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To cite this article:

Smith-Washington, V. (2023). A qualitative analysis of experienced teachers' ongoing need for mentors. *International Journal on Studies in Education (IJonSE)*, 5(4), 441-460. <https://doi.org/10.46328/ijonse.149>

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A Qualitative Analysis of Experienced Teachers' Ongoing Need for Mentors

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Article Info

Article History

Received:

21 February 2023

Accepted:

06 June 2023

Keywords

Attrition

Co-teaching

E-mentoring programs

Induction program

Leavers

Abstract

Teacher mentoring strategies provide new teachers (and experienced teachers, too) with crucial supports when they enter the real world of the classroom, attempt classroom management and instructional skills, improve their goals to remain in the classroom and the teaching profession, and help students to learn. The central research question, “Do experienced teachers still need mentors?” Data collection included an individual interview with a former study participant. Data analysis was thematic analysis by manual coding. Themes emanated were e-mentoring programs, high-quality mentorship programs, mentor roles and responsibilities, middle school teachers’ attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities, administrators’ support for mentoring programs, and feedback for special education teachers. The findings were administrative support with a negative co-teaching experience and learning independently occur with and without a mentor. A limitation was a veteran teacher who was interviewed. The implication was that veteran teachers, especially special education teachers need mentors from the first-year of teaching and beyond. Social change was improving induction and mentoring programs to ensure that novice and veteran special education teachers continue teaching and remain in the teaching profession for a lifetime.

Introduction

Teacher mentoring strategies provide new teachers with crucial support when they enter the real world of the classroom, attempt classroom management, and instructional skills, improve their goals to remain in the classroom and the teaching profession, and help students to learn (see Young et al., 2017). Smith-Washington (2022) wrote and published an article entitled, “A Case Study: A Novice Teacher’s Mentoring Experiences the First Year and Beyond.” An implication was that mentoring a new teacher is vital to helping them to remain in teaching.

The purpose of this article was to follow that same teacher, Rodney W., from the first year as a new teacher who is currently an experienced teacher in his ninth year of teaching in an inclusion middle school special education class. Meyer (2021) defined a mentor as:

We often think of a mentor as a wise and experienced *teacher* who guides a protégé on a journey into a profession or art. But the most important role of a great mentor—and a great teacher mentor—is building a professional relationship that encourages continuous support, scaffolds a professional identity, and endures. (p. 1)

The researcher met with Rodney W., who seemed anxious to be interviewed again. He is a 31-year-old Middle-Eastern young man. He teaches special education in a middle school. We met in year one when he was among eight other novice teachers interviewed for the researcher's dissertation and then again in year three. Currently, the researcher interviewed Rodney W. again in his ninth year of teaching. In the first article about Rodney W., he described the first few years of teaching in the special education field without an assigned mentor. He stated that he had to find his way without the assistance of a mentor. However, he did co-teaching with other special education teachers, which helped him a lot.

Rodney W. did not have a mentor in the first year in the charter school nor in the third year when he was with the academy. Rodney W. had some teaching experience, and they assumed he did not need a mentor. In addition, this was the first time I had a mentor in the school. He sought out what he needed to do. Rodney W. spoke with a few educators. In addition, he had good co-teachers and would get advice. Therefore, Rodney W. remained and learned without any assistance.

Rodney W. continued and said that he had a class alone every year. It was only his second year in special education when he came to the academy. Initially, Rodney W. was the charter school's English language arts teacher. Then, after obtaining his master's degree, he taught special education at the academy. Then the researcher asked what happened when he entered the academy whether he was immediately put into an inclusion class, or whether he continued alone. He immediately replied that he did both.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative case study aimed to explore how an experienced special education teacher described his reflective experiences and progressed independently until his ninth year of teaching and to show that teachers might still need mentors during the first year of teaching and beyond.

Literature Review

The literature review presents the induction model, e-mentoring programs, high-quality mentorship programs, mentor roles and responsibilities, and staff development for special education teachers. Other topics include inclusion in middle schools, retaining experienced teachers, international and national teacher shortages, reasons why teachers leave teaching, COVID-19 pandemic and inclusion, administrators' support for mentoring programs, and feedback for special education teachers. The next section of the research consists of a general problem statement, a specific problem statement, the study's purpose, results, analysis, themes, recommendations, and a conclusion.

When a trained teacher-mentor leads sessions, novices may become more comfortable sharing challenges and successes. In addition, the group could learn about just-in-time topics and helpful instructional strategies (Weinberg, 2021). Even mid-career teachers with years of teaching experience could find valuable mentoring experience in a few ways. First, the pedagogical theory is ever-evolving, with new concepts and approaches being developed and implemented in schools (Di Mario, 2022). Mentoring can be a valuable way to encourage experienced teachers to try new teaching approaches and develop their teaching practice. Second, a mentor can be a voice of experience where a teacher can brainstorm ideas, reflect on what worked, and analyze room for improvement. Third, as new pedagogical approaches emerge, much different technology emerged in the classrooms in the last few years. For mid-career teachers who are not digital natives, additional, ongoing support from a mentor can make a vast difference in the successful implementation of new classroom technology (Di Mario, 2022).

