MENTORING ASSISTANCE RECEIVED

Prepared for the O-QAT Title-II
Initiative 3.1 Continuing Licensure
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By

Laurel Cuthbertson
Mark D. Schalock
Teaching Research Division
Western Oregon University
Questions

One set of TEP-2 research questions focuses on the professional development of beginning teachers in Oregon’s standards-based schools, and what contributes in what ways to it. Research Brief #4 describes the types and amount of professional development assistance TEP-2 teacher participants received during their first year of teaching. Specifically, Research Brief #4 is concerned with helping define the study’s sub question, “What assistance do early career teachers receive in their development as practicing professionals?” Research Brief #4 further probes,

1. What types of mentoring relationships have these teachers experienced?
2. How much mentorship assistance have these teachers experienced?
3. Does the type and amount of mentoring support received vary for
   a. teachers assigned to “benchmark” grades (3 and 5) in which state examinations are administered annually?, and
   b. a teacher’s perceived level of classroom demand?

Data Collection Sources/Methods

Measures. Descriptive information on types and amounts of professional development assistance received have been collected through a mix of data collection methods and sources. These include focus groups held in the Fall and Winter following the first year of teaching; descriptions of the support they received on an open-ended portion of a self assessment instrument; and a classroom demographics form administered as part of a suite of surveys administered annually.

Sample. Seventy-seven first year teachers.

Key Findings

Types and amounts of mentoring received. A wide variety of mentoring assistance and relationships were described by study participants through the variety of measures used. These were classified into two main types: formal, to describe assigned individuals and/or mentor programs; and informal, which includes informally adopted mentors and participation on teaching teams. Amounts of mentoring assistance received are classified as “substantial” and “limited.”

Responses of focus group participants most frequently described either a formal or informal mentorship relationship/support from a colleague, or team/grade level relationships and/or support.

Responses to the self assessment revealed,
- Forty-one teachers (53%) reported receiving substantial formal or informal mentoring;
- Thirty-three teachers (42%) reported receiving limited formal or informal mentoring support; and
- Two teachers (3%) reported having no mentor relationship or support.

Benchmark grade assignments and types and amounts of mentoring received: Some items noted were,
- More than half of TEP-2 teachers taught at benchmark grades, and
- Teachers working at non-benchmark grades received more substantial mentoring assistance than teachers working at benchmark grades.

Classroom demand and types and amounts of mentoring received. As part of a suite of surveys teachers reported classroom demand ratings accounting for several variables on a six-point scale (see Research Brief 3 for details). Using these self report ratings
- Teachers receiving substantial mentoring assistance had mean classrooms demand ratings of 3.69.
- Teachers receiving limited mentoring assistance had mean classroom demand ratings of 3.92.
Implications for CONTINUING Licensure

- Mentorship and other forms of professional support for beginning elementary teachers varies greatly from school to school in Oregon and, as a consequence, teachers who must demonstrate CTL proficiencies within 6 years of receiving their initial license to teach are likely to have unequal opportunities to meet them.
- Development toward the proficiencies to be demonstrated for continuing licensure would probably be better served if all beginning teachers in Oregon had access to and received helpful support from a well conceived and consistently supported professional development support system.

Implications for INITIAL Licensure

- Beginning teachers need to understand that mentoring and other forms of support for the professional development of early career teachers in Oregon is not consistent in type or amount across schools and districts.
- Beginning teachers need to be prepared to the point of being able to function effectively in Oregon’s schools with whatever type or amount of professional development support they receive.
Background

This is the fourth in a series of briefs describing the work being conducted and reported through the TEP-2 Project (The Longitudinal Effects of Teacher Preparation on the Practice and Beliefs of New Teachers and the Learning of Their Students). The central objective of the project, as more fully described in Research Brief #1, is to determine whether exposure to selected emphases within teacher preparation makes a difference in the practice, beliefs and thinking of early career elementary school teachers and the learning of their students in Oregon’s standards-based schools.

Within this broad area of inquiry one set of questions focuses on professional development of these beginning teachers, and what contributes to their further development as professional educators (McConney & Schalock, 1998).

