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STOPPING THE LEAK: RETAINING BEGINNING TEACHERS

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Abstract: The need for teacher retention has prompted numerous American states to provide programs for training mentors. The goal of mentor training is to offer a support mechanism that will retain novice teachers and assist them in developing their teaching skills. Such a program is the Texas Beginning Educator Support System (TxBESS) which has supported over 10,000 beginning teachers since its implementation in 1999 (State Board for Educator certification, 2004). A group of TxBESS supported interns was surveyed and the data suggest that both retention rates and teacher satisfaction were high. The interns reported satisfaction particularly with regard to the effectiveness of the mentors.

Stopping the Leak: Retaining Beginning Teachers

Support in the induction phase of novice teachers is crucial to teacher retention. Recruiting individuals to enter teaching is certainly important, but stopping the leakage of teachers leaving the profession is equally essential. According to Ingersoll (2001), at the beginning of the 1993-1994 school year, about 192,500 teachers entered the profession, but by the following school year, about 213,000 (equivalent to 110% of those just hired) had left. Mentoring provides a bridge from theory to practical application in the classroom. Guidance and support by mentors can increase the novices' satisfaction and competence in teaching resulting in increased retention. A report from the National Center for Educational Statistics reveals that programs offering support and assistance to novice teachers can positively affect teachers remaining in the classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). Teacher preparation programs need to examine the training necessary for effective mentoring. Mentors must receive specific information regarding mentoring skills and knowledge and how to use an accountability system to encourage reflection and provide feedback to interns.

Alternative Routes to Training Teachers

The shortage of teachers has prompted numerous U.S. states to develop alternative routes to teaching licensure that require support for beginning teachers. New Jersey and Texas were forerunners in pursuing fast-track teacher preparation programs. Today, close to one-third of all new teachers certified annually receive their teaching training from these programs. This accelerated route is offered in 45 states and the District of Columbia (Mikulecky, Shkodriani & Wilner, 2004). Content areas with the most pressing need for certified teachers are secondary mathematics, science and foreign languages, as well as special education, bilingual education and English as a second language (Texas A&M University 2005). The majority of alternative preparation programs do not require the

traditional student-teaching component; therefore a support system is critical in the first couple of years. Induction programs with mentoring assistance have contributed to the educational system in several ways. They have improved retention, increased positive attitudes toward teaching, applied pedagogical constructs, improved the performance of students and attracted much needed minority teachers (Huling-Austin, 1992). In Texas, 9% of all teachers are minorities and 41% of those who prepare through alternative routes come from minority groups. In New Jersey, 9% of all teachers are from minorities and 20% of alternatively certified teachers belong to this under-represented group. In the Troops to Teacher program, 30% of participants come from minority cultures and receive training in non-traditional teacher preparation programs (Mikulecky, Shkodriani & Wilner, 2004). In North Carolina there are several alternative routes to teaching for qualified individuals with college degrees outside the field of education who want to become teachers. The use of alternate licensing policies varies by local school system. Since 1986, North Carolina has been a leader in training mentors and supporting novice teachers. North Carolina Public Schools System has devised a Mentor/Support Team Training Program which received national and international attention. The State Department of Education provides ongoing resources for mentors and their charges (North Carolina Mentor Program, 2006). Following North Carolina's lead, Texas in 1989 experimented with mentoring for beginning teachers as a strategy to encourage and counsel teachers through their first years in the profession. In 1990, when the state created its alternative teacher certification programs, mentoring was included as a requirement for all alternatively certified teachers; and in 1991, the requirement was mandated for all teachers during their induction year. However, unlike North Carolina, funds were not provided. In 1999, the Texas State Board for Educator Certification Education (SBEC) was awarded funding from the U.S. Department of Education to pilot a support system entitled the Texas Beginning Educator Support System (TxBESS). The state agency received a \$12 million grant to develop and implement a support and assessment system for beginning teachers (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2002).

