

Mentoring for new-hire success in any profession

Charles K. Runyan
Pittsburg State University

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the need for trained mentors in developing new hires in any profession and outlines a developmental theoretical framework as a basis for mentor training. To illustrate the success of trained developmental mentoring, a unique mentoring program called the Kansas Early Career / Mentor Teacher Academy is reviewed. The paper shares the theoretical framework, goals, structure, components, and materials used in the program and illustrates how it can be modified in other professions.

Keywords: education, teaching, induction, mentoring, beginning teachers,



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INTRODUCTION

Over the centuries, no matter what the profession, when successful individuals were asked what helped them navigate the various currents to their professional success, each usually named a specific person with great fondness. They would tell of how this experienced swimmer helped them perfect their swim strokes, showed them how to swim with the currents, and opened various opportunities to practice in the rough waters. Those individuals without that identifiable mentor usually talked about how they learned to sink or swim on their own and usually gave up in the rough currents, learning then only to swim close to shore and never again advancing out to rougher waters.

In understanding the importance of mentoring, a number of businesses and school systems have developed mentor programs, of one sort or another, over the last thirty years. Whether they are with at-risk high school students, college freshman, newly-hired teachers, first year principals, new superintendents, novice college professors, greenhorn laborers, young business executives or even beginning CEOs, each significantly benefited from being mentored by one who has successfully crossed the waters.

Over the past decade, Pittsburg State University and several local public school systems worked collaboratively to provide southeast Kansas's beginning teachers with a seamless system of mentoring and professional development. Called the Kansas Early Career Teacher Mentor Academy, the program has been presented at eight national and four state conferences with five different articles being published about its merits. The components that made this program with beginning teachers so successful can easily be transferred to other occupational fields.

MAJOR PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

As with any good mentoring program, there should be a systemized infrastructure that allows for continuous mentoring and training over several years, from the first day through several years of employment. With a number of specific components implemented over a period of years, all effective programs seem to have common principles and pieces of the puzzle that can be modified to fit any occupation.

Interactive Meeting Structure

Effective mentoring and induction programs provide a structure with multiple avenues for interaction between the new-hire and the mentor. For example, at the Academy, both the mentor and beginning teacher attend eight after school gatherings throughout the school year. In each get-together, dinner is served in between two different sessions. In the first, various district-related topics are covered, and, in the second, program-training topics are presented where mentors and mentees are usually separated. The opening session fosters get acquainted activities and exploration in the characteristics and common difficulties of the beginning teacher. The ending session celebrates the year's success where all participants are invited to a banquet where certificates are presented and the year is reviewed. By beginning and ending the school year together and meeting at set times throughout, program continuity as well as situational differences are accommodated.

Structured Field Interaction

Documented through collaborative plans and a time line of monthly activities, constant field collaboration and interaction is expected between the mentor and early career teacher. Here, mentors are trained to serve various roles over time: supporter, role model, information provider, organizational sponsor, resource link, counselor on personal and professional concerns, facilitator, and challenger of professional growth. As the situational context creates different role interactions, the relationships will usually evolve over time.

Trainers

Those who have effectively “walked the walk” lead all successful programs. For example, the Academy is directed and managed by former master teachers who have been successful mentors for others. Without respected individuals directly responsible for overseeing the activities and the training of the mentees and mentors, participants will often take the course of least resistance and take shortcuts.

Mentee Training Goals

Every efficient program has specific targets. To meet the needs of the Academy’s first through third year teachers, several goals were established to structure the activities and materials. Based on research and observed teacher needs, the following served as the major goals for the early career teachers program:

- Improved knowledge of classroom management skills;
- Increased awareness of techniques for improved student motivation;
- Awareness of personal issues involved in teaching;
- Improved knowledge of parent conferencing skills;
- Increased knowledge of effective instructional strategies;
- Demonstrated ability to reflect on teaching practices;
- Awareness of building a professional portfolio.

Without specific goals that are measured by participant evaluations and/or other data collection, no mentor program can claim to be successful.