Student teaching is part of college students' field experiences. Rodney W. participated in field experiences during student teaching while in college. He stated that he enjoyed those experiences and received instruction and guidance from a supervising teacher. Aderibigbe et al. (2018) explored the relationship of mentoring experiences between teachers and student teachers. Findings provided opportunities for revisiting assumptions about learning in the classroom and questioning established professional learning patterns. Mentoring might enable teachers to reflect on their practice and question what they do while teaching. Mentoring requires careful planning and effective implementation as collegial professional learning. As a result, mentoring becomes entrenched into the school's environment supported by design, not risks (Aderibigbe et al., 2018; Teacher and Education Support Development Unit, 2010).

Research on New Teachers' Perceptions of Pairings in Mentoring Programs

When experienced teachers do not match new teachers in mentoring programs, those new teachers are more than likely to leave the profession early. For example, Rodney W. had severe problems "trying to please one of his co-teachers" who appeared dissatisfied with everything he submitted for her approval. For example, he sought the advice of other co-teachers about his lesson plans, and the co-teacher continued to express dissatisfaction with those submissions. Rodney W. said he had no problem with her dissatisfaction, except she never told him what displeased her about his work. Her only comment was, "It is unacceptable!" As a result, he was discouraged but stated that he did not learn anything from her as a co-teacher. Later, she transferred to another location.

Schwan et al.'s (2020) qualitative study examined the impact of mentor and new teacher pairings on the self-reported benefits of a statewide mentoring program for new teachers. Participants included 147 new teachers and 89 mentors in a Midwestern, rural state. Teacher demographics had all grade levels, different content areas, job-alike and job-not-alike pairings, and in-district and out-of-district pairings. Findings indicated that the most similar pairings, such as same district and same position, reported the most positive mentoring experience. For example, the school district did not assign Rodney W. a mentor during his first year of teaching. Instead, he worked closely with several co-teachers through the years and gleaned some valuable knowledge from them. Mentors and new

teachers identified several themes as benefits of the experience (Schwan et al., 2020). Major themes were reflection, positive interactions, collaboration, improved instruction, and improvement. Major themes identified by new teachers included improved instruction, teamwork, positive interaction, improvement, direction, and a sense of community (Schwan et al., 2020).

Sparks (2020) investigated standard practices used by mentors participating in a new teacher mentoring program that encourages identified teachers to remain in the profession. School districts nationwide spent time, money, and human resources addressing the significant turnover rate and the recruitment of highly qualified teachers. Findings showed valuable insight into how mentors viewed their relationship with their mentees and how they viewed the mentoring program. In addition, the study demonstrated that although new teacher mentors worked with limited resources and constraints by rigid policies, they provided a particular type of expertise to beginning teachers (Sparks, 2020).

Reasons Why New Teachers Leave Teaching

Teachers leave the teaching profession for a variety of reasons. Eighty-six percent of NEA members said they saw more educators leaving the profession or retiring early since the pandemic started in 2020 (Walker, 2022). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022), approximately 10.6 million educators worked in public education in January 2020. Currently, just 10.0 million still teach, which results in a net loss of roughly 600,000 teachers (Walker, 2022). According to the National Education Association (NEA, 2022) survey, 91% said that pandemic-related stress is a severe problem for educators, and 90% of members said they feel burned out, causing a severe teacher shortage problem; another 67% said it is dire. When asked about potential ways to address the issue, teachers indicated higher salaries, additional mental support for students and teachers, hiring more teachers and support staff, and less paperwork (NEA, 2022). Pay is a significant factor and multiple models of support for educators, including planning, collaborating with colleagues, and building relationships with parents and students (NEA, 2022).

Administrators' Support for Mentoring Programs

School leaders ensured that first-year teachers and the expert teachers mentoring them felt set up for success (Weinberg, 2022). While teacher-mentors and mentees focused on a school's mentoring program, administrators have a dynamic role regarding the tone and implementation. For example, some principals invited the entire staff to provide supplementary guidance for new teachers or even meet monthly with protégés to hear their concerns and provide personal feedback (Weinberg, 2022).

A training program for mentors is the foundation of successful mentoring programs (Weinberg, 2022). Trained mentors might become great mentors who know and assume their duties and responsibilities. Mentors and mentees should be carefully selected and matched with experienced teachers who want to take on a mentoring role and agree to participate in specialized training. Mentors should only be compared with new teachers once mentors are thoroughly trained (Weinberg, 2022).

