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RETHINKING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAINING THROUGH MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

This proposal looks at teacher mentorship and how it is manifested in different school environments. Grid and Group Theory provides the basis of discerning the cultural forces at play within the respective school environments. The theoretical framework will highlight the data collection process. Rather than being a secondary asset, mentorship should become a primary resource for the professional development of teachers, novice and veteran alike. Each school faces challenges that are unique to their environment which calls for the use of in-house resources to engage the educator on multiple levels. The proposal reports preliminary findings and concludes on with a discussion on why this issue is of primary significance.

Keywords: professional development, mentorship, perception, teacher engagement

Evidence suggests that high quality teaching is facilitated through high quality professional development (Philips, 2008). Yet, development of teachers is often undermined by budget restraints (Sanders & Lewis, 2005). While most teachers receive ongoing professional development (PD) experience of some form, the quality is often debatable, necessitating the need for alternative PD that meets the needs of teachers and engages them on an intellectual, professional, and social level (Corcoran, 1995, Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996). One way to meet teachers’ needs is encouraging in-house PD through targeted and effective use of in-house resources including mentoring relationships. Teacher professional development is strongly shaped by the context in which they practice (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2008). The bottom-up approach is more sustainable in determining resources required and instilling capacity of all participants, including the local authorities and teachers (Lee, 2011).

Mentorship is a form of personal or professional developmental relationship where the mentor, an experienced or more knowledgeable person, guides and helps the less knowledgeable and experienced individual, the mentee (Farren, 2006). The relationship can significantly influence the mentee’s experience towards schooling (Zalaquett & Lopez, 2007). Mentorship provides teachers with relevant support and foundational training to enhance their knowledge and teaching skills. In turn, students interact with confident and knowledgeable teachers thereby enhancing their success in school. Mentoring is a multi-dimensional experience and a valuable tool in promoting comprehensive education experience per the Educational Leadership Constituencies Council Standards for Educational Leaders. While the standards focus on educators as leaders in the field, there is a need for clearer and more defined language on the professional development received, such as mentoring, that promote inclusive and equitable teaching practices (National Policy Board For Educational Administration, 2002). However, a successful mentoring relationship is influenced by several factors, including the institution’s culture. Culture can positively or negatively
affect the mentor-mentee relationship.

Statement of Purpose
This study is a follow up to a previous study designed to understand how current professional development programs are adapted within the institution’s cultural environment. PD plays a crucial role in meeting educational standards for professional accountability and student achievement learning (Abdal-Haqq, 1996). This has led to an upsurge of professional development workshops, development opportunities, and diversification of teacher resources (Harris, 2005). However, PD workshops and strategies do not always achieve the intended objectives, including improvement of teacher skills (Knight, 2000). While a culture of professional development is encouraged at the respective institution, preliminary findings indicated that current PD programs were lacking one crucial ingredient: mentorship. The absence of support post-PD session underlined the need for a mentoring program to support the culture of professional development. This study was designed to gain a better understanding of mentoring relationships in PD programs and how these relationships are influenced by the school’s culture. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to understand how the New Teacher Center Mentor Academy Program (the “NTC Program”) was influenced by the culture of the respective school.

Research Questions
1. How does the school culture influence the mentoring relationship?
   Sub-questions:
   2. What is the mentor/mentee perception of the effectiveness of the program?
   3. What are the mentor/mentee perceptions of the NTC Program on the mentorship relationship?
4. What are the challenges of sustaining a mentor-mentee relationship in this culture?
5. How does this culture support the mentor-mentee relationship?

Data Sources and Methods
This research employed a qualitative case study approach in order to comprehend an “in-depth analysis of a case” (Creswell, 2014, p. 14). A case study is appropriate when attempting to understand bounded systems (Patton, 2005). All teachers at the respective school were assessed to determine who are participating in the NTC Program in order to be eligible candidates. Following that determination, a random sample of six mentors and six mentees were selected from the group of teachers participating in the program. Purposeful sampling was used for data collection through interviews that yielded “insights and in-depth understanding rather than…generalizations” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). Interviews were scheduled with each randomly selected participant at a time that was convenient for the participant. Each interview lasted 45 minutes to an hour. Follow up interviews were conducted as needed for clarification and deeper understanding purposes (Creswell, 2014). The interviews were transcribed and member checking was done. Participants were provided copies of the transcripts for accuracy verification. Mentor-mentee interactions were also observed during meetings and faculty meetings to get a better idea of the culture that was identified through the grid and group framework. Triangulation was conducted through various data sources: interviewees’ nuances of expressions and observations along with interviewer’s observations, training materials, and observation data. Patton (2002) describes triangulation as, “using a variety of sources and resources, the evaluator observer can build on the strengths of each type of data collection while minimizing
the weaknesses of any single approach” (p. 306). Data was also derived from mentorship sessions, field notes, observations, and training documents and then thematically coded to look for consistent themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Theoretical Framework

A radical approach is necessary towards a “new paradigm of professional development because its goal is to build a committed and caring community” (Harris, 2005, p. 15). Grid and Group Theory provided the basis to discerning the cultural forces at play within the specific culture or, in this case, school site (Douglas, 1982). The typology “explains the roles and rules that define members of the organization (grid) and the social experience of the members (group) shape the perceptions and practices [within] the given social environment” (Harris, 2005, p. viii). The typology allows the researcher to “classify and compare social environments in terms of their differing constraints on individual autonomy” (Harris, 1995) and, in this case, social relationships in the mentorship program. The framework was used to determine the prototype or environment the school culture fits and how mentoring is adapted by the school culture.

Findings

Findings from this study highlight the importance of establishing contextual conditions for positive mentoring relationships among teachers, primarily for beginning teachers. Healthy mentoring relationships can encourage new teachers to “stay the course” when challenges arise. These findings can help inform educational leaders and policy makers about school cultural factors that can enhance relationships among teachers, promoting more successful professional development and more informed use of school funds.

Significance/Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of positive mentoring relationships among teachers, primarily for beginning teachers. Healthy mentoring relationships can encourage new teachers to “stay the course” when challenges arise. The findings can help inform educational leaders and policy makers about school cultural factors that can enhance relationships among teachers, promoting more successful professional development and more informed use of school funds.

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