

Introduction

We need other people to show us, to accompany us, to hold the hope and steady our faith that we will make it. And we also need people with whom to practice: parents, friends, children, teachers. For in relationships, we both form and heal what we come again and again to name our self. This is why mentors and mentoring environments play such a key role. Without adequate support many learners . . . may decide to stay where they are.

Laurent Daloz

This book begins with our passion for teacher and student learning and our shared vision for teaching excellence. We know what it is like to begin teaching without on-going support and guidance. We understand the overwhelming feelings of uncertainty and isolation new teachers have. We experienced these challenges ourselves; yet, in spite of the obstacles, we remained in the profession because of our strong desire to teach. Statistics show that today we are the exception, not the rule.

New teachers are leaving the profession at an alarming rate. Thirty percent of beginning teachers leave the profession after the first two years; within seven years, as many as half are no longer teaching. Mentor teachers can play an important role in reversing this trend by giving new teachers the skills and role models they need to survive and thrive in the profession. Promoting the personal and professional growth and well being of new teachers greatly improves the likelihood that they will remain in the teaching profession (Stansbury & Zimmerman, 2001). A good mentoring program provides the kind of support that can reduce teacher attrition dramatically.

As mentor trainers for a number of years, we hoped and believed we were making a difference. Our mentor training primarily focused on the characteristics of good mentors, the needs of new teachers, and ways to promote reflection and collaboration. While we provided successful learning experiences for mentors, we felt our training lacked two important elements: the focus on student learning that is at the heart of all good teaching, and strategies for ongoing program support. We also wanted to ground our work in standards for good teaching as well as the latest research on effective schools.

This book presents a framework for a mentor program built on the reciprocal relationships between mentors and mentees as they create professional learning communities. This program provides a coherent learning environment for beginning teachers and those new to a grade level, building or district. It also offers a forum for our most admired teachers to pass on their accumulated wisdom about teaching practice to new generations of teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1998).

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) and the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) standards provide the guidelines for the knowledge, skills and professionalism of quality teaching reflected throughout the book. To further guide our research, we looked to Peter Senge's *Schools That Learn*, Robert Garmston's *The Adaptive School*, Rick DuFour's *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, and Tom Guskey's *Evaluating Professional Development*. Building on their ideas we structured a mentor program consisting of four themes that are embedded throughout our book.

- Collaboration
- Reflective practice
- Shared vision for professional growth
- Student learning

These guiding principles provide the framework within which mentors and mentees can develop partnerships in a professional learning community.

Collaboration

If I want to teach well, it is essential that I explore my inner terrain. But I can get lost in there, practicing self-delusion and running in self-serving circles. So I need the guidance that a community of collegial discourse provides – to say nothing of the support such a community can offer to sustain me in the trials of teaching and the cumulative and collective wisdom about this craft that can be found in every faculty worth its salt.

Parker Palmer

Meaningful collaboration doesn't just happen as a result of suggestion or chance. It is an ongoing process that needs to be structured, planned, and learned. There must be many opportunities for mentors and mentees to share ideas, perspectives, and expertise about teaching and learning. Teachers must work together as collaborators and colleagues to better understand both their own school experience and that of their students. This type of collaboration changes the mentor/mentee relationship from a hierarchical relationship to a reciprocal relationship based on mutual respect and learning. This effort combines the abilities and energies of beginning teachers with the experience of veteran teachers, and enables both to simultaneously contribute to the process of improved learning for teachers and students (Middleton, 2000). The activities presented in this book encourage mentors and mentees to collaborate as they explore issues related to learning. Whether they are completed independently, in mentor/mentee pairs, or in small groups, all activities promote a spirit of mutual sharing and collegiality.

Reflective Practice

[Reflection] emancipates us from merely impulsive and merely routine activity. Put in positive terms, thinking enables us to direct our activities with foresight and to plan according to ends-in-view, or purposes of which we are aware. It enables us to act in deliberate and intentional fashion to attain future objects or to come into command of what is now distant and lacking.

John Dewey

Thoughtful, reflective dialogue helps us see each other's point of view, become sensitive to each other's strengths and weaknesses, and act in each other's best interests. In practice, however, reflection can be difficult to integrate into our daily teaching routine in a sustained, meaningful way. We believe that if we want teachers to reflect, we must offer them a wide range of ongoing opportunities to think and talk about their teaching practice. The mentoring program we outline in this book provides ample occasion for mentor and mentee to practice the art of reflection and develop a culture of reflective thought.

Even when conditions are conducive for reflective dialogue, it can be difficult for teachers to think and talk openly about their work in meaningful ways. For the most part, teachers function in the isolation of their classrooms with little opportunity or encouragement to engage in any type of reflective activity with other educators. Even when opportunities to reflect on practice are presented and supported, many teachers have little understanding of what reflection really means and how it is accomplished. To help with this process, we include structured activities that involve posing questions and teaching dilemmas, discussing possible solutions or procedures, implementing strategies, analyzing student work products, and evaluating results in a collaborative manner.