Research showed that mentorship is most successful when new teachers matched with a mentor from their subject or grade level, and mentors and mentees confirmed this in partner schools (Hong & Matsko, 2019; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). District and school leaders described the challenges in adjusting schedules to facilitate better matches between mentors and mentees and the importance of prioritizing this (National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, 2021). Many educators voiced the need for flexibility in smaller schools with fewer teachers in each subject area. In addition, when a new teacher needs support to strengthen specific instructional skills, that might be more effectively provided by a teacher who happens to be outside their content area (National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, 2021). Deliberately matching new teachers with an experienced teachers in their content area or grade level creates the opportunity for more profound coaching that connects the content with teaching strategies or practices (National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, 2021).

A mentee or protégé is a new teacher who receives advice, training, or guidance from a more experienced or skilled mentor. Mentees may have specific skills or competencies to learn from mentors who spend a designated amount of time tutoring or teaching. Typically, a mentor and mentee establish goals together and meet regularly to practice or learn new skills throughout the mentoring program (Welteroth, 2022). Mentoring programs should retain two or three unassigned, trained mentors within the school if a mentor-mentee pairing is unsuccessful or to match teachers hired after the start of the school year. Late hires need immediate support as they likely missed important meetings and beginning-of-year guidance (Weinberg, 2022).

The most critical mentoring element occurs when mentors and mentees pair. Unfortunately, some principals make matches based on teachers' schedules, grades, or subjects taught, without regard for each as a unique individual (Weinberg, 2022). Instead, consideration for participants' personalities was the best method of ensuring a professional, positive working relationship. For example, if a new teacher is communicative and outgoing, a successful mentor will likely be collaborative and ready to discuss ideas or challenges (Weinberg, 2022).

Feedback for New Teachers

A comprehensive mentoring program includes various essential components, such as an ongoing assessment and feedback to mentees (Anderson et al., 2012). New teachers need strong, active mentors with expertise, disposition, motivation, skills, and the ability to provide feedback and adjust their mentoring style. Assessing the effectiveness of a given mentee is no easy task—administrators in the school district where Rodney W. was employed observed teachers using informal, unannounced formative evaluations. In addition, the principal held summative evaluation conferences with teachers toward the end of the year. The moderator asked about the type of feedback he received from either the principal or assistant principal. Rodney W. stated that both administrators provided constructive feedback; however, the assistant principal provided feedback on what Rodney W. needed to improve and looked for his weaknesses. In contrast, the principal always gave precise feedback and commented, “Give more verbal feedback to the students”; “Give more on the praises than just telling the students, ‘It is good’; or ‘That is correct’”. He asked him to be more specific. In addition, the principal advised him about how to strategically group students.

Finding a ‘Buddy’ Mentor is better than No Mentor

Beginning teachers should receive high support, especially in their first year in school (Teacher and Education Support Development Unit, 2010). Unfortunately, Rodney W. received low support during his first critical five years as a novice teacher. At this stage, Rodney W. needed help determining if he was ready to be mentored regarding intensive professional dialogue. However, he stated there was a mentor, he would have appreciated it, but he never received a mentor. Beginning teachers might need a buddy mentor to help with orientation to the profession and the school and to help them plan (Teacher and Education Support Development Unit, 2010).

Rodney W.’s so-called *buddy* was a fellow co-teacher whom he adopted ideas and some ideas he did not accept. A buddy may develop into a mentor, or the mentor could serve as a buddy in the first year before extending their role into mentoring in subsequent weeks and months (Teacher and Education Support Development Unit, 2010). However, Rodney W.’s co-teacher did not grow into a mentor because he had several co-teachers during his years, from a novice to an experienced teacher.

School districts sought the best way to support new teachers in their first year at a school. However, a clear focus on an effective support system for new teachers contributes to a higher retention rate (Podolsky et al., 2016). The retention problem is most acute at schools serving large concentrations of students of color, where teacher turnover is significantly higher than average (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). An effective response is the creation of high-quality mentoring programs to support new teachers.

While this response is a positive development, the quality and impact of these programs vary widely, with many operating as little more than a buddy system (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Research shows that when new teachers receive mentors, they are more likely to enhance their instructional skills and continue teaching in the classroom (New York State Education Department, 2022). New York School District could have lost Rodney W., but his resilience and determination caused him not to quit but to remain in teaching so he would not consider himself a failure. He refused to fail. During his first year of teaching, we discussed policies and procedures. According to the New York State guidelines, he needed a mentor. However, Rodney W. “never wanted to go and ask for a formal mentor, or was he just comfortable with what he did?” Rodney W. confirmed this statement and said he would have liked to have had a mentor if given one, but he never received an official mentor. A teacher appeared every once in a while. However after many years, he was somewhat skeptical of an assigned mentor.

The Induction Model

Since Rodney W. did not receive a mentor, an assumption was that he did not participate in an induction program. The National Council on Teacher Quality (2015) found that New York requires all new teachers to receive mentors. Rodney W. did not receive any mentoring activities or participate in the induction program. A decreased workload requires release time for mentors and new teachers, and districts are eligible for funding to support release time (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2015).

