

Building Resilient Educators: Mentoring Networks for Teacher Wellbeing and Retention

Duncan-Buchanan, A.

University of Texas - Austin

Last year, half of the new teachers in Texas were uncertified, leaving them less prepared for the classroom. Uncertified new teachers quit teaching at much higher rates than certified new teachers. This research presentation shares research on mentors' impact on guiding new teachers in the tools that support wellbeing for a long career. Additionally, mentors' involvement contributes to their professional development as they attend training, develop leadership skills, and current teaching practices. This research utilizes Michael Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory, which studies the role individuals play in implementing public policy. This theory is used in this study to understand how mentors implicitly train new teachers to navigate the policy climate of the classroom through the curriculum, grading, classroom management, and parent relationships, etc.; the relationship between mentor and mentee develops new teachers as judicious implementers of policy. This qualitative case study involved interviewing mentors and novice teachers mentored in Texas to capture the individual mentoring experience. Participants were interviewed who span a range of experiences, representing the whole induction ecosystem. The interview protocol included descriptive questions where participants shared their experiences with the mentoring program and organizational conditions. These questions highlight key elements that support the development of teachers and their retention. As Texas relies on these new teachers, it is crucial that veterans are supported and prepared to guide the next generation of educators. Preliminary findings reveal a mutually beneficial relationship between mentors and mentees, which enhances their wellbeing. This relationship can be impactful in supporting retention as both mentors and mentees experience supporting self-efficacy. Strengthening mentor programs can also create a culture of wellbeing that promotes systemic change.

Keywords: Novice teachers, mentoring, retention, state mentor program, implementation, qualitative research, case study

Introduction

An epidemic is occurring in public schools across the country; there is a steady decline in interest in the teaching profession (Kraft & Arnold Lyon, 2024; Peetz, 2022). This decline, however, began prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic acted as an accelerant for teacher shortage (Ingersoll & Pereda, 2010; Sutchter et al., 2019; U.S. Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education, 2017). The profession has struggled with historical issues that the pandemic exacerbated, such as low pay, autonomy, and a lack of support (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). These issues that unions and education stakeholders have grappled to solve seem further out of reach due to the political and policy climate surrounding education. Together, these factors have created an unattractive narrative that discourages prospective teachers from entering the profession. This, coupled with the high rate of teacher turnover, has contributed to devastating effects on communities of color

and low socioeconomic status because often turnover is highest in these communities. New teachers leave the profession at a striking rate (e.g., Grissmer & Kirby, 1987, 1992, 1997; Hafner & Owings, 1991; Ingersoll, 2003; Murnane et al., 1991). In Texas, the teaching workforce is growing less experienced. Last year, 2023-2024, half of the new teachers in Texas were uncertified, leaving them less prepared for the demands of the classroom (Marder et al., 2024).

Uncertified new teachers quit teaching at much higher rates than certified new teachers (Marder et al., 2024). Existing research indicates that mentoring is an effective means to train quality teachers who remain in the profession. Research tells us that quality mentoring goes far in supporting the retention of novice teachers by improving their commitment and retention, classroom practices, and student achievement (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Yet research devotes less attention to how context shapes implementation factors and outcomes of mentoring programs.

This study investigates the implementation

of mentoring in programs in Texas, exploring an often-overlooked area in the pipeline, the transition from preservice teacher to teacher of record. Policymakers focus on recruitment by implementing incentives to recruit potential teachers (Ingersoll, 2003, 2004), because of the focus on recruitment, there is a lack of care on the process of keeping people in the profession. The investment is about enticing students into the profession, not the care and support to keep them in the profession. Often, the methods needed to support and care for new teachers are complex and require more funding.

Last year, half of the new teachers in Texas were uncertified, leaving them less prepared for the classroom. Uncertified new teachers quit teaching at much higher rates than certified new teachers. This research presentation shares research on mentors' impact on guiding new teachers in the tools that support wellbeing for a long career. Additionally, mentors' involvement contributes to their own professional development as they attend training, develop leadership skills, and current teaching practices.

This study is part of a larger study that examined the mentoring experience of teachers in Texas to understand how their experience is being impacted by the current political climate and context in schools. Using qualitative case study techniques, collection and analysis of documents and interviews, investigate the following questions:

- How does mentoring act as a reciprocal relationship for mentors and mentees?
- In what ways does that relationship support the retention of teachers?

