



APPLYING BUSINESS LESSONS TO EDUCATION: MENTORING AS JOB-EMBEDDED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Dr. Nathan R. Templeton
Department of Educational Leadership
Texas A&M University – Commerce
Nate.Templeton@tamuc.edu

Joshua W. Tremont*
Lamar University
*Corresponding Author: tremontjw@hotmail.com

Abstract

Mentoring is a form of nurturing that not only impacts professional practice but affects school climate and morale, as well. As educators continue to experience an attrition rate that exceeds other professionals, the intentional administrator must begin to implement effective strategies for the induction and development of campus faculty. While current trends advocate using outside sources to develop comprehensive professional development plans, this best-practice papers seeks to inform professional practice by using mentoring as a form of job-embedded training that aligns professional development with the demonstrated need and identified goals of educators.

Keywords: mentoring, professional development, teacher retention, teacher improvement

Teacher attrition has attracted considerable attention as national policies – aimed at improving student outcomes, increasingly focus on recruiting and retaining more qualified and effective teachers (Boyd et al., 2005). Moreover, as the trend in education continues to shift toward additional accountability matrixes, the discussion regarding a connection between teacher retention and student achievement continues to elude most educators. While focusing on teacher quality is a laudable goal and research supports the connection between the quality of teachers and student academic success (Darling-Hammond,

2000), there appears to be some disconnect as policy makers continue to overlook the cyclical nature of continuous professional improvement. As such, schools continue to succumb to the pitfalls of standards-based education reform, the premise of which believes the setting of high standards and establishing measurable goals alone can improve individual outcomes in education. Improving individual outcomes in education is a dichotomy that must shift from the isolationism of understanding student needs to a more holistic process of responding to adult needs that in turn facili-

tate the creation of new knowledge structures in students. Literature suggests that the focus of professional development has shifted from the district to the school level, from fragmented efforts to comprehensive plans, from off-site training to job-embedded training, and from generic skills to a combination that includes content-specific skills (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997; Mertler, 2013).

Improving traditional models of professional development often focus on community issues and challenges rather than on the specific and demonstrated needs of each educator. By contrast, mentoring is a product of personalized learning and choice, as each collaborative exchange between mentor and mentee is innately tailored to meet the strengths and needs of the intentional educator seeking to impact professional practice.

Moreover, mentoring is a form of coaching that supports individual development. Whether learning new skills or rethinking developed ones, mentoring transitions teachers to exceed expectations through immersion in a supporting process that addresses differing levels of readiness while being sensitive to those differences by finding resources to support each person's developmental goals.

Fibkins (2011) likens teaching to a performance art – one where those who are classically trained (performers) persist at improving their craft through countless hours invested in honing and refining a set of unique skills that may take a lifetime to truly master. In much the same fashion, teachers should accept the role of practitioner; that is, to understand that the process toward becoming effective is a continual journey replete with successes and failures. However, it is the failures that may cause deeper issues for educators. Teachers often lack immediate support systems that enable immediate feedback aimed at skill development. Mentoring is

one solution for bridging this gap and one lesson where business may have the right answers. In *An Administrator's Guide to Better Teacher Mentoring*, Fibkins (2011) establishes the foundation for the text by reminding the reader of the need for forward thinking educators to embrace a business model for the induction of employees. "We live in a world in which mentoring, coaching, team building, and empowering have become standard practices for many successful corporations and corporate leaders" (p. 1). Schools are beginning to use terms synonymous with those who compete in a global economy; terms like human capital or partner relations. As Smith (2009) describes, human capital is the set of skills that an employee acquires on the job, through training and experience, and which increases that employee's value in the marketplace. Certainly, educators have resisted the intentionality of investing in employees through ongoing professional development. Admittedly, education is the great equalizer in our competitive global economy; however, "ongoing mentoring for teachers - investing time and money into their professional development – has not caught on in the same way it has in the corporate life" (Fibkins, p. 1).

While schools are not immune to the challenges of becoming change-agents, Fibkins (2011) discusses strategies that afford the means for the intentional administrator to restructure their roles. Central to this premise is for the administrator to begin the process of collaboration with stakeholders. For example, the establishment of a mentoring team comprised of "competent educators who are known and respected by the school" (p. 4). Other campus leaders, including department heads, lead teachers, and assistant principals are logical choices suggested by the author. One is in agreement with this process of shared leadership, as transformational leadership is necessary for creating a culture of sustainability. As Fibkins (2011) chimes, "the potential for professional

growth involved in effective mentoring is not just for teachers. In developing a trusted mentoring role with teachers, administrators also create a teacher-learner climate in which they, too, become open to examining their own skills [and strengths]" (p. 9).