Research tells us that support for new teachers is essential in promoting success and development in the teaching profession. A new teacher requires induction into the school and community contexts in which they work, and induction to the profession at large. Further, research also suggests attrition rates of teachers can be reduced through professional support systems and supportive colleagues. A large percentage of teachers leave the profession within their first 5 years, and this represents a loss of human resources our schools increasingly need.

Important also, to the scope of the present study, is the experience a new teacher has once he or she leaves a preparation program and enters the reality of a classroom and school context. In reviewing major trends garnered from related research the Oregon Education Association describes how new teachers feel isolated in their classrooms, having come from preparation programs where training is often collaborative and group oriented in nature. Once in a school setting that atmosphere typically changes to one of day-long isolation, where a beginning teacher has to rely on his or her own resources. As one TEP-2 teacher put it, “This is a hard profession to get perspective in, because you are working in relative isolation every day.”

We believe the type and amount of mentoring assistance first year teachers receive has much to do with the effectiveness of their teaching, vs mere survival, during their beginning years, and to their ongoing development as continuing, growing, professionals.

In Oregon, formal mentor programs and assignments for early career teachers vary widely by district and school. Types and amounts of assistance also vary. Some district or school based programs provide assistance for beginning teachers in the form of professional development activities, while others assign a trained mentor to several beginning teachers in a school or across schools. Still others will assign an experienced on-site classroom teacher to provide one-on-one mentorship to a beginning teacher.

TEP-2 beginning teachers’ experiences show, however, that more often than not support for beginning teachers in Oregon’s schools occurs on an informal basis, with a first or second year teacher finding help and professional camaraderie among grade level teams, or from “a teacher next door.” Unless an early career teacher in Oregon can afford the luxury of picking and choosing the school or district in which they will teach, the type and amount of mentoring they are likely to receive is uncertain.

Research Questions

Among the primary questions driving the TEP-2 project are those focusing on the longitudinal aspects of change and development. Part of the challenge in describing such change is sorting the variety of experiences and influences which help shape development, which are unique to each teacher and the context in which they work. Within this context, however, a major source of influence can be the professional assistance they receive as beginning teachers, and that is the focus of this brief.

Specifically, here we are concerned with “What assistance do early career teachers receive in their development as practicing professionals?” Looking at these experiences in relation to classroom demand and grade level assignments that are particularly burdensome adds to the picture of what
Data Collection Sources/Methods

A mixture of methods have been used to describe types and amount of mentoring and school/district support which the 1st year elementary teachers studied received during their first year of teaching. The data presented here have been collected from two cohorts of first year teachers, with cohort one (consisting of 68 teachers) beginning their first year of teaching in the 1999-2000 school year, and another (consisting of 9 teachers) beginning their first year of teaching in the 2000-2001 school year (for added details about the sample of teachers studied see TEP-2 Research Brief #2).

During their first year of teaching, participants were asked to comment on the types and levels of mentoring assistance they received, or was available to them, through open-ended questions on a self assessment instrument. This instrument was administered in February and March of 2000 for the first cohort of teachers, and in February, 2001 for the second.

Also during their first year of teaching participants were asked to rate the level of their classrooms’ overall demand as a context in which to teach. This rating was part of a classroom demographics form. This instrument was administered in December, 1999 for the first cohort of teachers, and in December, 2000 for the second cohort.

Following their first year of teaching, teachers attended focus groups during which they were asked to reflect on the kinds of support and mentoring relationships they experienced during their first year of teaching. Focus group meetings occurred in December, 2000 for the first cohort of teachers, and November, 2001 for the second cohort.

These multiple data sources provide a triangulated picture of the professional assistance received by the teachers studied within the project.

Results

Types and Amounts of Mentoring

A variety of mentoring relationships were described by study participants, as well as other forms of emotional and instructional support received. For purposes of this brief, we focus first on the variety of supports received.

