

The Effect of Mentor Teachers on Initial Teacher Training and Emergence as a Beginner Teacher

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Abstract

Since the 1990s there has been a strong movement towards mentoring induction programmes for both pre-service training and beginning teachers who are in their early years at a school. Despite the high uptake of this practice, the exact definition and nature of mentoring remains controversial. Several types of mentoring, with potentially contrasting goals exist and these can affect teacher outcomes, students and the positioning of teachers in society. Mentoring programmes also have effects on pedagogical practice, instructional effectiveness and the commitment beginning teachers feel towards teaching. Mentoring programmes are shaped by a number of interconnected issues, including dispositions of mentors and mentees, mentor training, the context in which mentoring occurs and societal expectations. Although the broad uptake of mentoring programmes appears to indicate that these programmes are beneficial, empirical evidence on the effect of mentoring is limited. The literature supports the assertion that mentoring helps reduce beginning teacher turnover, increase job satisfaction and raise student achievement. However these issues are not necessarily those novice teachers are most concerned with and few articles examine ways in which novice teachers can best utilise mentoring for their learning.

Keywords: *Mentoring, Collaboration, Induction, Education, Beginning Teachers, Mentor, Novice Teacher, Practice.*



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Introduction

Context and Factors Beyond the Control of Novice Teachers

Teachers must pass through several stages of training and enculturation before attaining expertise in their craft. Teacher expertise is generally accepted to proceed through at least three distinct phases; pre-service, induction and ‘experienced’, although the boundaries between these are blurred to some extent ([Ingersoll & Strong, 2011](#); [Vikaraman, Mansor, & Hamzah, 2017](#)). Teachers at each stage will be referred to as pre-service, beginning, and experienced teachers for the purposes of this review. Novice teachers will be used in cases referring to both pre-service and beginning teachers. It is also noteworthy that not all teachers will progress through to the last stage – teacher retention rates are relatively low (internationally, as many as 50% of teachers leave in the first five years), and teaching is increasingly seen as a short term career ([Ingersoll & Strong, 2011](#)). These labour market forces have a dramatic effect on the way teachers must be trained, which is demonstrated clearly by the United States of America (USA) statistics; before 1990 teachers had a modal experience of at least 15 years, which has decreased to 1 year of experience in recent years ([Ingersoll &](#)

[Strong, 2011](#)). This trend has a dramatic effect on teaching as a profession, as the effect of teacher expertise on learning is well documented (Hattie & Clinton, 2004). Even amongst teachers retained in the profession, the impact of the first year of teaching is high, and may cement undesirable practices unless positive intervention occurs ([Kuzmic, 1994](#)).

In order to compensate for these issues, teaching programmes have been radically modified in recent years. Mentoring was essentially non-existent pre-1980, and is now common in both pre-service teacher training and beginning teacher induction into schools ([Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009](#); Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005). In New Zealand mentoring became commonplace and “comprehensively resourced” from 1985 ([Langdon, 2011](#)). Its introduction appears to have been an attempt to enhance the uptake of expert skills by novice teachers. Despite this, the effect of mentoring is not always clear as there are a large variety of mentoring archetypes with different goals, purposes and outcomes ([Kemmis, Heikkinen, Fransson, Aspfors, & Edwards-Groves, 2014](#)). Three clear patterns of mentoring were evident and advocated for at the policy levels of different countries;



mentoring as support, mentoring as supervision and mentoring as collaborative self-development. It was also noted that peers can serve as a kind of mentor, with benefits that may support more traditional mentoring (Lu, 2010). These forms of mentoring are not mutually exclusive, and it is unclear which is favoured in New Zealand. In a review of selected studies, Lu (2010) identified mentoring practice as a highly political undertaking, suggesting that the exact type of mentoring received may be beyond the control of pre-service or beginner teachers (Kemmis et al., 2014).

School level effects of mentoring may also be beyond novice teacher control, but are likely to have a major impact on professional ability and perception of the teaching career. A major tension at this level is the tendency for mentors to teach in ways that enculture students into schools, rather than enhancing specific skills that lead to quality teaching (Cameron, 2007; Langdon, 2011). Unsurprisingly, school principals appeared to have a major effect on the culture of mentoring within their school, which was attributed to their level of resourcing and holistic view of the school (Roberson & Roberson, 2009). This was evidenced in a cross-case analysis of seven New Zealand case studies, which found that principals “high expectations of staff” were perceived as a strong contributor to a culture of learning within the school (Langdon, 2011). In this study, school culture appeared to cause teachers to perceive practices such as reflection, use of research and collaborative development more positively. This had benefits for beginning teachers who felt more confident, able to engage with literature and more able to experiment with classroom practice. Conversely, unsupportive school cultures led to the opposite effects, and tended to isolate novice teachers, harming their professional development. Despite these rather large effects on their development, novice teachers are unlikely to be able to significantly alter school culture, particularly during pre-service mentoring (Langdon, 2011).

