of a mutual respect.

Another mentor elaborated:

I mean it’s showed me that I’m capable of giving that feedback and listening to people’s requests and just being able to help out in that different sort of way. This is a cooperative process. It’s not I’m gonna come in and tell you exactly how to do it and I’m not gonna make lesson plans for you. We do this cooperatively.

A third mentor suggested that he/she also learned from the experience:

Any time doing stuff like this or working with interns or whatever, I like it cause it causes me to reflect on what I do and just kinda refine and like I said even bouncing ideas off each other. I wrote down some of the things that he said too. So it’s nice. I like to always try and improve and change things, so it was nice to have that opportunity too.

Another mentor reflected on her/his approach to offering support:

It made me think a lot about me as a person and what types of supervisory methods I do and how I think about a person. Do I think about them as a whole, as all the things they’re bringing to the table? ... And so just kind of really getting to know the person I think that that was probably a key. It’s just about building relationships for me ...

To sum up, this mentor ruminated:

I see this as great—that my role maybe is to help mentor but I actually learned a lot partly because you have the young, fresh eyes of a teacher just kind of getting into it as well as then just new approaches
to things. So I think yeah, in terms of the engagement part I think it has a dual role. So obviously it’s meant to be a support for a newer teacher in their role but I think it actually is a bit of a rejuvenation for me as a teacher that’s been in the field for a little while, right? It kind of almost came back to how you see things and even seeing kids interacting with a teacher in a different way. There was lots of parts of it that I think that I gained as much as he maybe hopefully did too, right?

In providing co-learning opportunities, it seems clear that our mentorship model was effective in supporting professional growth for both mentors and mentees.
A number of questions arose out of our examination of the data. These are listed below:

1. **To what degree do understandings/misunderstandings of the mentor/mentee role or mentorship processes, in general, affect the sense of efficacy of the mentorship process?**

On the one hand, one mentee participant perceived the program to be about watching her/him teach and that it was inauthentic because the mentor was not from his/her same school:

> I’d say the challenge is that having somebody outside your school means that they don’t understand your school culture. ... So when you’re bringing someone in from an outside environment to observe you teach and then you’re expecting it to be some sort of quality partnership it’s inauthentic because they just walk into the situation.

It seems possible that this misunderstanding (i.e., that mentoring is primarily about watching him/her teach) affected this mentee’s sense of efficacy regarding the mentorship process.

In contrast, the mentor who commented below was clear about the intentions of mentorship and very conscientious in structuring the program with the mentee:

> I just kept thinking this is for you. This is for you. This is different than her other experience with being evaluated by her superintendent and her principal. This was all about her. ... We could develop a relationship. She felt safe. She was able to come to me with the real things and not the surface things. Like, “Oh no, it’s fine. I’m fine.” Right? For me that was one of the biggest things. And just to be able to share.
Another mentor concurred.

And I didn’t want to be telling them what to do. I wanted to help them on what they wanted help with. I didn’t want to be the expert there. I wanted to help them with what they wanted.

We posit that these understandings could enhance the sense of efficacy regarding the mentorship process. Further investigation is needed to address this question.

2. When is the best time for mentoring?

Some mentees indicated they thought having a mentor in their first year of teaching would have been really helpful; others thought having a mentor in their second year would have been most helpful. One of the mentors also suggested that the program may better fit second-year teachers:

So my throw out there would be like is it a pro to have it somebody—that this kind of programming—to have it for somebody who’s at least had a temporary contract to a second year. Because then they’ve had time. “I’m teaching math again, I would really like more hands-on projects” or “I’m teaching this and I would like that.” It might be not even the same class subject but the idea of knowing sort of what they’ve had experience. Whereas they’re coming off an internship, they’re becoming a prime teacher. They’re going to plan and that. It’s not that there’s not room for improvement but they just don’t know what to improve on yet.

Future research should further examine this timing issue to determine if there is a preferred window in which a mentorship program should be initiated.

3. Are there benefits/drawback in combining mentorship with workshop-/orientation-type induction programming?

Some mentees liked working with a mentor in combination with the “regular” induction program offered by the division; others preferred simply working with their mentor.