Mentor Training Goals

A strong mentoring program relies heavily on trained mentors selected on the basis of proximity, discipline similarity, positive attitude, and proficiency. Mentors should be masters of their craft who model the best practices and believe in each mentee’s undiscovered possibilities. Because of the importance of continuous daily support through mentor activity, an effort is made to train the participating mentors in specific interaction skills and research-based activities that could be effectively used with the beginning professional. To help focus the Academy program, specific goals were established for mentor proficiency. For the training to be successful, it is believed that the mentor should be able to:

- Conceptualize the general characteristics, needs, concerns, and expectations of the beginning teacher;
- Understand the components of developmental beginning teacher induction programs;
- Interact and communicate with the beginning teacher in a non-threatening, supportive manner;
- Assess and interpret specific classroom needs and problems of the beginning teacher using checklists, assessment instruments, and personal conferences;
- Analyze, focus, and support specific teacher classroom needs using peer coaching techniques and conferencing;
- Use data collection instruments in observing class activities to focus classroom observations;
- Help in the successful completion of the Kansas Performance Appraisal;
- Incorporate the personal, professional, and personality needs of the beginning teacher into activities and interaction;
- Implement developmental activities that offer the beginning teacher additional knowledge, skills, and attitudes for successful teaching performance;
- Serve effectively as a developmental mentor, who provides an orderly, personalized transition from pre-service preparation to the first three years of teaching.

Mentor training goals, if taught and reinforced, will give mentors the skills and attitudes to effectively develop their charges.

Materials

The more one knows the greater the possibility of success. For example, if one doesn't know the rules of the game, one can't play the game. Consequently, if the mentee doesn't know the policies, norms, power dynamics, and operational culture of the institution, he/she can't get off to a positive start. In any quality program, various materials are provided to serve as a basis for the mentee and mentor to move through the various required knowledge bases needed for success. Whether it is flipping burgers to teaching kids to serving as a CEO, there is a pedagogy needed for success. Good programs sequence the material needed for achievement. For example, the Academy has two separate manuals developed for the early career teachers and mentors.

Beginning Teacher Materials

The Early Career Teacher Training Manual is used to house the major materials needed for the early career teacher's success. The manual's items have been developed from feedback provided by past participants. Additional materials are added as the year progresses. Initially included in the manual are such items as:

- Orientation Checklist - a 225 item checklist which asks the beginning teacher to identify school and student policies, everyday procedures, classroom expectation and reinforcement plans, and particular school cultural norms and climate characteristics.

- Activity Time Line - a monthly listing of suggested activities with the mentor which is modified to fit the particular school placement; two distinctly different timelines are used representing differences between the special education and regular classroom teacher.
- Getting Started - materials are provided that specifically addresses the first few days and weeks of school. Forms and handouts that might be helpful throughout the year to assist with record keeping, organization, classroom management, and time consolidation are also provided.
- Classroom Management - materials addressing student relationships, behavioral guidelines, consistency, reinforcement, motivational strategies, and common challenging situations such as verbal confrontations, foul language, and off-task behaviors.
- Conferencing - materials covering effective communication, parent contact strategies, open house preparation, and specific conferencing arrangements, preparation and procedures.
- Effective Instructional Strategies – materials presenting various instructional strategies appropriate for all students as well as those appropriate for students with different learning styles, intelligences or special needs.
- Technology - a collection of material designed to help incorporate technology into the classroom and use the Internet as an instructional resource.

Serving as central texts for seminar discussions are Harry and Rosemary Wong's The First Days of School (2009) and The New Teacher Book (2010) edited by Burant, Christian, Salas, and Walters. Both these texts provide a myriad of instructional and management ideas especially written for first year teachers. The books present teaching as a highly skilled craft that can be learned, and it involves having high expectations for student success, managing the classroom, and designing lessons for student success. As the years progress, additional texts are often added such as Understanding the Common Core State Standards (2011) by Kendall Second as well as various educational journal articles. Third year teachers usually review material from The Unauthorized Teacher's Survival Guide (2001) by Bryan and Warner. This text provides additional strategies both for new and seasoned educators.