A Systematic Mentor Program

TxBESS was intended to reduce teacher attrition during the first critical years. The program was implemented in collaboration with Texas A&M University to provide systematic support for beginning teachers. TxBESS was developed around a standard-based system in which performance standards and a formative and reflective assessment served to support coaching and mentoring relationships. The assumption was that beginning teachers who had TxBESS support would attain greater professional expertise more quickly than unsupported teachers, leading in turn to higher academic achievement among students. SBEC, Texas A&M University and the Texas Workforce Commission in cooperation with the state's twenty regional education service centres established a three-year pilot program to allow for development and evaluation of the TxBESS project (SBEC, 2004). Since the spring of 2000, over 7,000 beginning teachers have been assisted through this support system. TxBESS was found to be associated with improved retention rates among beginning teachers, stronger retention rates for high school teachers and increased retention of minority teachers. In addition, TxBESS mentor teachers reported that serving as mentors positively affected their professional growth. Participating principals indicated that the support that teachers received from TxBESS trained mentors resulted in improved classroom performance. (Dana Center Evaluation Report, 2003).

Prior to their mentoring assignments, the mentors attended a four-day training session. They explored interpersonal skills, communication strategies and understanding and

acceptance of diverse personality temperaments as described by The Myers-Briggs Temperament Indicator (MBTI). (Wikipedia, 2005). The program helped mentors to acquire positive interpersonal skills and accept differences as well as skills to make consistent judgments based on evidence. They were instructed to examine teacher artifacts, watch video clips of teacher performances and compare them to the developmental continuum in the TxBESS framework. They learned to administer the TxBESS Activity Profile (TAP), a formative evaluation process incorporating frequent observation and conferencing. The TAP includes a pre-observation conference, an observation and a post-observation conference and provides information based on objective data from which the interns can plan to improve their teaching (Texas State Board for Educator Certification, 2005). The training was implemented in the Educational Service Centers (ESC) of Texas by state certified trainers.

The Region IV Education Service Center is the largest of the twenty state sponsored educational centers in Texas. In 1990, the Center developed an alternative route to teaching in response to teacher shortages. Region IV ESC incorporates TxBESS practices in the training of mentors assigned to its teachers. The interns are provided with constructive feedback from a trained support team, that includes school administrators, mentors and supervisors. In addition, Region IV has begun an on-line mentor training program to extend services to 54 school districts within its service area and beyond.

In addition to its regular alternative program, the Region IV Education Service Center (ESC) was awarded a Transition to Teaching (T3) grant. In 2003, the federal congress appropriated \$41.65 million for this program to enable mid-career persons and recent college graduates to pursue alternative routes to the teaching profession (State of California Commission, 2005). The T3 program in Region IV provided the opportunity for 90 degreed professionals to become certified teachers through its fast track program based in Houston. The program included an association with the Texas A&M University that assisted in recruiting recent college graduates. Candidates had to meet strict application requirements including at least a 2.75 GPA in their major area of study. The program was designed for candidates in bilingual education, elementary education, special education, mathematics, science and foreign languages. The curriculum was designed to provide the equivalent of 15 semester hours of pre-service face-to-face and on-line courses/modules. The candidates continued extensive training. They were reimbursed for the pre-assignment training as well as for all preparation fees during the second year of the grant.

Prospective candidates were recruited from two pools of candidates; recent college graduates and mid-career professionals. Region IV recruiters targeted recent college graduates from Texas A&M at College Station who met specific standards and expressed an interest during their last year of university work. Mid-career professionals with work experience in the areas of mathematics, science and Spanish were selected for the project as well as mid-career professionals with previous coursework that qualified them for specialisation for bilingual education and special education. The interns were provided with TxBESS trained mentors during a two-year internship. The T3 grant provided the mentors with a stipend for their mentoring services. A study was conducted by the authors of this article toward the end of the second internship year to evaluate the interns' reactions to their mentors' effectiveness and the impact of the mentors' training on the interns' teaching.

Method

Participants

A survey was conducted among 90 T3 interns participating in the project. Responses were obtained from 81 interns of whom 66 % were women and 20% were men and 15% did not indicate gender. Two thirds were married, 25% were single, and 8% were divorced. One

half had children who were living with while 20% reported no children at home and 30% did not respond. Minority representation was 36 % and 64% of all participants and respondents were aged between 31 and 61.