This research utilizes Michael Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory, which studies the role individuals play in implementing public policy. This theory is used in this study to help understand how mentors implicitly train new teachers to navigate the policy climate of the classroom. Through the curriculum, grading, classroom management, and parent relationships, etc. The relationship between mentor and mentee develops new teachers as judicious implementers of policy, ranging from state curriculum expectations to school attendance compliance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Purpose and Role of Mentoring Programs

There are multiple state policy levers to address teacher shortages. These measures span across the teacher pipelines, for example, the initial preparation, certification, and early career support. The strength of support increases teacher retention. Induction is one aspect of the teacher pipeline that supports teachers in remaining in the profession. One component of induction is mentoring. This component serves as a bridge between a student teacher and a teacher of record (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004).

In research about early career teachers, induction is a fundamental element in preparing

novice teachers. Induction has been defined as a "...comprehensive initiation or introduction to a position that provides inexperienced teachers with the necessary models and tools for beginning their teaching careers, as well as specific guidance aimed at helping them meet performance standards (Woods Rowland, 2016). There are various elements to quality induction programs, including high-quality mentor programs with ongoing professional development (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). Mentoring is one component of a comprehensive induction program, according to Sun (2012). Mentoring is a tool used to prepare teachers to enter the classroom, "bridge from a student of teaching to a teacher of students" (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004, p. 29). For this study, mentoring will be used to describe the "local guide" relationship between novice teachers and experienced teachers, ie, the socialization of beginning teachers (Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1993; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004).

Mentoring is an aspect of preparing teachers for the profession that could set teachers up to remain in the profession for years to come. Studies have shown that quality mentoring positively impacts novice teachers' career trajectories (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004). Unfortunately, there is a wide variety of designs for mentor programs, so identifying what is effective and for who is challenging (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Research has shown that even in the variation of design, there are key elements that impact teachers' experiences that create a quality mentor program: time, mentor, and context (Ingersoll and Strong, 2011; Ingersoll et al., 2019). The research shows that multiple variables in mentor design can affect the program and the ability to retain teachers. Yet there remains a gap in understanding how novice teachers experience these mentor programs and whether the quality of experiences is universal across districts.

METHOD

Overview of Methods

This exploratory qualitative case study examines the implementation of teacher mentoring programs in Texas. The current influx of unlicensed teachers in the Texas workforce influences the quality and needs of mentoring programs. Through the use of focus groups, three levels of implementation are captured in state mentoring programs in Texas: institutional, organizational, and individual. At each level, there are different variables that shape the program implementation and the experiences of those individuals. This sheds light on novice teachers' experience with these programs, with the hope of identifying ways to improve support for novice teachers.

Data Source

For this study, a focus group was conducted with mentors who provide mentoring for teachers in Texas to capture the individual mentoring experience. These participants were found across

districts in Texas, centered on attendees of a free mentoring conference conducted through the local university. Another key variable in determining the districts is their involvement in the Mentor Program Allotment, a Texas bill providing money for districts to create their own mentoring programs. The focus group participants spanned a range of experiences. This focus group was conducted in person. The focus group protocol includes descriptive questions where participants can share their experiences with the mentoring program, organizational conditions, and enabling/constraining conditions.

An analysis of documents describes the nature of new teacher mentoring programs and how they address the needs of novice teachers. This provides evidence of program goals and elements without the bias of being filtered through individuals. The documents include training materials for mentors and required documentation for mentees for the purpose of what is communicated as key components of mentoring, and how it is being communicated to participants within the program. The information collected at this level helps to understand the context of novice teachers. While collecting these documents, notes were taken throughout the process and used to develop themes and identify other connections. Semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and memos help create triangulation, improving the rigor of the study.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, allowing me to be iterative in my review of the data to better understand mentors' experiences with mentoring. Notes were taken after the focus group to identify key insights from the interviews, as well as nonverbal information such as their comfort with various education policies (Maxwell, 2013). The focus group data was coded deductively and inductively. The deductive codes are based on the literature and may include program design, mentor-mentee ratio, target demographic, quality teacher markers, etc. Additionally, codes were developed based on the theoretical framework exploring how street-level bureaucrats can help me understand mentors' and mentees' experiences in mentoring. The data enabled a comparison of the mentoring experiences novice teachers are having across formal and informal areas. Inductive coding was used to identify themes not yet found in the literature but shaping implementation in these settings, for example, how mentors' and mentees' identities and context affect their mentoring experience.