Mentor Materials

Mentors are also provided a written training manual in The Mentor Training Manual. Again, each of the manual's items were developed from feedback provided by past participants and were related specifically to the developmental orientation of the program. As the year progresses, additional materials are added to fit the specific year of the mentoring assignment. The basic mentor material includes:

- The Mentorship - a 44 page manuscript containing four chapters - Why Become A Mentor, Characteristics of the Beginning Teacher, Mentor Characteristics, and Mentor Communication Activity - which serves as the text of the training program.

- The Mentorship Course Syllabus - a graduate course syllabus offering three hours of graduate credit from Pittsburg State for those participating in the training sessions.
- Orientation Checklist - a 140- item checklist which asks the mentor to help the beginning teacher identify school and student policies, everyday procedures, classroom expectations/reinforcement plans, and particular school cultural norms and climate characteristics.
- Activity Time Line - a monthly listing of suggested mentor activities to be used with the beginning teacher that is modified to fit the particular school placement.
- Data Collection Instruments - a collection of eight different instruments mentors can use when observing the beginning teacher's classroom.
- Conferencing and Coaching - an outline of procedures for mentors to follow in conferencing and coaching the beginning teacher.
- Teaching and Learning Style Identification - a series of teaching/learning styles instruments and explanations are developed to help the mentor recognize and understand the cognitive, affective, and physiological traits of him/herself and the beginning teacher.
- Personal and Professional Need Identification - a 49 question needs identification instrument, Teacher Needs Assessment Questionnaire, which can be used to identify specific personal and professional needs at various times throughout the year.
- Using Videotaping in the Classroom - a series of procedural suggestions and a ten-domain critique guide for analyzing videotaping of classroom teaching episodes.
- Course Activities - over a dozen different activities and assessments used in the mentor training sessions.

The materials are constructed and used to allow for continuity, attention to task, and the further professional development of the experienced teacher.

Early Career Training Topics

Successful programs follow the presentation of material through the implementation of the concepts in the field. Ineffectual programs simply present at one meeting and move on to another topic next meeting. Because of the common, as well as situational differences of the mentees, training topics vary over the years. Whatever the topic, the focus of the program is not to just present the ideas but also to see these ideas implemented in the classroom with the help of the mentor.

In the Academy, after the initial orientation meeting, the three-hour monthly sessions are structured to provide information on a monthly topic plus give the early career teachers time to discuss their individual needs. Early seminars focus on issues most likely to surface at the very beginning of school such as managing time and the classroom, adjusting to a new role, balancing home and school demands, and becoming familiar with the school and community. Later seminars address issues such as conferencing, professional development, technology, and instructional techniques and resources. Topic covered in recent sessions include:

- School and Community Orientation
- Effective Teacher Conferencing
- Student Learning Styles
- Classroom Management
- Positive Discipline
- High Expectations for Every child
- IDEA and the Classroom Teacher
- The Internet for Effective Lesson Planning
- Response to Intervention (RTI) and Kansas MTSS
- Data Collection Involved in Making AYP
- The Common Core
- Effective Questioning
- Handling Students in Trauma
- Identifying and Handling Drugs and Gangs in the School
- Ending the School Year

Outside speakers are utilized when appropriate. Also, personal contacts in the classroom by the trainers are provided when requested by individual teachers.

Individual Concern Exploration

In any well-functioning program, both mentee and mentors need time as group to explore individual and situation concerns particular to their situation. Many times the first year teachers are separated from the second and third year teachers to discuss specific concerns appropriate to their developmental level. Whatever the topic, early career teachers are active participants in these seminar discussions. Each seminar is structured to allow teachers time to discuss situational concerns and address common personal concerns. Many of these concerns fall into the areas of:

- Adjusting to the realities of teaching;
- Managing time;
- Relieving self-doubts;
- Finding value in teaching;
- Balancing home and school demands.
- Becoming familiar with the community;
- Avoiding isolation;
- Building new relationships; and
- Adjusting to a new role;

The program takes the orientation that if the beginning teacher does not personally adjust to the new occupation, the chance of long-term professional development is diminished.

