

**Learning From
Mentors**

A Study Update



**College of Education
Michigan State
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The name of the National Center for Research on Teacher Learning (NCRTL) reflects its innovative vision and the focus of its research. Originally called the National Center for Research on Teacher Education, the NCRTL was founded at Michigan State University's College of Education in 1985 with a grant from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The center was renamed in 1991 to reflect its new emphasis on teacher learning and the center's desire to provide leadership in defining this new area of research.

In its first five years, the center examined various approaches to teacher education--including preservice, inservice, alternative route, and induction programs--to further knowledge and understanding of the purpose of teacher education, the character and quality of teacher education, and the role of teacher education in teacher learning. This longitudinal research, known as the Teacher Education and Learning to Teach (TELT) Study, forms the foundation for current NCRTL projects. The work of the NCRTL is guided by both internal and national advisory boards.

Learning from Mentors

Mentoring by experienced teachers is a critical topic in education today and a favored strategy in U.S. policy initiatives focused on teacher induction. In addition to creating new incentives and career opportunities for experienced teachers, assigning mentors to work with beginning teachers represents an improvement over the abrupt and unassisted entry into teaching that characterizes the experiences of many beginning teachers. To date, most research on mentoring has focused on programmatic, administrative, and role issues, with little attention to the practice of reform-oriented mentors, the connection of mentoring to novices' learning, and the influence of context on mentors' practices. To realize the potential of mentoring as a strategy to reform teaching, we need a much better understanding of what thoughtful mentors do, what novices learn as a result, and what conditions support or hinder mentored learning to teach. This is the agenda of the Learning from Mentors study.

The Project

Learning from Mentors, one of nine current studies at the National Center for Research on Teacher Learning, focuses on mentoring practices and the contributions of mentor teachers to novice teachers' learning. Led by NCRTL senior researcher Sharon Feiman-Nemser, the study examines mentoring in three contexts--the United States, the United Kingdom, and China--and asks what mentors do, what novices learn, and how mentors' practices and novices' learning are shaped by different institutional, social, and cultural contexts.

Data has been collected in six research sites: Oxford, England; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Lansing, Michigan; Holt, Michigan; and Shanghai, China. Types of data gathered include *logs of mentor/novice interactions over time* that give a general picture of mentoring in each site; *log/reflection interviews* which allow novices and mentors to elaborate on particular entries in their logs about their learning and their work together; and *observations of and interviews about novices' teaching, mentors' teaching, and formal interactions* that reveal how mentors and novices talk and think about teaching and learning to teach. In addition, videotapes of novices teaching and extended conversations about teaching between novices and mentors were recorded in every site.

Researchers are constructing descriptions of different forms of mentoring and analyzing the kinds of learning that these forms enable. They are also probing mentors' theories of mentoring and learning to teach as articulated and expressed in their work with novices.

A videotape of mentored learning to teach in China, England, and the United States will be produced to show how thoughtful mentors in different contexts define their responsibilities and work with novices. Case studies of mentoring are being prepared, as well as a collection of writings by mentors on mentoring.

Initial Findings and Implications

Initial findings and implications from the Learning from Mentors study center on what mentoring is like in different contexts and what reform-oriented mentoring entails. While analysis is not complete, several important issues about mentoring are becoming evident:

- **For mentoring to contribute to educational reform, it must be connected to a vision of good teaching.** Although mentor teacher programs are part of the current reform agenda in the U.S., mentor teachers do not automatically serve as a force for change. Their ability to do this depends on the kind of teaching they promote and the kinds of professional norms they encourage.
- **For mentoring to be effective, it must be informed by an understanding of learning to teach.** An understanding of learning to teach includes a conception of what novices need to learn and how that learning occurs over time in the context of teaching. Mentors need such an understanding to create appropriate learning opportunities for novices, especially if they want to help novices learn new kinds of teaching.
- **Mentoring is more than a social role; it is also a professional practice.** Mentoring is usually defined as a new social role for experienced teachers. But role definitions do not help mentors visualize what they are supposed to do. More helpful are clear statements of purpose linked to descriptions of specific mentoring practices in context.
- **Mentors need time to mentor and opportunities to learn to mentor.** While the time available for mentoring affects the quality of mentoring, mentors still need opportunities to develop their practice as mentors, especially if they are going to serve as agents of change. In particular, mentor teachers need opportunities to (1) critically examine their beliefs about teaching and learning to teach, (2) connect their practice as mentors to novices' learning, and (3) discuss dilemmas and problems that arise in the course of helping novices learn to teach. These opportunities can contribute to a "culture of mentoring" in which all teachers work together to improve their teaching.

The professional culture of the school and broader national policies and values affect what mentors do and what novices learn. Cross-cultural comparisons reveal how multiple contexts shape what mentors do and what novices learn. For example, the idea that mentors should help novices "find their own style" is more prevalent in the U.S. and England than it is in China, while the idea that mentors are experts is more acceptable in China than in the U.S. and Britain. In their interactions with novices, Chinese mentors tend to focus more on pedagogy and less on content because the national curriculum determines what teachers should teach. By contrast, reform-oriented mentors in the U.S. spend considerable time helping novices learn to develop curriculum. These findings suggest that in introducing or changing programs of mentoring we need to take into account broader contexts.

Conclusion

The promise of mentoring goes beyond helping novices survive their first year of teaching. Teacher mentoring can also be a way of promoting new approaches to teaching and learning and new forms of teacher collaboration across the learning to teach continuum. If mentoring is going to function as a strategy for reforming teaching and teacher education, it must be linked to a vision of good teaching and guided by an understanding of how novices learn such teaching.

Materials Available

The NCRTL has produced more than 100 research reports, issue papers, technical series, craft papers, videotapes, and special reports on contemporary issues in teacher education. For more information about the NCRTL, to receive a publications list, or to be placed on our mailing list, please contact:

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