Interestingly, and moving beyond a more traditional function of using mentoring to improve attrition rates for new teachers, Fibkins' (2011) approach speaks of creating a learning environment for all teachers by framing discussions on teaching and learning and striving to develop each teacher into a competent master teacher. "The mentor's task is to find ways to help teachers reach their goal of improving. It is a worthy goal. When educators see fellow teachers and their students floundering, it is [a] professional responsibility to help them better their craft" (p. 23).

Implications for Administrators

Education always lags behind the curve of innovation. In fact, education tends to be a more reactive practice than a proactive one. As such, administrators must begin to have forward-thinking dialogue about improving practice through relevant job-embedded professional development. So many times, teachers report that professional development sessions are often unrelated to specific skills needed or are just a complete waste of time. Why not use the human capital available within the school to target and improve areas of demonstrated need. While not taking anything away from providers who sponsor professional development activities, it is more beneficial for the campus administrator to align each educator in need of assistance with a peer or group of peers who can directly impact professional practice in a meaningful and deliberate manner.

The central task is to select wise mentors – those educators who have proven

track records of failures and successes in public education. Intentional administrators must validate the process by first focusing conversations on improving teacher effectiveness. "Teachers can overcome their lack of experience, skill, and self-awareness with caring interventions by mentors who can dignify their worth and at the same time help them learn new, effective approaches" (Fibkins, p. 30). To highlight: Wise mentors have perspective. As effective educators, wise mentors have experienced the battle scars of teaching. Not only are they practitioners in the field, they affirm the day-to-day demands of the teacher: "confrontation, care, deflection, encouragement, reprimand, and more" (Fibkins, p. 31). Wisdom also prevails when challenging teachers to have the courage to grow professionally.

Wise mentors understand that teaching is rewarding because of the time invested in the process. Teaching involves cycles akin to those in life; however, the constant is hard work. One affirms Fibkins' (2011) call for self-renewal in the face of the inherent risk of improving one's skills and forging new directions. One applauds the idea that "effective mentoring helps teachers understand that their greatest potential for growth comes from accepting students who rebuff their good intentions. It is the teacher's job to figure these students out – to sweat, try new approaches, fail, be tough, be soft, do whatever it takes to win over these students" (Fibkins, p. 33). One also applauds the author for correctly clarifying that the teacher's ultimate validation comes from self-reflection, not student feedback.

Wise mentors understand that building trust is a product of loyalty and privacy. Teachers are like everyone else; they frequently encounter personal issues that threaten their ability to be successful in the classroom. In order for the mentor protégé relationship to flourish, all parties must agree to share openly, as "trust and loyalty

spark renewal and allow one to take risks” (Fibkins, p. 36). Veteran educators are aware of the power of the tongue and its residual effects on a culture of trust. Effective mentors must build the foundation whereby “teachers [freely] talk about personal issues that may be affecting daily work” (Fibkins, p. 38).

The wise mentor understands his charge of developing the capacity of the protégé. “The eventual maturing of the protégé into mentor should be a cherished goal” (p. 39). With an understanding of sustainable leadership, one affirms the author’s intentions of perpetuating the cycle of professional growth by encouraging and nurturing the skill set of intentional educators.

Wise mentors are skilled communicators. “Successful mentors know how to intervene, listen, be non-judgmental, give constructive and accurate feedback, confront failure-causing behaviors, support successful and failed efforts to change, be available for counseling on educational and personal issues, and be a general advocate for their protégés (Fibkins, p. 42). One affirms that mentors cannot know everything about every subject or situation; however, Fibkins’ (2011) admonition to “be [your] brother’s keeper” (p. 45) is appreciated and well received. Having appropriate support systems in place, where “informal learning and exchange are ongoing and easily accessible” (p. 54) is paramount to success for the mentor and the protégé.

Finally, wise mentors will assist teachers in finding their personal teaching voice by “encouraging the evolving teacher to look within himself, identifying strengths as well as areas that need improvement” (Fibkins, p. 50). The discussion again centers on reflective leadership, and perhaps a better connection should be made here. Renewal (i.e., personal, institu-

tional and professional) is necessary to discover and discard the inner demons as the intentional educator searches for his unique teaching self (Fibkins, 2011). As with students, it’s not about what teachers know but rather how they learn.