Mentor Training Topics

It is imperative mentors are trained to serve as a trusted guide, advisor, or model for another. It doesn't always come naturally. Though the mentors attend the same monthly training sessions as their mentees, at times, there were separate training sessions to cover specific mentor topics. Example of topics covered include:

- Characteristics and Stages of Beginning Teachers
- Characteristics of Growth-Oriented Mentors
- Assessing Professional Needs
- Assessing Teaching Styles
- Using the Internet for Ideas and Mentoring Resources
- Brain Research and Interpersonal Skills
- Coaching Another Professional
- Rogerian Counseling
- Classroom Observation Instruments
- Video-taping to Help Another Teacher

The program takes the orientation that if the mentor is not given the tools and skills to facilitate another adult's development, the chance of long-term professional growth is diminished.

Program Evaluation

Any effective mentor program evaluates the growth of those being mentored. Each year the Academy collects both qualitative and quantitative data to evaluate and modify the program.

The Teacher Needs Assessment Questionnaire (TNAQ) is used to show quantitative professional progression for early career teachers (Runyan et al., 1993; Runyan et al., 1994; Runyan et al., 1995). The early career teachers, both individually and as a group, are being tracked as they hopefully move through the stages of survival, mastery, and impact. Based on each individual teacher's perception, the program uses 49 statements to collect data on the beginning teachers' development (three times a year), tracking their movement through the stages. Using a three-stage theoretical framework, the program strives to move each teacher from a survival mentality to making an impact on every child. Characteristics of each stage are listed below (Runyan et al., 1996).

Establishing Structures (Survival)

- Acquiring supplies and establishing room layout
- Knowing school policies, norms and culture
- Building collegial staff relationships
- Establishing classroom procedures and routines
- Setting rules and reinforcing them to gain respect of students
- Expanding subject matter knowledge
- Lesson planning for high time on task
- Coping with evaluation, other's opinion, and fear of failure

- Knowing parents and opening lines of communication

Developing the Science of Teaching (Mastery)

- Using various models of teaching correctly
- Acquisition of innovative techniques, activities, and ideas
- Asking classroom questions effectively and providing review and practice
- Providing timely assignment feedback and furnishing justification for grades
- Clear direction giving, illustration, and transitions so classroom activities move smoothly
- Identifying learning styles, characteristics, and needs of class
- Providing sponge activities to keep students busy
- Managing time pressures

Developing the Art of Teaching (Impact)

- Being novel, vivid, and varied in teaching strategies
- Achieving equity in monitoring, questioning and feedback
- Showing high expectations for every student and motivating all students to succeed
- Striving to meet the individual academic, emotional and social needs of students
- Developing consistency in enthusiasm, fairness and humorous disposition
- Being a role model who shows empathy, warmth, and respect to each student

Each time the instrument is used, a computer program is used to tabulate the means and display individual and group results. Over the years, the researchers have found that as beginning teachers move through their first year of teaching, they seem to generate concerns in a developmental sequence, even though there are identifiable situational differences. If left unexplored, these concerns could ultimately become major dissatisfactions that could influence their personal and professional life and stagnate their development (Runyan et al., 1995). With the help of a mentor teacher addressing these concerns, the beginning teacher's needs lessen and approach those of the mentor. Also, over the years, the results of the instrument have been useful as a vehicle capable of evaluating the program's success by identifying developmental stages and illustrating group and individual movement from one stage to another.

SMALLER PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

A number of other components have also shown themselves to be successful elements in fashioning a practical yet potent program. Each help fit the mentoring program together are valuable pieces of the puzzle.

Recognition / Credit

All individual are motivated by extrinsic rewards. Three hours of graduate credit is always offered to all participants. For the early career enrollees, course syllabi were developed to accommodate the first, second, and third year teacher. For the mentors, three hours of graduate credit are also offered with different syllabi reflecting the activities required for each of the types

of participation. Overall, the program is designed to provide college support till the early career professional obtains tenure and professional certification.