4. Does mentorship provide benefits for those not new to the profession but who find themselves in new roles?

For example, in our study the individual beginning a new role in the division had much classroom experience but appreciated knowing that his/her mentor was readily available to answer quick questions by email or phone regarding:

- Working with individuals and very small groups of learners.
- Writing IPPs .
- Planning individual interventions.
- Multiple assessment approaches.
5. **What degree of flexibility should be offered to participants in a mentorship program sponsored by school divisions?**

Some appreciated the flexibility given to the mentor/mentee pair:

> Even that day that we took the day where she could come and observe me and then we reflected and planned, like that was up to us! And so that flexibility I would say don’t lose that. I don’t know if there’s value totally in just going and observing your map and then that being all you do. Like to have the ability to be flexible and go with things is great. So I would keep that.

But, the flexibility posed its own challenges. As one mentee noted:

> So that was definitely tough and not having scheduled check-ins or that kind of stuff. Even just at the end of the month send an email. If you missed your time, send out an email. Something along the lines of that would have helped. ... So we had made a plan at the beginning of the year to make those dates and that was awesome because I knew when he was coming but then things cancelled out. So maybe if one or the other teacher has to cancel rather than saying, “Oh well we’ll figure out another time,” say, “I have to cancel today but let’s pick another day right now that I will come,” just so that those sub days aren’t lost, that time’s not lost. Because we got one out of three of our half days and that’s a third of what we were supposed to do so it’s not benefitting the program, it’s not benefitting me.

### One Last Lingering Question

Following the completion of this two-year study, along with the questions arising from the data listed above, there is the lingering question regarding the practicality, utility and efficacy of recruiting an appropriate dedicated substitute teacher to serve in the mentor’s classroom. The use of a dedicated substitute teacher was considered a strength of the program for at least one mentor teacher:

> For me, I was one of the people who had the sub that was already well a dedicated sub ...  ... [F]or me that was amazing just knowing that that day—it was just that day I was just gone. ... If you can get the dedicated subs I would keep that.

However, our results suggested that although a system for establishing dedicated substitute teachers should be attempted, recruiting specific substitute teachers can be problematic depending upon the mentor’s primary subject area teaching assignment (e.g., high school math). Future research should develop a system for establishing dedicated substitute teachers and assess the efficacy of such a system.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Our study investigated the overarching question: Is an induction-by-mentoring model that focuses on collaborative classroom connections in the beginning teacher's classroom efficacious and sustainable? We also addressed specific sub-questions including:

- What impact does a model of providing release time for mentor teachers to work one-to-one with beginning teachers in their classrooms have on mentors and beginning teachers?
- In what ways can release time be provided for mentor teachers in order to ensure the sustainability of a mentorship program?

In conclusion, our findings do indicate that the sustainability of our mentorship model would depend, at least in part, on the provision of appropriate and reliable substitute teachers and resolution of issues related to proximity of the mentor/mentees pairings. However, the data also indicates that our model, which offers time and space for face-to-face relationship-building opportunities and release time for mentors to work with beginning teachers in their schools and classrooms, means that mentees are receiving the support they require according to their needs, that the appreciation for technologies to keep in touch is enhanced, that the sense of isolation is ameliorated and that co-learning supports professional growth for both mentors and mentees. Hence, we are confident in concluding that while issues related to sustainability need careful consideration, our model is effective in providing the necessary support to retain and sustain beginning teachers.

Recommendations coming from this two-year study include:

1. Have designated mentor/mentee pairs. The selection of mentors and mentees needs careful consideration. While criteria for the selection of mentors have been established, an application process for recruiting/selecting mentors is a helpful suggestion.

2. Ensure clear messaging about the purposes of the project/program to assure mentees that the program is about providing time and support for professional development and not about taking up more of their time.

3. Have a structured program. Although flexibility in programming was appreciated, the lack of a structured annual program resulted in some pairings having fewer
in-person mentor-mentee meetings and lowered the commitment to the in-person meetings. As one mentor noted:

I definitely would have liked to meet with her more. Like I don’t even think we used the allotted days just because of schedules and everything like that. Things get busy for both of us. That’s really tough to meet up for something like that. I’m not sure what the solution is for that but I know we didn’t use the days that we were allowed to use because of that. Both of us just get busy, right?

4. Consider subject-alike (secondary) or grade-alike (elementary) mentor-mentee pairings. Such pairings facilitate co-planning and co-teaching; however, they may not be necessary depending upon the definition of “mentoring” utilized. Mentoring may not necessarily require or include co-planning and co-teaching.

5. Ensure that both mentors and mentees have solid understandings of mentorship and mentoring processes. A solid orientation/training program for mentors and clear messaging for mentees will assist everyone in understanding the similarities and differences between coaching and mentoring, and between supervising/evaluating and mentoring.
References