A mentor’s personal experiences, disposition, past training and experience are likely to affect the mentor – mentee relationship. Interaction with mentors thus results in a relatively unique experience of pre-service placement and induction into teaching for every novice teacher. It is likely that the diversity of mentoring systems has evolved due to societal, school and policy architectures unique to various countries and education systems (Pennanen, Bristol, Wilkinson, & Heikkinen, 2016). While this is not necessarily problematic, it makes the systematisation of good mentoring practices difficult, except on a highly conceptual scale. This diversity also stands in stark contrast to the highly systematic training received by pre-service teachers in many countries and has led to a “haphazard” structure of mentoring practices (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015). Perhaps due to this, mentor perspectives may vary significantly from pre-service training courses, as they are shaped by mentor experience and the educational contexts they have operated in (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015; Wang, Odell, & Schwille, 2008). This is challenging as mentors may pass on their own experiences to mentees, rather than offering solutions that fit with the latest educational research, vision or curriculum goals (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005).

While mentor training and disposition may be beyond novice teacher control, an understanding of an individual mentor’s backgrounds and approaches may aid novice teachers. Given that novice teachers formative experience is a “trial by fire” or “sink or swim” challenge (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011), increasing

the ability of novice teachers to control their fate at this early stage could have important effects. Two key issues likely to be relevant to novice teachers are; the benefits of a mentor-mentee relationship, and the agency novice teachers have to support the potential of a mentor-mentee relationship.

Challenges Facing Novice Teachers

Although it is widely agreed that novice teachers face a range of similar challenges, the exact nature of these challenges is inconsistently reported. Veenman (1984) reviewed 83 studies from different countries that explored the perceived problems of beginning teachers in their first years of teaching. Veenman identified lack of resources, unclear goals, difficult work, conflict and reality shock as *challenges* while also suggesting a range of classroom issues (such as behaviour management) as *needs* of beginner teachers. The majority of the studies reviewed were based on survey data or interviews, and it was noted that there was some variance in the severity or type of challenge reported. A lack of resources and goals can likely be addressed by spending time with mentors on unit or lesson planning, and this practice appears relatively common (Fletcher & Barrett, 2004). Work difficulty may be more challenging for a mentor to resolve, as tensions exist between school achievement requirements and the realities of novice teaching (e.g. 56% of novice teachers feel they should not be required to operate at the level of experienced teachers, yet teachers are assessed on student achievement) (Fletcher & Barrett, 2004; Stanulis & Floden, 2009). Behaviour management is often perceived as a key need by beginner teachers, and it seems like early mentor intervention (first week of teaching) may be able to help novice teachers establish effective classroom management (Stanulis & Floden, 2009). Overall, the importance of these findings may be that consistently identified challenges can be more effectively targeted by mentors or novice teachers as part of their professional relationship.

While the challenges and perceptions of novice teachers are relatively well researched, the evidence on how mentoring actually affects novice teachers is less clear. Survey based studies show that novice teachers perceive mentors as being an important emotional support, with collegial support often being also highly placed (Algozzine, Gretes, Queen, & Cowan-Hathcock, 2007; Marable & Raimondi, 2007). However, it is difficult to elucidate the exact elements of mentorship that caused teachers to feel supported and it is possible that supportive school or peer environments have similar effects to mentoring that confuse these results (Langdon, 2011). Findings from a study of teachers employed over a 10-year period within districts in New York State (Algozzine et al., 2007) suggests that highly specific induction activities are more likely to be perceived as useful by mentees, though this does not necessarily mean that they lead to effective teaching. It appears clear though that support is important in both mentee perception of teaching and job commitment, which is important to administrators concerned with teacher retention. The effects of mentoring on novice teacher instructional practices are less clear. While novice teachers perceive that their practices have improved, empirical studies have found conflicting evidence on this (Richter et al., 2013). Where positive effects were found, they demonstrated increases in teacher effectiveness when intensive mentoring was available (Stanulis & Floden, 2009). This indicates that the structure of

mentoring is likely to be important in determining its effects on novice teachers.

Novice Teachers Affecting a Positive Mentoring Experience

Given the potential importance of mentoring relationships to retention, wellbeing and achievement, it is in the best interests of novice teachers to understand how to maximise the effects of mentoring. This is particularly critical given the extremely steep learning curve of teaching as a discipline. While the contexts of learning to teach may be largely beyond the control of novice teachers, there are several elements they can use to their advantage. Firstly, novice teachers can modify their own misconceptions about mentoring and refocus their efforts on accessing the most beneficial types of knowledge from their mentor (Clark & Byrnes, 2012). Secondly, novice teachers can attempt to create constructivist mentoring relationships that facilitate more beneficial learning (Richter et al., 2013). Finally, novice teachers can engage in peer mentoring or collaborative activities, to supplement traditional forms of mentoring or “fill in gaps” that their mentor may not address (Lu, 2010). These steps can dramatically enhance the effectiveness of teacher training and induction, and may restore novice teacher’s agency over their learning during this challenging part of their careers.