Shared Vision for Professional Growth

Mentors can guide a mentee's sense of the possible. The mentor's vision inspires and informs. Sharing stories, modeling behaviors and holding up a mirror empower the mentee. By fostering continuous reflection and assessing learning outcomes, movement is encouraging during and after completion of the relationship.

Lois Zachary

A solid mentoring program presents opportunities for mentors and mentees to explore their value and belief systems in order to create the best possible learning environment for students. As Nancy Hoffman observes in *Schools That Learn* (2000), "When teachers begin their careers it is based on something to be gotten or had rather than something engaged, constructed and connected to the participants. These practices shape the beginning teacher's identity as one who implements rather than produces knowledge."

A mentoring program must provide opportunities for teachers to construct their own teaching identity, a vision based on teaching standards and research, as well as on their own experiences and reflection and those of other teachers. As teachers engage in meaningful conversations about teaching and learning, work through teaching dilemmas and think deeply about challenging educational issues in a safe environment, a beginning teacher's identity begins to emerge. In this environment, new ideas can be explored and teaching practices can be examined without fear of recrimination. The activities presented in this book provide many opportunities for self-reflection, group reflection, and analysis of one's own beliefs, history and practice.

Student Learning

The focus of traditional schools is teaching; the focus of the professional learning community is student learning. The difference is much more than semantics. It represents a fundamental shift in the teacher-student relationship. This new relationship would not allow for the familiar teacher lament, "I taught it – they just did not learn it."

Rick DuFour

A mentoring program must not lose touch with the real purpose of teaching: keeping students at the center of our practice. Professional growth leads to better teaching and, ultimately, to improved student learning. The activities in this book provide opportunities to use real student data and feedback for meaningful discussion after methods and activities are implemented in the classroom. This guided, interactive dialogue will address teaching standards and methods, student characteristics and learning styles, curriculum, and assessment. Participants will examine their own student learning history, explore assessment strategies, investigate curriculum issues, analyze national, state and local standards, and consider various teaching methods – all focused on the goal of fostering student learning.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book is designed to guide both mentees and mentors through a cycle of learning based on teaching standards. The mentors and mentees will collect information, discuss teaching experiences in a variety of settings, apply what they have learned, and assess the outcomes. This cycle focuses on what is at the heart of good teaching by emphasizing and modeling teacher and student learning. Understanding the time constraints experienced by teachers, we knew it would be important to create a book that is easy to use. To that end, we've laid out a step-by-step process that calls for one two-hour mentor/mentee gathering each month, along with informal mentor/mentee interactions throughout the month. For each month of either a

nine-month or year-round school program, we present a set of desired outcomes grounded in teaching standards, followed by a repertoire of ready-to-use activities that promote collaboration and reflection. Each month builds on the previous month's focus and activities. A central focus of the program is a *Weekly Teacher Reflection Journal* that helps teachers collect information and observations related to their classroom practice as well as each month's specific topic. At the end of the cycle the learning partners will analyze the information they have collected in order to set meaningful goals as part of an ongoing professional development plan.

The monthly format includes the following components:

∞ **Overview or Focus of the Chapter**

Each chapter begins with a brief discussion of the focus for this month's mentee/mentor work.

∞ **Learning Targets**

The learning objectives of each of the suggested activities are outlined at the beginning of each chapter.

∞ **Resources**

We include a list of resources that can be used to enhance and enrich the presented activities. This is especially useful for future reference.

∞ **Activities**

Each chapter includes activities that assist mentors and mentees in collaborating and reflecting on a given topic. Each activity is accompanied with an overview, suggestions for implementation, and a time estimate.

∞ **Required Forms Section**

Forms that are to be completed each month can be found in the required forms section at the end of each month's activities. This section includes the *Monthly Seminar Planning Form*, the *Weekly Teacher Reflection Journal Form*, the *Monthly Reflection Journal Summary Form*, and the *Monthly Support Seminar Evaluation Form*.

MONTHLY SUPPORT SEMINARS

The theme for each month is reflected in the agenda for the monthly support seminars. Here all participants gather to discuss their observations and share the learning process as colleagues. The following is an overview of the topics addressed throughout the year.

MONTH ONE: Introducing the Mentoring Partners to the Reflective Process

We begin with activities and tools designed to assist the mentee and mentor to get to know each other. The framework of the mentor program is described, and a timeline is established for both weekly meetings and monthly support seminars. The *Weekly Teacher Reflection Journal* and *Monthly Reflection Journal Summary* are introduced and will be the focus of reflection and dialogue throughout the mentor/mentee relationship. Mentors and mentees begin the process of paired learning using the *Norms of Collaboration* (Garmston, 1999). The norms describe the approach mentors and mentees will use to discuss and analyze each other's teaching performance in the following months.