Food, Food, Food

One of the best ways to motivate people is to feed them well. To help set a relaxing, yet professional atmosphere, food and various beverages are provided at all monthly sessions. There is an emphasis on setting a professional atmosphere. At each session, participants eat a full meal on tablecloths using silver ware and plates. Musical presentations are usually provided. The program wants to show they are valued and respected. A formal year-end banquet is also hosted to celebrate the completion of the year with principals and superintendents invited.

Internet Communication

With the use of technology, help and/or professional development are available at any time in most any format. All Academy participants are connected together through the Internet in a secured interactive CANVAS site. Here, all members have access to each other on a daily basis and can assess all materials. Various training videos, materials, books, articles, professional websites, and teacher blogs are at their disposal. Discussion questions offered by the trainers often have elicited diverse discussions and offer a place to get a wide array of responses to situational problems encountered by the early career professional. Throughout the year, the ability to communicate with each other, even visually, at any time proved to be an excellent vehicle to provide timely information to the Academy participants.

Management Responsibilities

For any program to be successful, local district or management involvement is essential. For the Academy, the administration in the participating districts is also responsible for:

- Selecting qualified, on-site mentors matched by an appropriate combination of proximity, grade level, endorsement, attitude, and instructional proficiency.
- Providing compensation for both the early career teacher and mentor.
- Supporting the Academy topics with the professional development initiatives in the respective school district.
- Providing a process for reassigning a mentor if the first assignment is not effective (Easy Out Option).
- Respecting the confidentiality between the mentor and beginning teacher (Confidentiality Agreement).
- Providing administrative support for the program through providing professional development with other staff members regarding their roles in supporting the beginning teacher.
- Providing transportation to the training sights.
- Providing administrative attendance at the year-end banquet.
- Evaluating the program.

Confidentiality Agreement

To provide for confidentiality in the mentor/mentee relationship, confidentiality is a must. If the mentee sees the mentor as an evaluator, the relationship usually doesn't progress too far. The Academy uses a form that all early career teachers and their mentors must sign which states that no activity or interaction (unless illegal) can be used for formal performance assessment in contract renewal or dismissal.

No Fault, Easy-Out Policy

Sometimes relationships just don't take for a host of reasons. To provide a system of changing assigned relationships, the program uses a form that all participants must sign that outlines the process to change the early career / mentor assignment.

Collaborative Professional Development Plan

When individuals are given a collaborative assignment, relationships are forced to grow. For the Academy, in addition to the monthly timeline of activities, a collaborative plan that fosters individualized mentor/mentee classroom interaction is required each semester. Each plan outlines the objectives, planned activities, intended timeline, and verification documentation used in the collaborative activity.

Celebration Graduation Banquet

All successful endeavors need to highlight and reward the efforts of the participants. An Academy graduation banquet each year is held to celebrate the completion of the year and to bestow Certificates of Completion.

THE COMPLETED MENTOR PUZZLE

In summary, there are a number of components which, when put together to fit the employment situation, complete the mentoring puzzle. It has been found over the years that workable mentor programs would be well served to contain:

- A developmental philosophy which recognizes the mentee as one who has a set of skills and needs, and as a result of the program develops, extends, modifies, or refines these skills; orients the beginning teacher to the school system; and addresses and meets the perceived personal and professional needs of the teacher;
- A well defined set of rationales and goals;
- Continuous yearlong support over several years through various organized support systems;
- Various personnel to offer a vast array of materials, instruments, and activities to personalize each mentee's year;
- Mentors selected, trained, and focused using current knowledge available;
- Frequent support interaction and targeted topics to help the mentee in adjusting, expressing needs, and developing;

- An improvement system for areas on which the mentee could focus when a personal need surfaces;
- An improvement system for any identified weaknesses connected with the employee evaluation system; and
- Documentation of positive growth from the mentee's own perception of skills and knowledge as well as other qualitative and quantitative data.

Though the waters are usually rough for many beginners in any occupation, the swimming hole is becoming much calmer with well-constructed, long-term mentor programs. As more and more schools and institutions implement comprehensive programs, the puzzle is being completed with more and more swimmers successfully reaching their career shores.

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