Young et al. (2017) found positive impacts of an induction model on student achievement in English language arts and mathematics. However, the researchers found no statistically significant differences between New Teacher Center (NTC) supported teachers and comparison teachers on teacher practice measures or teacher retention in their third-year teaching. Young et al. found high implementation fidelity levels and contrasts in induction experiences between treatment and comparison teachers. This finding indicated that the NTC induction model was implemented well in various district contexts. The result might mean that experienced teachers with assigned mentors could positively impact student achievement in English language arts and mathematics.

High-Quality Mentorship Programs

With such positive teacher outcomes for those receiving mentors, a viable recommendation would be for states and school districts to ensure that every new teacher receives high-quality mentoring programs to increase teacher retention and effectiveness. Recent teacher surveys rank mentoring as the most helpful support. In addition, new teachers working with a mentor score higher on measures of effective practice, and students increase their achievement on reading and mathematics assessments (Hong & Matsko, 2019). As a result, states and districts should invest in high-quality mentoring for teacher improvement and retention, particularly in schools serving high-need students and students with disabilities (National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, 2021).

Mentorship programs may help to retain novice regular classroom teachers and special education teachers in the profession (Greene, 2018). Greene's qualitative exploratory multiple case studies explored special education teachers' perceptions of the mentoring program with three or more years of experience in secondary schools. The researcher asked four research questions regarding the program's strengths, weaknesses, impact, and whether or how it might aid teacher retention (Greene, 2018). Data were collected from 12 new and new-to-district special education teachers using in-depth semistructured interviews, a focus group interview, and a questionnaire. Ten themes emerged: four relating to the first research question and each subsequent research question reflecting two themes (Greene, 2018). Themes included aspects such as new teachers benefiting from having mentors, the program needing to be more helpful for teacher retention, and the program's failure to adequately address new teachers' feelings of being overwhelmed. Findings showed that the program benefitted some teachers. Still, an implication was that the school district could improve the mentoring program (Greene, 2018).

Mentor Roles and Responsibilities

With release time provided to mentor teachers, mentoring could be simple, but successful implementation can be challenging (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology, 2022). Mentors should receive release time to work with new teachers. States and school districts should allocate funds for release time for mentors and new teachers to receive and provide knowledge and skills in classroom management and organization, discipline strategies, and lesson planning. Rodney W. was denied these viable opportunities during his first critical years as a new special education teacher. He did not have a mentor to share information about his career path, guidance, motivation, emotional support, and role modeling (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology,

2022).

Another definition of a mentor is someone who can support, advise, and guide a new or experienced teacher teaching for the first time in a new school (Cronin, 2022). Mentors typically take the time to get to know and discuss an individual's challenges. Then that information and understanding, coupled with personal teaching experience, might help the individual improve and enhance knowledge on the job (Cronin, 2022).

E-mentoring Programs: A New Form of Mentoring

Due to COVID-19 pandemic requirements, face-to-face limited new teachers meeting with mentors. As a result, mentoring programs caused mentors and mentees to meet up during planning and after the school changed e-mentoring programs. These programs may be the new norm because of the pandemic. Such programs include digital mentoring, computer-assisted mentoring, electronic mentoring, online mentoring, and virtual mentoring that incorporates the use of technology (Garringer et al., 2019). Over the past couple of decades, e-mentoring has grown in popularity to include the use of cell phones and social media, especially among young people graduate from college and become new teachers (Garringer et al., 2019). E-mentoring requires information and communication technology, including sending emails between a mentor and mentee, texting using cell phones, chatting using a messenger program or social media, and video conferencing. Other examples include Skype, FaceTime, Zoom, Duo, FaceTime, Google Hangouts, or other video call platforms, and posting messages to digital bulletin boards or forums (Garringer et al., 2019). Some programs utilize proprietary platforms, often combining the mentioned above so that mentors and mentees communicate in a space wholly dedicated to private mentoring interaction (Garringer et al., 2019).

Other programs may use readily available technology or a combination of proprietary and publicly available software platforms (Garringer et al., 2019). These diverse e-mentoring models can connect individuals worlds apart and offer potentially more significant and frequent access to various types of mentors. E-mentoring also provides safety and participant monitoring capabilities beyond what many in-person programs could offer (Garringer et al., 2019). With technology playing an increasingly important role in everyone's lives, relationships and e-mentoring models might continue to develop in relevance in mentoring (Garringer et al., 2019).