Materials

A survey instrument was developed by the researchers, the Mentees' Opinion of Mentors' Effectiveness (MOME) consisted of 10 items each with Likert-type responses on a scale of 1-5 (1-Low Agreement; 5-High Agreement). The instrument was guided by the interns' perceptions obtained at a general T3 meeting. It included the following:

1. The intern's teaching improvement as a result of the mentoring.
2. The frequency of the mentoring.
3. The constructive modeling by the mentor.
4. The mentor's knowledge of the intern's needs.
5. The collegial and respectful behavior of the mentor.
6. The compatibility and communication exhibited by the mentor.
7. The degree of the intern's progress as a result of the summative assessment.
8. The mentor's knowledge of the school and sharing of internal policy.
9. The intern's evaluation of the teaching/mentoring experience.
10. The mentor's overall effectiveness.

The survey was mailed to the participants and included return addressed stamped envelopes. Telephone reminders followed the mailing and electronic surveys were also made available.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The data were first analysed in terms of descriptive statistics. These were obtained for each item and the descriptive statistics for the 10 items are presented in Table 1. Except for Items 1 and 8, the mean response to the survey items was equal to or greater than 4. The variability for the items was fairly homogenous within the group. One respondent did not offer a response for Item 3 while three people did not respond to Item 9. Two individuals did not rate the overall effectiveness of their mentors. From observing Table 1, it can be seen that the mode for eight of the items was 5. Items 1 and 9 exhibited bi-modal distributions of responses, with modes of 4 and 5.

Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Median	Mode	Chi-Square	df	P
1. My teaching has improved because of my mentor's coaching.	81	3.86	1.137	4.00	4 (a)	34.12	4	.001
2. My mentor provided regular and frequent support.	81	4.07	1.160	4.00	5	54.25	4	.001
3. My mentor modeled constructive behaviors.	80	4.07	1.041	4.00	5	52.25	4	.001
4. My mentor was knowledgeable of the needs of beginning teachers.	81	4.00	1.183	4.00	5	46.59	4	.001
5. My mentor treated me as a colleague and involved me in professional activities.	81	4.26	1.138	5.00	5	86.22	4	.001
6. We established a basis of compatibility and communication.	81	4.38	.943	5.00	5	96.25	4	.001
7. My mentor's observations and formative assessment helped me to improve my teaching.	81	4.02	1.140	4.00	5	47.09	4	.001
8. My mentor's knowledge about agency and internal politics facilitated my teaching experience.	81	3.90	1.271	4.00	5	38.94	4	.001
9. My rating of my experience as a beginning teacher is above average.	78	4.17	.903	4.00	4(a)	74.69	4	.001
10. My mentor's overall effectiveness is above average.	79	4.11	1.074	4.00	5	53.34	4	.001

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Chi-Square statistics were conducted to determine whether the observations obtained differed from a hypothesis of an equal distribution of responses. A Chi-Square test of significance was used to test each item. The results are presented for each item in Table 2. From Table 2 and Chi-Squares associated with each of the items, it can be seen that the differences between observed and expected values were all statistically significant. For each item, the differences were a function of more respondents choosing response of “4” or “5” than expected. Thus, for each of the 10 items, the interns exhibited strong agreement with the concepts of the items.

Item	Chi-Square	<i>df</i>	P
1. My teaching has improved because of my mentor's coaching.	34.12	4	.001
2. My mentor provided regular and frequent support.	54.25	4	.001
3. My mentor modeled constructive behaviors.	52.25	4	.001
4. My mentor was knowledgeable of the needs of beginning teachers.	46.59	4	.001
5. My mentor treated me as a colleague and involved me in professional activities.	86.22	4	.001
6. We established a basis of compatibility and communication.	96.25	4	.001
7. My mentor's observations and formative assessment helped me to improve my teaching	47.09	4	.001
8. My mentor's knowledge about agency and internal politics facilitated my teaching experience.	38.94	4	.001
9. My rating of my experience as a beginning teacher is above average.	74.69	4	.001
10. My mentor's overall effectiveness is above average	53.34	4	.001