Types of mentoring and other forms of assistance received. Focus groups held with both cohorts of beginning teachers were asked to respond to the following question, “What emotional and instructional supports have you received as a beginning teacher? Were there any formal supports or mentoring relationships established?” Responses revealed a wide range of mentor relationships experienced by these first year teachers. They included formal district mentoring programs; team or grade level planning groups; informal mentors or “coaches;” principals; opportunities to observe experienced teachers’ classrooms; life partners and parents who were also teachers; to little or no mentoring experience. These are summarized in Table 1. Entries are ordered in frequency of reference.

Table 1. Types of emotional and instructional support received during the first year of teaching

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<thead>
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<tr>
<td>✅ Mentor / support from a colleague</td>
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<tr>
<td>✅ (formal or informal)</td>
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<td>✅ Team or grade level meetings and relationships</td>
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<td>✅ Supportive principal</td>
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<tr>
<td>✅ Observation of other teachers’ classrooms, graduate courses, and training and professional development activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>✅ Support and assistance from parents of students</td>
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<tr>
<td>✅ Classroom aide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✅ Emotional support from spouse, family, and friends</td>
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<tr>
<td>✅ Continued assistance from former teacher preparation program professors</td>
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Comments shown in Box 1 add detail to these categorical listings.
Box 1.

“I didn’t have a mentor. I only heard about mentors from here. I did talk to teachers who were all [same grade] teachers, and so we would all meet and help each other, and it is still that way this year.”

“Last year the mentor program was great, and I am in the same district and same program. This year, the formal support my district gives us is money to spend on graduate level classes, which I think is a very real, tangible way to say that we want you to take more classes and stay certified. It’s not just lip service—it’s a decent amount of money over 3 years to spend. So, I could get my continued license if I get it in that space of 3 years.. That is really cool.”

“My mentor was wonderful and she is a really good teacher, so I sought her out in the beginning. We had a connection. Then she said, ‘well, we can apply for this official mentor program.’ I said, ‘let’s do it!’ She got paid, and she took me out to lunch and dinner with some of the money. She is very supportive and helpful.”

“I had a mentor I could visit and ask for advice. She was only a second year teacher, so she was familiar with the experiences I was now having. This was good in the case she could relate, but also bad because she was still figuring out her own work load.”

“My principal has always been extremely supportive…it’s a high needs school, and they are doing the job of five people—the counselor and her. They do a wonderful job. I have always felt very supported by my principal and I am grateful for that. I think mentors should be required.”

Ten teachers identified areas for which they experienced a lack of support, including having no materials, little to no support from their principal, and teams or mentors that were not helpful or created stress.

A recurring response from focus group participants was the desire for more mentoring assistance, and more support from their principal. A substantial group of participants also felt they needed support or assistance around specific aspects of their work, for example, behavior management and state benchmarked standards for student learning. A number of participants also wished for time during the school day for planning, preparation, and professional development.

Box 2 contains a few responses around the kind of support and assistance that would be useful to beginning teachers.

Box 2.

“…Someone who is working with first year teachers who doesn’t have a million other jobs ahead of working with you. It should be someone who indoctrinates first and second year teachers and gets them going, because that is why we drop out. That is why we come home at night and say, ‘I never want to do this again.’”

“It would be nice if we had a mentor program at my school…there are things you’re expected to know, and all of a sudden there comes a time when they need to be done, and I was at a point where I had no idea.”

“Everyday I feel like I am Mr. Curriculum at 3:00, because I am planning the next day and I have to figure it out…i do get some things that are our district program, but no coaching in it—no one to show you how to implement it.”

Amount of mentoring assistance. Seventy-six (76) first year teachers responded to the following open-ended question on a self assessment instrument: “Were you assigned a mentor when you began your duties at your school, and if not, who do you go to for help, advice, direction, etc.?” A content analysis classified responses into a) formal (an assigned individual or support group) or b) informal (an unassigned “professional friend” or a “teaching team”), c) substantial or “lots”, d) limited, and e) no formal or informal mentoring received. On the basis of these data it was found that

- 31 of the 76 first year teachers responding were formally assigned a mentor by their school or district. Of these 31 teachers, 20 reported receiving a good amount of assistance from their mentor, and spoke of the experience in a positive manner. Eleven (11) of the 31 teachers reported receiving a limited amount of assistance from their formally assigned mentor, with two of the teachers reporting some difference between the philosophy of the mentor and their own. One teacher reported the assigned mentor was never available throughout the entire 1st year of teaching.