However, e-mentoring comes with challenges because it requires access to information and communication technology (ICT) including smart phones, cellphones, tablets, Internet-connected computers, smartphones, mobile devices, and technical support for technology and digital platforms (Kaufman, 2017). To support e-mentoring, states and school districts could provide computers to every new teacher in every school district in the nation and provide training and updates on such devices during the first three years of teaching. The chosen technology is available to all mentors and new teachers, which is challenging when working with children with disabilities. Mentors and mentees must be technology literate. For example, if a mentor is unfamiliar with social media platforms, using them to build a mentoring relationship may be only produced with sufficient training (Kaufman, 2017). Mentors and new teachers need adequate ICT communication skills, such as reading comprehension and the ability to sufficiently express themselves through texts and emojis (i.e., digital images used to describe an idea

or emotion in digital communication (Shpigelman, 2014).

E-mentoring is available for K-12 teachers and mentors (Erdoğan et al., 2022). Teacher training should begin with pre-service training, in-service training, and ongoing professional development throughout their professional careers. Therefore, Erdoğan et al. discovered how e-mentoring affected pre-school teachers' professional development. Those researchers created an e-Mentoring-Based Education Program (e-MENTE: PT) during the in-service support period. Researchers concluded that the e-MENTE:PT program supported preschool teachers' professional knowledge, learning environments and classroom applications, and an e-mentoring based teaching management system was effective on professional development.

Staff Development for Special Education Teachers

High-quality professional development creates space for special education teachers to share ideas and collaborate in their learning, often in job-embedded contexts that relate new instructional strategies to students (O'Neill et al., 2021). Rodney W.'s form of staff development was to observe co-teachers approaches, and if he learned from them, then he adopted those techniques; if not, he discarded them. Rodney earned a master's degree in special education, which was his staff development. Educators and policymakers increasingly seek teacher professional learning as an essential strategy for supporting students' complex skills to be prepared for further education and work in the 21st century (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). For students to develop mastery of challenging content, problem-solving, effective communication and collaboration, and self-direction, teachers, must employ more sophisticated forms of teaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Effective professional development is critical to teachers learning and refining the pedagogies required to teach these skills.

Method

The moderator asked Rodney W. about what occurred during the first three to five years, how was it for him trying to learn how to be a special education teacher, and doing the behavior management plan that probably was generally frustrating. Rodney W. replied that he always hoped, expected, and thought for radical change that huge improvements would evolve in his teaching. He had all this information. He felt that he could do so much better. What he noticed every year was only gradual improvement. However, every year, there was some improvement. Rodney W. stated there was no year that he made a giant leap. Although he admitted that every year, he improved.

Rodney W.'s first teaching assignment was in an inclusion middle school. He was initially overwhelmed and daunted by students' particular needs, lesson planning, classroom management and organization, and discipline strategies. Without a mentor, he struggled independently and remained favorable toward students as he taught them skills in each content area. Inclusion in middle school is slightly different from inclusion in elementary school. Hines (2022) stated that the rationale for inclusion has never relied on research findings but on principles. Proponents insisted that the inclusion of students with disabilities is inherently correct. Teachers' concept of inclusion is that students attend classes with general education students combined with direct support from special education teachers (Hines, 2022). Inclusion is not the same as mainstreaming students in the regular classroom;

thus, not belonging to other specialized environments based on their disability (Orr, 2021). This notion also holds for middle school inclusion. In middle schools, students with disabilities become members in the regular classroom, which is their primary group and not the special education group. Middle schools lend themselves to inclusive practices because of the standard co-teaching model. As a result, this model could be more successfully implemented where interdisciplinary teaching teams share planning (Hines, 2022).

Children with disabilities may have mental and sometimes physical delays that affect their academic learning (Orr, 2021). Children who are gifted or academically advanced can also be affected by classroom placement. Classroom instruction modifications ensure that all children received the best educational opportunities. Some students found typical classroom situations overwhelming and inappropriate for their developmental needs. Others placed in a general classroom may cause them to excel because they felt part of the learning process and were not excluded (Orr, 2021).

The moderator asked Rodney W. whether teaching special education students was the same or different in his third through fifth year in the middle school inclusion program. He countered that his personality remained the same since going back and forth about how he should present himself to the students. Nevertheless, he realized at the end of the day that he should remain positive. He did not have to be “mean and nasty” to the students. Unfortunately, that attitude backfired on him and others who were hostile toward students.

Research showed that teachers’ attitudes toward students with disabilities were associated with differential teachers’ expectations and, in turn, with students’ educational pathways (Cate & Glock, 2019). Theories of social cognition explain the connection between attitudes and behavior. However, the distinction between implicit and explicit attitudes is different (Cate & Glock, 2019). Implicit attitudes are automatically activated when the attitude object is present and guide automatic behavior. In contrast, explicit attitudes infer deliberation and reflection, affecting controlled behavior (Cate & Glock, 2019).