RESULTS

Findings

The first finding identified from the focus group session addressing the first research question, investigating how mentoring acts as a reciprocal relationship for mentors and mentees. The findings

revealed that mentors found mentoring to support their professional development, as well as created opportunities to improve their morale about their job.

Finding: Reinforce their commitment to the profession.

One key finding that was repeated across the focus group participants was that their role as mentor reinforced their commitment to the profession. It reignited their passion and focused their energy on changing the future.

Trish, a mentor with 20 years of teaching experience, said it helped them do their best professionally because they needed to be organized and current on educational strategies for their mentee. It also gave her an optimistic outlook on the job.

...., I think mentoring others. Like, keeps me on my best game. Like, it keeps me organized. It keeps me all like, wanting to, like, keep learning more and figuring out how to do things better for myself and for my students and for my mentee, and then also, just like, being that person that you're like, forcing yourself to look at the bright side and find the good and stuff. So it keeps you from going to, like, the dark place, you know, where you're just sitting in your room by yourself, like, why am I doing this job? So, yeah, it really keeps you going forward. (Trish)

Another participant, Brit, a mentor with 32 years of teaching, found mentoring exciting and reignited their continuous learning. She continued to build on what Trish said.

Very similar, same thing. Just the growth that I've done in this position, and figuring out how much I still don't know, is really enlightening and exciting. (Brit)

Praticia, another mentor, with 24 years of experience, highlights the multiple ways they have always been a mentor for students to new teachers and how those relationships have grown—the students she mentored ended up mentoring her own children. The relationship has a more profound impact than just one mentee; it seems to ripple out.

I think for me, the power of the relationships, a long time ago in a land like far away that I don't always remember, I mentored kids before I mentored other teachers, and those kids show up at my home every Christmas and we have Christmas dinner together. And now they are mentoring my children, and they are sharing stories with my kids and teaching my kids lessons. And I think for me, the profound impact that mentorship has had on me mentoring them, if the ball just keeps rolling and the relationship keeps growing, and to

me, that's invaluable, and I'm super grateful for that. (Patricia)

DISCUSSION

As Texas depends on these new teachers, it is paramount that veterans are supported and ready to guide the next generation of educators. One way of doing so is protecting the time and being intentional in how these mentors and mentees connect. To do that, school administrative leaders need to protect the time and create structures that sustain the relationship-building throughout the year. The state government needs to direct resources, such as funding, to support the time veteran teachers are investing and to support new teachers.

Preliminary findings reveal a mutually beneficial relationship between mentors and mentees, which enhances their own personal wellbeing. This relationship can be impactful in supporting retention for both mentors and mentees, as their experience with mentoring supports self-efficacy. A key element that improves teachers' relationships with their jobs. Strengthening mentor programs can also foster a culture of wellbeing, supporting systemic change as mentors and mentees develop a relationship that grows a network that sustains them in the profession.

This study provides policy implications not only for Texas school districts but also for other national school districts implementing mentor programs. The study identifies how these policy approaches are improving or failing in the retention of teachers. The results will provide best practices that can be replicated in other states as well as identify areas that are important to the success of quality implementation of mentoring programs.

This study provides implications that practitioners can take up and improve the quality of mentoring at their school sites by examining Texas, which has a similar racial breakdown nationally and different policy strategies for mentoring. Identify how time, mentor matching, and time shape the experience of novice teachers. Funding contexts and creating variables that schools need to adapt to and meet the needs of their novice teachers. The study will identify how these policy approaches are improving or failing in the retention of teachers. The results will provide best practices that can be replicated in other states as well as identify areas that are important to the success of quality implementation of mentoring programs.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that what works is time set aside for connection and growth to create this environment, which is essential for the retention of teachers. This research sheds insight for mentors and mentees, creating a reciprocal relationship and a chance to build networks. When teachers start their careers and as veterans grow in their careers, both would support the retention of teachers,

creating an environment in which teachers thrive.