MONTH TWO: Exploring Our Current Reality

The activities in Month Two are designed to help participants gather information about the school, district and the community. The mentor and mentee assess their learning needs and complete a plan to meet those needs in the coming months.

MONTH THREE: Analyzing Professional Practice

The mentoring partners discuss the knowledge, skills and professional standards represented in the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). Through dialogue and reflection about the teaching standards, the partners will create a "big picture" survey of their own professional practice. The activities focus on collecting examples, resources, and other useful information that demonstrate how quality teaching standards are represented in their school and classrooms. The *Weekly Teacher Reflection Journal* for this month will focus on the partners' reflections on how the standards are applied in their everyday teaching, and the effect of quality teaching on student learning.

MONTH FOUR: Analyzing Classroom Environment

This month's activities are centered on how each teacher's classroom environment is structured to meet diverse student needs and to maximize learning. The effect of various classroom environments on student learning is explored through reading, classroom observation and teacher interviews. Participants record their explorations in the *Weekly Teacher Reflection Journal* and discuss them during the partners' meeting. The partners then discuss how they are currently structuring their classroom environment and how students are reacting to it. They compare this to the best practices reflected in the professional teaching standards and note further changes that would help students learn more effectively in their own classroom.

MONTH FIVE: Understanding Assessment

This month's activities will help teachers gain a better understanding of assessment and explore their own assessment experiences. Various assessment strategies will be introduced. The learning partners will analyze student work, discuss issues related to grading, create an assessment plan and participate in a type of performance assessment. Each activity is designed to promote reflective thought and discussion of the complexities of meaningful student assessment. The *Weekly Teacher Reflection Journal* will focus on the effectiveness of current assessment practices and how assessment relates to student learning and achievement.

MONTH SIX: Content Standards and Curriculum

In Month Six, the partners will analyze the content of teaching and learning. Collaborative activities will promote discussion of curriculum and academic standards for teaching. Partners will explore their current curriculum and determine what additional curriculum information is needed for effective teaching. They will also analyze national, state and local academic standards and examine the connection between curriculum and standards. The *Weekly Teacher Reflection Journal* will focus on this analysis.

MONTH SEVEN: Instructional Methods

Teaching is more than a series of activities. It must include instructional strategies based on curriculum, standards, and student needs; these instructional strategies are the focus of Month Seven. Partners will analyze student behavior, participate in classroom visits, examine how various teaching methods meet the needs of a diverse student population, and develop learning goals based on current practice. The *Weekly Teacher Reflection Journal* will focus on teaching methods, instructional strategies and documentation related to the classroom visits.

MONTH EIGHT: Setting Goals

This month, partners will analyze the data collected as a result of the activities throughout the first six months, including all *Monthly Reflection Journal Summary* forms and other artifacts collected throughout the year. By responding to such statements as “What I most need help with is...” and “What I most need to work on in my practice is...,” partners will set measurable learning goals that lead to professional growth and maximized student learning outcomes.

MONTH NINE: Writing the Professional Development Plan

In Month Nine, partners will create a professional development plan based on the learning goals set the previous month. Goals, a plan of action, and a timeline are the essential components of the professional development plan. Both mentor and mentee will collaborate on the plan; optionally, the mentor may complete a plan as well as the mentee.

MONTH TEN AND BEYOND: The Cycle Continues: Sustaining the Momentum

The final section explores next steps to continue the collaboration and support as the professional development plan is implemented. Suggestions for future work that addresses the ongoing needs of mentor and mentee to continue the learning partnership are addressed.

TOOLS AND CHECKLISTS: Appendix

This section includes tools and monthly checklists to assist all mentees, mentors, administrators, and program coordinators to implement the mentor program. The tools and checklists include:

- Monthly checklists outlining key classroom and district responsibilities for mentors and mentees, as well as school occurrences throughout the year that can affect teaching and student learning;
- Monthly administrator duties that are necessary to support and encourage the mentor program;
- The monthly organization and implementation responsibilities of the mentor program coordinator.

CONCLUSION

Readers who are familiar with the requirements for National Board teacher certification will recognize the linkages to our mentoring program. Just as we have integrated NBPTS standards as expressions of quality teaching, many of our activities consist of documenting evidence of how those standards are actualized in the classroom. This practice of collecting documentary evidence of standards in practice is an important part of attaining National Board Certification – and a part that many teachers struggle with. Educators who wish to apply for certification will find this program an excellent way to prepare.

Our mentoring program, then, seeks to achieve more than creating a nurturing environment for new teachers, as important as that objective is. Ideally, the program we outline becomes a way for the entire faculty to gain a practical familiarity with the highest standards of the teaching profession, and to prepare to gain recognition for mastering these standards. Our program seeks ultimately to create a community of educators who learn from their practice and who share their insights with their colleagues as they create an ever-improving, ever-renewing learning environment for children.

RESOURCES

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