Rodney W. continued and stated that he felt that he should remain optimistic and cheerful with the students. Of course, this did not suggest that there were no consequences for students misbehavior. Nor did it imply that there were no rules when the teacher firmly provided directions and set expectations for students’ behavior. Cate and Glock (2019) supported Rodney W.’s feeling of optimism. Edge (2019), a school counselor, claimed that when children did not have consequences for their actions, they felt they could do whatever they wanted. However, outcomes helped children behave appropriately and provided boundaries. Implementing results might help children gain a fundamental understanding of how the world works (Edge, 2019).

Rodney W. questioned his feelings and again used self-talk by asking if this meant that he had to change his personality. He concluded that he had to be firm but positive because he thought that the carrot worked better than the stick. The carrot-and-stick motivation approach involves creating a carrot, a reward, and a stick, or a consequence to motivate students (Frangieh & Rusu, 2021). Teachers’ positive attitudes are essential for successfully including students with disabilities in schools with peers without disabilities (Cate & Glock, 2019).

Results

The findings in this case study showed the following themes emerged while interviewing Rodney W. (1) Induction model, (2) e-mentoring programs, (3) mentor roles and responsibilities, (4) staff development for special education teachers, (5) inclusion in middle schools, (6) retaining experienced teachers, (7) administrators' support for mentoring programs, and (8) feedback for special education teachers.

Rodney W. is one of the fortunate teachers who remained in teaching and who did not become discouraged because he lacked a mentor during the first three to five years of teaching. What Rodney W. experienced probably would have discouraged the average new first-year teacher in any school district in the United States. He could have left teaching without the proper mentoring support, but he did not. He remained in the teaching profession without a mentor for nine years and managed to retain himself in the teaching profession.

The research question was, "Do experienced teachers still need mentors?" The moderator asked if he had ever thought about leaving pre-COVID with the thought that maybe he should get out of teaching. Did those thoughts ever come across his mind? Rodney W. responded that he did not want to quit and on a sour note made him stay. He did not want to leave. If things were going well, it would have been easier for him, but he could not leave knowing he could not do this job well, which would have hurt him even more, honestly. The impact of the pandemic on teachers, especially new teachers, and mitigating the risks to health and mental well-being were just as significant as on students with disabilities (Parker & Pablo, 2022).

According to an earlier study, approximately 40% of new teachers left the profession within five years, but teachers with mentors were more likely to stay (Gray et al., 2015). For Rodney W., it was the idea that if he left, it meant failure. So, he stayed. Influential mentors build a confidential and trusting relationship by providing non-evaluative feedback after informal observations. Being accessible, sharing relevant information and resources, and co-teaching to model instructional strategies are additional effective mentor program practices (Hoover, 2021).

The Institute of Education Sciences study, *Public School Teacher Attrition, and Mobility in the First Five Years: Results from the First through Fifth Waves of the 2007-2008 Beginning Teacher Longitudinal Study*, examined the benefits of mentorship programs for beginning public school teachers. Findings showed that those assigned mentors remained in the profession at more excellent rates than teachers who did not have mentors for over five years (Gray et al., 2015). The study revealed that 92% of new teachers who had a mentor returned to the classroom for a second year, compared to 84% of new teachers who did not have access to a mentor. After five years, 86% of the teachers with mentors remained in the profession, compared to 71% of teachers without mentors (Gray et al., 2015). Although the study results found that teachers with mentors stayed and those without left. Rodney W. beat the odds, and he is indeed an exception because he did not have a mentor for nine years. Co-teachers saved him from drowning, and he could grasp anyone who could advise him on 'Where should he go from here?'

Research showed that special education teachers leave the profession more than general education teachers

(Alqahtani, 2019; Billingsley, 2020). According to a Virginia Tech College of Education survey, 37% of special education teachers reported leaving the job to escape teaching, as opposed to 24% of general education teachers (Billingsley, 2020). Alqahtani (2019) investigated the impact of the mentoring programs used with new special education teachers (SETs) to determine the reasons that caused them to leave teaching at a high attrition rate. Fifty-six participants graduated from different universities in Saudi Arabia and taught teaching for five years or less. Alqahtani acknowledged the problems in special education related to the teacher shortage and turnover due to many teachers leaving. The causes of SETs' turnover are complex, but the attrition rate was the leading cause that contributed to the problem.

Many states reported that special education teachers suffered from high attrition rates among new SETs within their first five years of teaching (Iris Center Peabody College, 2022). Teachers, especially special education teachers, were most at-risk of leaving during their first years in the classroom. Some estimates suggested that up to 50% of new teachers leave the profession in the first few years (Iris Center Peabody College, 2022). However, results indicated that the mentoring programs helped SETs to stay longer in the field. In addition, findings indicated that SETs who participated in the mentoring program did not leave the profession at a high attrition rate.