Novice teacher perceptions can have dramatic effects on the type of help they seek from mentors, and what information they retain or identify as being useful. The perceptions of what is useful may be contrary to learner centred practices that benefit students, and are often more to do with novice teacher confidence in the classroom (Clark & Byrnes, 2012; Langdon, 2011). Beginning teacher’s perceptions of their class have been well studied, and tend to focus on behaviour management, student motivation, task differentiation, assessment and relations with the school community (Veenman, 1984). Taken together, these tend to lead towards more authoritarian teaching that is less effective at promoting student’s achievement. These can also lead novice teachers to seek or accept tricks of the trade from their mentor. While these tricks often appear to be expert tools, evidence suggests that they act as short term fixes that can lead to the establishment of automatic practices that are not learner centred. An awareness of this tendency may allow beginning teachers to seek true expertise as opposed to quick fixes.

More recent research has identified perceived self-efficacy as a major factor in novice teachers stress levels and commitment to teaching while also uncovering a level of naivety in their perceptions of teaching and ability to change their teaching community (Tynjälä & Heikkinen, 2011). Seeking increased support and knowledge of real possibilities from mentors may be a way to use this partnership to overcome the problems inherent in these perceptions. In their review, Tynjälä & Heikkinen (2011) also identified a troubling dichotomy in novice teacher’s perception of success; approaches that led to problem solving that facilitated learning and those that led to reduction of problems via automated solutions were both perceived as being successful. Modern teaching approaches, such as Teaching as Inquiry (Ministry of Education, 2007), appear to be specifically aimed at preventing the second outcome. Use of such tools may be useful in helping novice teachers avoid automatic knowledge from their mentor, whilst acquiring true expertise.

Working with a mentor to construct a mutually beneficial approach to Teaching as Inquiry and learning can be an effective

tool on practicum and during induction. Mentoring of certain types has clear benefits for the practice of both mentor and mentee (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009). A constructivist approach to the mentor-mentee relationship is recommended as being the most beneficial, even in countries with vastly different educational systems, such as the US and Finland (Richter et al., 2013; Tynjälä & Heikkinen, 2011). Richter et al., (2013) in their study of 700 novice German mathematics teachers identified two major types of mentor-mentee relationship; transmissive and constructivist. Constructivist style relationships caused beginning teachers to experience higher enthusiasm, job satisfaction and teaching efficacy, whilst lowering emotional stress. It could therefore be considered important to the beginner teacher to be able to identify and establish elements of this style of relationship with their mentor. Intriguingly, components of this relationship appear counterintuitive from a beginning teacher’s perspective. For example contact time with mentors was significantly reduced in constructivist relationships, while reflection and experimentation were reported more frequently than in transmissive mentoring relationships (Pennanen et al., 2016; Richter et al., 2013). Placing emphasis on these elements of the relationship may therefore be useful for novice teachers seeking to get the most out of the induction period, and may help shift mentors towards constructivist practice if they are not already engaged in it.

Peer-collaboration is a powerful alternate form of mentoring that can supplement traditional mentoring. While seldom officially supported, with the exception of Finland (Kemmis et al., 2014), peer mentoring can be highly effective, particularly when guided by an experienced observer (Lu, 2010). Peer coaching has been demonstrated to provide collegial support and facilitates reflection, which can help pre-service teachers become more student-focused in their teaching (Ovens, 2004). Ovens (2004) used survey and interview data with 12 final-year physical education students and found a positive perception of peer-mentoring, despite the reported increased workload required by peer collaboration processes. Participants also reported feeling that their learning about teaching was increased considerably and that it focused learning on the quality of their teaching. These perceptions are remarkably similar to those reported as being desired from more traditional forms of mentoring (Pennanen et al., 2016). Collegial support was also perceived as the most important support in situations where official mentoring was absent (Marable & Raimondi, 2007). Peer collaboration can therefore be a powerful tool for novice teachers, and may be a way to effectively supplement traditional mentoring in New Zealand.

Conclusion

Use of Mentoring

Mentoring of novice teachers is a useful practice that is perceived positively by novice teachers. While the literature has a large focus on retention, the recent trend has been to examine other factors to attempt to determine elements of effective mentoring. While this review attempted to focus on mentee’s ability to have agency over their mentoring, it is interesting that there appeared to be little guidance on best practices in this area. This area may be a useful focus for future research, particularly given the evidence from Finland on the benefits of constructivist

focused mentoring and culture. Overall, mentoring appears to benefit both novice and mentor teachers, and is positively perceived by both. Controversy remains over the sociopolitical effects on mentoring and it seems there is some difficulty in changing existing structures, as well as in importing effective practice from elsewhere. The diversity of systems and practices across teaching systems has also made it difficult to generalise good mentoring practices and this remains a challenge for the research. A focus on the beneficial effects of working at an individual level may allow mentors and mentees to construct more effective relationships despite the prevailing environment. This is important for beginning teachers as it returns agency to them, and may enable them to uncover more relevant expert knowledge from their mentors as part of an inquiry cycle.

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