Reflection and Discovery

Intentional improvement for educators begins with what Mertler (2013) emphasizes as the integration of professional reflection throughout the mentoring process as a form of job-embedded professional development. Administrators must dialogue with colleagues regarding this essential progression toward self-discovery. Reflective journals not only assist with learning from successes and failures by articulating celebrations and challenges along the path, this deliberate approach serves as a basis for improving learning and teaching. Further, the process aims to narrow the gaps between theory and practice, an essential skill lacking in many young educators. As the late Sydney Harris, a former columnist for the Chicago Times wrote, “the whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows” (n.d.).

To further clarify, reflective practice is a process of continuous improvement whereby the educator learns from those critical episodes in life. The process looks something like: Experience (actions past and present), Observation (documenting what happened), Reflection (making sense by investigating) and Planning (making plans for future action). It is this last part that is somewhat intriguing. Effective mentoring is about facilitating conversations that enable both parties to struggle with meanings and events in order to effectively plan for what’s next. In other words, mentoring becomes a form of formative evaluation.

Individual Performance Goals

Planning for what's next is a matter of bettering ones craft and begins with establishing an Individual Success Plan or ISP. What is it that I need my mentor to help me improve and what is our timeline? How will we determine skill mastery or pedagogical improvement? How will I deal more effectively with challenges and how can my mentor support me in this endeavor? These essential guiding questions frame the basis for setting individual performance goals. The quest of the mentor is to keep the mentee on track through collaboration, support, and intervention. For example, if the goal is to improve technology integration by a specified date and both parties have agreed on what successful representation will look like, it is incumbent upon the mentor to keep the educator squarely focused on the acquisition of new knowledge and the improvement of specific skill sets. Secondly, the mentor must assist in evaluating in a thoughtful and collaborative manner that affords the opportunity for sustained growth and development. It is noteworthy to mention that an ISP may be needed as often as weekly or infrequently as every 4-6 weeks and may be revised as necessary to account for growth and obstacles.

Modeling through Collaborative Learning

Mentors must be allowed release time to observe protégées and vice versa. Modeling is an effective teaching tool and one that facilitates improving practice through study and dialogue. Therefore, mentors must be allowed time to conduct informal and formal walk-throughs and evaluations.

References

Boyd, D. J., Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J.H. (2005). Explaining the short careers of high-achieving teachers in schools with low performing students. American

If the guiding question for the week is improving classroom management, the mentor may first guide his protégée through a study of best practices as included in a recent journal article. Next, the protégée may be asked to formulate a line item in the ISP to address needed improvements as documented from a recent classroom visit. At the next classroom observation, the mentor may ask permission to video the teacher during the presentation of the lesson. During a follow-up conference, this video may be compared with one from another effective teacher in order to draw inferences and conclusions about improving practice in this area. Likewise, the current video may be paired with an older one to demonstrate growth. In this manner, the teacher has not been told what to do but has instead participated in a collaborative learning activity that eventually leads to a desired outcome.

Conclusion

Mentoring invests in people. "Mentoring is different. It is a shared role that requires delicate and caring intervention and feedback. It is a slow process built on mutual trust and self-respect. It only works when both parties, the mentor and the protégé, clearly understand the areas that need improvement and how the mentor can be useful" (Fibkins, 2011, p. 2). The overarching goal of each campus administrator must be to invest in students by investing in teachers. Use mentoring for its intended use – to build capacity in people and to empower their sustained collective growth.

Economic Review Proceedings, 95(2), pp. 166-171.

- Darling-Hammond, Linda. (2000).
Teacher quality and student achievement: A review of state policy evidence. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 8(1), 9-16.
- Fibkins, W. L. (2011). *An administrator's guide to better teacher mentoring*. Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield Education.
- Mertler , C.A. (2013). *Action research: Improving schools and empowering teachers* (4th ed). Thousand oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Price, K. M., & Nelson, K. L. (2011). *Planning effective instruction: Diversity responsive methods and management* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning.
- Smith, R.E. (2009). *Human resources administration: A school-based perspective* (4th ed.). Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.
- Sparks, D. & Hirsh, S. (1997). *A new vision for staff development*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.