According to a National Education Association (NEA, 2022) survey, over half of educators leave the profession earlier than planned; when asked if he thought about leaving instead of the COVID-19 pandemic, Rodney W. vehemently stated, "Yes, of course!" However, he did not want to leave. Rodney W. is an exception to those who left teaching. More than half of the teachers who said they would leave earlier than planned represent a significant increase from 37% to over half in August 2022. Those figures held for teachers regardless of age or years of teaching, bus drivers, and cafeteria workers (NEA, 2022). However, findings showed that a disproportionate percentage of Black (62%) and Hispanic/Latino (59%) educators, already underrepresented in the teaching profession, leave (NEA, 2022). Eighty-six percent of members say they witnessed more teachers leaving the profession or retiring early since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Walker, 2022).

Discussion and Conclusion

Rodney W. never experienced nor participated in any program to encourage him to enter a teaching career. He had known since childhood that he wanted to become a teacher. As a result, his first-year teaching was daunting and alone because the New York public schools did not assign him a mentor. Why? He did not know. The moderator asked him about the curriculum and the support received from the administrative staff and colleagues. Rodney W. concluded that every year he had a co-teacher. However, every time he had someone different. He bounced ideas off each teacher and received feedback on how he could improve and get better. So, there was always that support because that is the nature of having a co-teacher. However, that always stayed the same. He felt like there was always something else to gain from them. Rodney W. learned from their mistakes; it was usually either something he did not want to pick up from them or something he wanted to gain from them.

To recruit prospective teachers, districts similar to North Carolina school district attempt to gain the interest of junior and senior high school students and enroll them in a program called Teacher Cadet I at public schools across

North Carolina. Many schools also have Teacher Cadet II class for seniors that offers more field experiences to give students extra time in the classroom before they begin college (Gross, 2022). Teacher Cadets learn about the science of learning, professional expectations and responsibilities of teachers, human development, and the history of education (Gross, 2022). In addition, the program partners with colleges and universities in North Carolina to provide college-level instruction, foster relationships between students and professors, and share information about teacher education programs. For many students, enrolling in the Teacher Cadet course opens the door to a college education by bringing them on their first college visit (Gross, 2022).

After high school graduation, supervising teachers encouraged Teacher Cadets to attend college and later teach in North Carolina public schools (Gross, 2022). Since May 2022, the Teacher Cadet corps trained approximately 60 new teachers. They typically trained 20 to 30 educators annually, holding training as-needed basis. Many newly trained educators are from regions that did not previously have Teacher Cadet programs. The Teacher Cadet program is still focused on bringing the program to every high school in the state and beyond.

In addition to North Carolina, Tennessee is a model for sponsoring prospective students to become educators. The Department of Education announced in January 2022 that it sponsored and hosted a teaching apprenticeship program approved by the U.S. Department of Labor (Hackathorn, 2022). According to the State Education Department, there are currently 65 programs among 14 colleges of education and 63 of Tennessee's 147 school districts. The programs offer no-cost pathways into the teaching profession through financial assistance for tuition, books, and fees, along with establishing residencies for candidates to work alongside current teachers (Hackathorn, 2022).

Tennessee State University (TSU) praised historically Black institutions that created a teacher pipeline program. The Associated Press reported (Hackathorn, 2022). TSU created a pathway for high school seniors to earn bachelor's degrees in teaching with initial licensure in biology, chemistry, special education, or English as a second language (Hackathorn, 2022). The state education department funded the TSU program through a grow-your-own competitive grant program. In October 2020, the department announced an award of \$2 million to seven education prep programs to form or expand teacher pipeline partnerships with school districts. In addition, the Federal Labor Department's support for Tennessee's teaching apprenticeships is significant because it provides a financial opportunity that was unavailable to teacher programs in the past (Hackathorn, 2022).

Like North Carolina and Tennessee, the West Virginia Department of Education attempted to help high school students who might enter the teaching profession with a teacher preparation program (Hackathorn, 2022). The West Virginia Department of Education launched a teacher preparation program in the fall of 2022. The program aims to help high school students earn and complete courses alongside obtaining K-12 classroom experience. As a result, high school students earned college credits before graduating high school. Students completed four classes, and the goal was to enter college with a minimum of 22 credit hours (Hackathorn, 2022). Currently, the Department of Education seeks ways to fund the program.

A major challenge in schools is for all children to receive a quality education from highly-qualified teachers

(Balow, 2021). However, since 2011, education researchers and district leaders have increasingly called attention to the growing problem of a teacher shortage in the nation's kindergarten–grade 12 schools as massive numbers of teachers are leaving the classroom: some in pursuit of other opportunities or avoiding the field altogether (Balow, 2021). The National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research conducted a study with approximately 500,000 teachers (NEA, 2022).

More specifically, 55% of teachers said they actively sought to leave the profession. Not only were teachers leaving the field, but many newer teachers were also leaving (National Education Association, 2022). In addition, almost 30% of college graduates who became teachers left the profession within five years (Will, 2022). With a significant teacher shortage and constant turnover, school systems across the country struggle with the challenge of building and maintaining a high-quality teacher workforce to meet the needs of all students (García & Weiss, 2019; Sutchter, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2019).