Table 2. Chi-Square Statistics

Scale Scores

Consideration was first given to conducting an Exploratory Factor Analysis to determine the underlying constructs of the assessment instrument. However, because the ratio of observations to variables was insufficient, a thematic grouping of items was undertaken, leading to scale scores. This resulted in Items 1, 7, and 9 being grouped and labeled Teaching Improvement. Items 4 and 8 were summed to form Mentor Knowledge. The aggregate of Items 2, 3, 5, and 6 represented Mentor Behavior. Item 10 was considered as a single item construct called Mentor Effectiveness. The means for the four scale scores are presented in Figure 1. Mentor Behavior was rated the highest of the four scales. Mentor Knowledge was lower than the other scales.

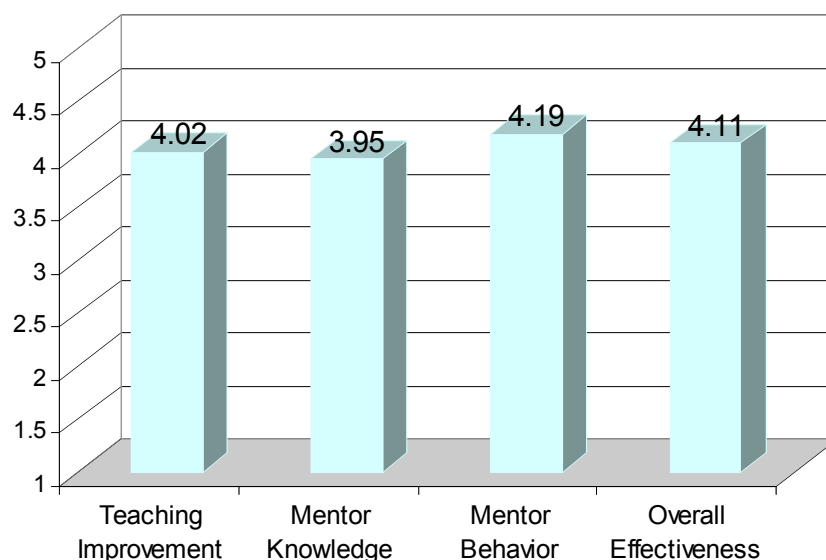


Figure 1. Scale Score Means

Discussion

Taken as a whole, the interns' held perceptions that: (a), the program was effective in improving their teaching, (b), their mentors were knowledgeable, (c), their mentors exhibited appropriate behavior, and (d), overall, their mentors were highly effective. The T3 interns' perception of the mentoring experience was positive. In the comment section of the survey, 97 percent of the interns indicated that they planned to return to teaching and that teaching fulfilled their career choice. Of those respondents, 67 percent mentioned that their mentors' assistance significantly affected their decision to remain in the teaching profession. The interns expressed satisfaction with the TxBESS Activity Profile, which incorporates multiple strategies for more frequent observation, conferencing and feedback about an intern's effectiveness in the classroom. Although 42 percent commented negatively on the amount of paperwork involved in the TAP procedure, most believed that it increased their professional growth.

Providing support and assistance to new teachers can change the isolation teachers often feel during their initial year in the classroom. In spite of good intentions, numerous mentoring programs fall apart at the implementation stage. Beginning teachers frequently complain that their assigned mentors are too busy with their own teaching load to adequately

offer assistance and guidance, or that the mentoring consists of occasional comments on the playground or in the school's hallways.

Recognising the need for well-trained teachers and systematic mentor training the outcomes of the T3 resulted in the development of a hybrid model that employed the strengths of the TxBESS mentor training model, the Region IV ESC, Texas A&M University in developing an alternative, flexible and viable model for the recruitment and retention of elementary and secondary teachers. The results of the study indicate that a solid relationship was built up among the teacher intern, mentor, education service provider and a university. In addition, it suggests that such partnerships can foster the creation of a foundation for future growth and development of training programs that can increase teacher retention, help shape sound teaching practices, increase high-quality instruction and, ultimately, improve student performance.

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