REFERENCES

- Achinstein, B., Ogawa, R. T., Sexton, D., & Freitas, C. (2010). "Retaining teachers of Color: A pressing problem and a potential strategy for "Hard-to-Staff" Schools." ("Retaining Teachers of Color to Improve Student Outcomes") *Review of Educational Research*, 80(1), 71-107. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654309355994>
- Allen, Q. (2015). Race, culture, and agency: Examining the ideologies and practices of U.S. teachers of Black male students. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 47, 71-81. ("Quaylan Allen - Chapman University")
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2003). *Racism without racists: Color-Blind Racism & Racial Inequality in contemporary america*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC.
- Carver-Thomas, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). "Teacher turnover: why it matters and what we can do about it." ("ERIC - ED606807 - Teacher Turnover: Why It Matters and What We Can Do ...") In Learning Policy Institute. Learning Policy Institute. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED606805>
- Carver-Thomas, Desiree, Tara Kini, and Dion Burns. (2020). Sharpening the divide: How california's teacher shortages expand inequality. Learning Policy Institute. Learning Policy Institute. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED610882>.
- DeCesare, D., McClelland, A., & Randel, B. (2017). Impacts of the retired mentors for new teachers program. ("Impacts of the Retired Mentors for New Teachers program") REL 2017-225. In Regional Educational Laboratory Central. Regional Educational Laboratory Central. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED573097>
- Feiman-Nemser, S., & Parker, M. B. (1993). "Mentoring in context: A comparison of two U.S. programs for beginning teachers." ("Report. 92 21p. - ed") *International Journal of Educational Research*, 19(8), 699-718. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0883-0355\(93\)90010-H](https://doi.org/10.1016/0883-0355(93)90010-H)
- Ingersoll, R. M., & Smith, T. M. (2003). The wrong solution to the teacher shortage. ("Ingersoll, R. M., & Smith, T. M., (2003). The Wrong Solution to the ...") *Educational Leadership*, 60(8), 30-33.
- Ingersoll, R. M., & Smith, T. M. (2004). Do teacher induction and mentoring matter? *NASSP Bulletin*, 88(638), 28-40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019263650408863803>
- Ingersoll, R. M., & Strong, M. (2011). The impact

- of induction and mentoring programs for beginning teachers: A critical review of the research. ("Ingersoll, R., & Strong, M. (2011). The impact of induction and ...") *Review of Educational Research*, 81(2), 201-233. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654311403323>
- Ingersoll, R. M., May, H., & Collins, G. (2019). Recruitment, Employment, Retention and the Minority Teacher Shortage. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 27(34-39), 1-42. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.3714>
- Lipsky, M. (2010). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public service*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- LoCasale-Crouch, J., Davis, E., Wiens, P., & Pianta, R. (2012). "The role of the mentor in supporting new teachers: Associations with self-efficacy, reflection, and quality." *Mentoring & Tutoring*, 20(3), 303-323. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2012.701959>
- Marder, M., Torres, L.G., Martinez, C. (2024). Beyond the tipping point: Rise of uncertified teachers in Texas. Report and recommendations from The University of Texas at Austin. bit.ly/uncert-teachers-report
- Maxwell, J.A. (2013) *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*. Sage, Thousand Oaks.
- Nakamura, J., & Shernoff, D. J. (2009). *Good mentoring: Fostering excellent practice in higher education* (pp. xxvii, 303). Jossey-Bass.
- Pabon, A. (2016). "Waiting for Black Superman: A look at a problematic assumption." ("Review of Waiting for Superman - *Academia.edu*") *Urban Education*, 51(8), 915-939.
- SB3 limits speech and engagement in Texas classrooms! (n.d.). IDRA. Retrieved October 30, 2024, from https://www.idra.org/education_policy/texas-classroom-censorship/
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), "Public School Teacher Data File," 2017-18. Chris Sun, Teacher Induction: Improving State Systems for Supporting New Teachers (Arlington: *National Association of School Boards of Education*, 2012), 3, http://www.nasbe.org/wp-content/uploads/DG_Teacher_Induction_March_2012.pdf