A high turnover means fewer faculty need to remain long enough to gain a significant understanding of students, families, and the community (Balow, 2021). As a result, investments in professional development are lost. Collaborative relationships could be rebuilt among general and special educators (Balow, 2021). Studies showed that having high turnover and high attrition of teachers negatively affected the achievement of all students in a school and diminished teacher effectiveness and overall quality of instruction, even for those teachers that remained in the classroom (Balow, 2021).

Many teachers left classrooms for summer break, where stresses multiplied as the national teacher shortage grew (Dill, 2022). Approximately 300,000 public school teachers and other staff left the field between February 2020 and May 2022. According to Bureau of Labor Statistics data, these figures represented a nearly 3% decline in the teaching workforce (Dill, 2022). Teachers often cited working conditions, such as the support of principals and the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues, as top reasons for leaving. More than 1 in 4 teachers who left pursued other career opportunities (Podolsky et al., 2016; Torpey, 2018).

Summary

As a result of the interview, the moderator asked Rodney W. about the status of a setting in which special education teachers did not receive a mentor. Instead, mentors emerged from veteran teachers and colleagues who helped along the way. Rodney W. answered that his first two years resulted in trial and error. He used self-talk to discover that if something worked, he kept trying it, and if not, he changed it. For the final question, Rodney W. shared his insight into his relationships with co-workers and staff at the academy and his journey of becoming a better teacher. Rodney W. responded that it is symbolic of growing as human beings. People do not grow one day with anything. Growth is a prolonged and gradual process with anything; that is how he realized how it was. Every year he sought radical improvement and change that was sometimes a moderate change that became better every year.

Beginning teachers should receive high support, especially in their first year. A buddy may grow into a mentor

who operates as a buddy in the first year before extending their role into mentoring in subsequent weeks and months. However, Rodney W.'s buddy (co-teacher) did not grow into a mentor because he had several co-teachers during his years as a novice into his years as an experienced teacher. A clear focus on an effective support system for new teachers contributes to a higher retention rate (Podolsky et al., 2016). The retention problem is most acute at schools serving large concentrations of students of color, where teacher turnover is significantly higher than average.

Mentoring remains a sustainable policy option in education. However, for purposeful mentoring to occur, a prerequisite is the acceptance of its complexity in performing the mentoring function, which implies careful planning. Teachers are valuable educational resources, and high-quality teaching performance is essential to academic improvement and reform. To assist beginning and veteran teachers, supporting student performance in the classroom from the beginning of new teachers' teaching careers is vital to teacher and student success. With high stakes and the support of well-designed mentoring programs, providing effective induction programs for new teachers into the profession and keeping them in education are essential to this effort. Fulfilling the mission of teaching and giving equal opportunities to every child means high-quality mentoring and teaching. Effective mentoring is critical in continually improving teachers' professional knowledge and skills to instruct and prepare students for the next century and beyond. However, mentoring programs must consider the intricacy, procedures, and purposes of school-based programs to be compelling.

Implications

Based on the findings in this case study, and according to Rodney W., "More structure could have been put in place for me to have a mentor. There is room for more guidance about the school's department in helping new teachers to strive and thrive." Implications were providing a training program for mentors because training is the foundation of successful mentoring programs (Weinberg, 2022). Mentors' training might help them to become mentors and understand their duties and responsibilities. Mentors and mentees should be carefully selected and matched with experienced teachers who want to take on a mentoring role and agree to participate in specialized training. Mentors should only be compared with new teachers once mentors are thoroughly trained (Weinberg, 2022).

Recommendations

Based on the findings in this case study, several recommendations provide suggestions for the state and school districts to ensure that new teachers receive ample opportunities to succeed in their chosen fields. Mentors might be the answer to increasing teacher retention so new teachers become experienced teachers as their goals. All over the world and in the United States, school districts are losing highly qualified teachers, and students suffer from it. As stakeholders, school boards, administrators, teachers, and parents, we must do everything to ensure that teachers who decide to become teachers can do that by having a mentor assigned as closely as possible to a match to retain those new teachers in their chosen fields of study. That is the least we can do.

With such positive teacher outcomes for those receiving mentors, a viable recommendation would be for states and school districts to ensure that every new teacher receives high-quality mentoring programs to increase teacher retention and effectiveness. States and school districts should allocate funds for release time for mentors and new teachers to receive and provide knowledge and skills in classroom management and organization, discipline strategies, and lesson planning.

More structure should be implemented for every teacher to have a mentor from the first year to the third year. In addition, there is room for more guidance from the school's department in helping new teachers to strive and thrive. Finally, states and school districts should provide a training program for mentors because training is the foundation of successful mentoring programs. Mentors and mentees should be carefully selected and matched with experienced teachers who want to take on a mentoring role and agree to participate in specialized training. Comparisons of mentors with new teachers should only occur once training occurs.

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