- 43 teachers reported that although they were not formally assigned mentors, they received assistance from grade level or planning team members, or from another experienced teacher who had taken them “under wing”, or from someone whom they had sought out for advice. Of these 43 teachers, 21 reported receiving substantial help, generally describing
the informal assistance they received in a useful, positive way. Twenty-two (22) of the 43 reported receiving a limited amount of help from other teachers, and many of these had to seek the assistance received on their own initiative. One teacher reported to have received no mentoring assistance during the first year of teaching.

Figure 1 shows percentages of types and amounts of mentoring into 3 collapsed groups: teachers receiving substantial or “lots” of formal or informal mentoring, those receiving limited mentoring assistance, and those reportedly receiving no mentoring assistance. Seen in this way, 53% of TEP-2 teachers in their first year reported having experienced considerable formal or informal assistance. A sizeable 45%, however, reported receiving a limited amount of mentorship assistance during their first year teaching assignment. Figure 2 provides a more detailed picture of the type and amount of mentoring received.

![Figure 1.](image1)

**Figure 1.**

Percentage of 1st Year Teachers Studied Receiving Differing Levels of Mentoring

![Figure 2.](image2)

**Figure 2.**

Type and Amount of Mentoring Received Among TEP-II First Year Teachers Studied

**Variation in Type and Amount of Mentoring by Classroom Demand**

**Type and amount of mentoring for benchmark vs. non-benchmark grades.** A cross-tabulation of these data for teachers working at benchmark grades vs non-benchmark grades is shown in Table 2.

| Mentoring Received by Beginning Teachers In Benchmark vs Non-Benchmark Grades |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------|
|                  | Lots of Formal | Limited Formal | Lots of Informal | Limited Informal |
| Benchmark Grade  |                 |                 |                 |                 |         |
| No               | 10              | 5               | 12              | 7               | 34      |
| Yes              | 9               | 8               | 9               | 12              | 38      |
| Total            | 19              | 13              | 21              | 19              | 72*     |

From these data it will be seen that

- More first year teachers taught at benchmark grades than did not.

- First year teachers assigned to benchmark grades received less formal and informal mentoring assistance than teachers assigned to non-benchmark grades.

**Type and amount of mentoring for teachers in high and low demand classrooms.** On the classroom demographics instrument, teachers were asked to rate the overall level of demand of their classroom on a scale from “1” = low demand to “6” = high demand (See Research Brief #3). In a cross tabulation of type and amount of mentoring received (as reported on the self assessment instrument referred to above) against the classroom demand rating provided by teachers, it can be seen from Figure 3 that the level of demand reported decreased with the amount of mentoring received. One interpretation of these findings is that a mentoring experience had a desired effect though not as clearly as would be expected (little difference occurred in demand rating for teachers receiving little and a lot of mentoring).

* Total numbers may vary slightly across data sources as some participants’ data sets are incomplete.
Summary

This Research Brief follows Briefs 1, 2, and 3 in describing the research questions addressed through the TEP-2 project, the methods of data collection used, and findings for first year teacher assignments, conditions of work, and classroom/school contexts within which they work. This is the first brief, however, to look into some of the factors that influence development and practice of the 1st year teachers studied.

The types of mentoring experience these teachers received varied widely, with some teachers receiving markedly more and markedly different kinds of mentoring than others. In general terms, 41 teachers reported receiving substantial mentoring assistance, while 33 reported receiving limited assistance. As a final note, we leave our participant teachers to describe the role and promise of mentoring as a vehicle for the continuing professional development of beginning teachers:

- What has contributed most to my improvements? I think talking with other teachers, like workshops or friends, and my mentor have contributed most to my improvements. If you get a good mentor who is like you, it is wonderful. If you don’t have a mentor or you get one who is not like you, then I think it would be horrible. But, my mentor is just wonderful and that is the one thing I think that has really helped.

References
