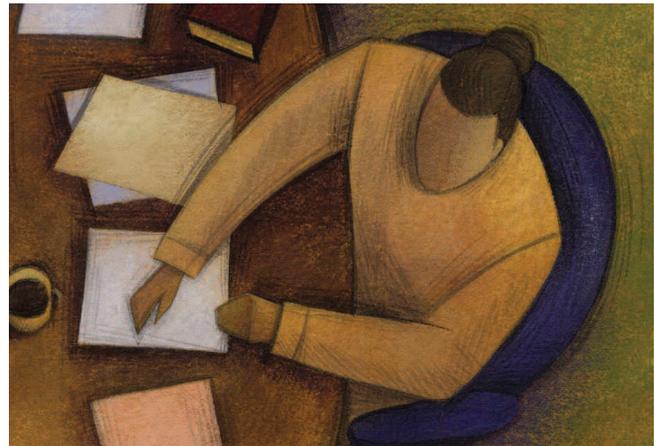
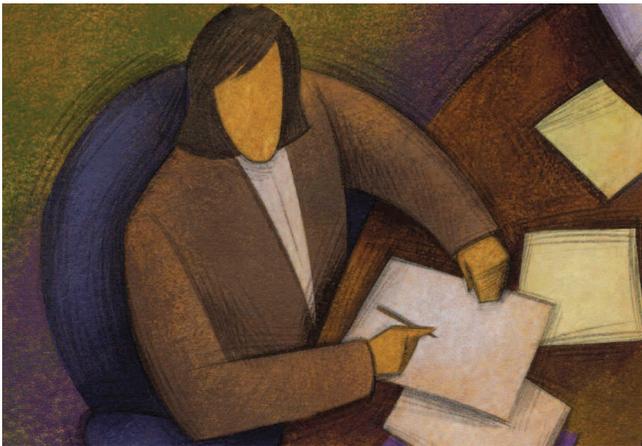


Beyond Mentoring:

INFLUENCING THE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE AND CAREERS OF EXPERIENCED TEACHERS

Full-release mentoring programs, such as the New Teacher Center Induction Model, are giving veteran teachers valuable experience in collaboration and a broader perspective on the teaching profession, the authors report. The schools need to take advantage of that experience when these veterans return from their assignments.

BY SUSAN HANSON AND ELLEN MOIR



TEACHER induction programs have proliferated over the past decade as part of a drive to increase teacher retention, to support new teachers, and to improve student achievement. Formal mentoring programs for novice teachers often play a role in these efforts, and they have received considerable attention. Meanwhile, there has been little examination of the impact of formal mentoring programs on the mid-career teachers who work as teacher mentors. Yet hundreds of experienced, talented teachers are being temporarily released from classroom teaching to serve as mentors to new teachers.

Traditional mentoring programs involve a part-time mentoring assignment and don't offer much in the way of training for mentors. Thus they often focus on emotional support, situational adjustment, and acculturat-

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ing new teachers to the norms of the school and district.¹ In "full-release" mentoring programs, accomplished teachers leave classroom teaching with the expectation that they will return when their mentorship is completed, usually following a fixed two- to three-year term. These full-release programs may work toward a larger vision that seeks to transform classroom practice by developing mentors who can work with new teachers to challenge the status quo and transform school cultures to promote high-quality classroom practice.² While the primary purpose of full-release mentoring programs remains promoting the growth of the new teachers, they clearly have great potential for developing the mentors' skills, professional practices, and careers.

Until recently, the full-release model of mentoring had not existed long enough to track mentors' careers after they finished their mentoring assignment. The Santa Cruz New Teacher Project (SCNTP), begun in 1988 as the pilot program of what is now known as the New Teacher Center Induction Model, releases classroom teachers to be full-time mentors to novice teachers for three years. Over 150 experienced teachers working in the three districts that are part of the SCNTP

have completed their mentorships since the program's inception, giving us one of the largest datasets on former, full-release mentors in the U.S. and allowing us to look for patterns in the post-mentoring experience of these mid-career teachers.

Our research questions included, What proportion of full-release mentors return to classroom teaching after their mentorships end? How do former mentors apply the skills and knowledge they gained as mentors once they return to their schools? What mentoring skills connect to educational leadership in schools?

We used a survey and personal interviews to investigate these questions. Fifty of 72 former mentors who exited the SCNTP between 1994 and 2004 returned the survey. We then interviewed 18 of the respondents to learn in more depth how they applied the knowledge and skills they learned as mentors to their current work in schools.³

CAREER PATHS OF FORMER MENTORS

Full-release mentoring programs draw successful mid-career teachers away from classrooms, with the inherent risk that they will decide not to return to classroom teaching, thus eliminating the opportunity for future students to benefit directly from their expertise. This might be enough for some districts, particularly those struggling to retain staff members, to decide that an investment in full-release mentoring programs would be too risky. We were eager to learn what proportion of full-release mentors from SCNTP returned to classroom teaching after their stint as mentors in support of novice teachers.

In our sample of 50 former mentors, just over 33% were classroom teachers in 2005. This figure was disappointing at first, but a deeper investigation of the population showed that almost half of the mentors had moved on to leadership positions as support teachers or administrators in their local schools. And perhaps more significant, 91% of the 50 former mentors who had finished mentoring between 1994 and 2000 were still working for school districts or teacher training programs in 2005.

The 50 mentors worked in the following positions:

Position After Mentoring	
Position	Percentage
Classroom teacher	34
Support teacher	24
Principal/assistant principal	18
College professor	6
Other (e.g., consulting)	18

In follow-up discussions, many of the veteran mentors told us that they had fully expected to return to classroom teaching until other opportunities arose that took their careers in unanticipated directions. Some found themselves perceived by employers as having the skills and experience that made them attractive candidates for leadership positions.⁴ Others explained that mentoring opened their eyes to new career possibilities. Here are a few snippets taken from the interviews:

I was pretty set on returning to the classroom and feeling really excited about it because I had been in so many classrooms and had learned so much through observing and talking with teachers and having time to read and study. I was ready to go back, but this other opportunity opened up, and I saw it as a way to have a bigger impact in our district, at the district level. — *District secondary literacy facilitator*

I didn't have any intention of becoming a principal, to be honest with you. I just knew that I love working with new teachers. I had no intention of leaving the classroom, I loved being a teacher. Now I'm getting used to the idea that I'm just helping in a different way. — *Elementary principal*

The ongoing weekly professional development sessions built a foundation for comprehensive competence and confidence as a leader. Over time, this exceptional training equipped me to lead not only as a coach/mentor, but to consider leading a school. — *Elementary principal*

Roughly a third of the mentors did stay with their original plan to apply to their own classroom teaching what they had learned mentoring novice teachers. A classroom teacher in his fifties explained how mentoring helped to keep him in the classroom:

Those three years gave me rejuvenation. I would have had trouble finishing out a career that may now last another eight years if I hadn't taken that three years. I refer to it as professional development. You know, it's hard, 17 years without a break, not to be on the verge of trying to seek out maybe different kinds of work. I might have changed careers, or become kind of the older, embittered, isolated, you know, dinosaur on staff. — *Secondary teacher*

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE MENTORING EXPERIENCE TO ONGOING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

The few studies that have examined the benefits of mentoring for mid-career teachers have done so in the process of looking for secondary, positive effects as part of a larger study.⁵ Mid-career teachers have reported feeling replenished, having a renewed passion for teaching as a result of mentoring. But understanding how men-

tors apply the skills and knowledge they gained as mentors in their ongoing careers can help educators learn how to get the most out of the mentoring experience and provide long-term benefits to schools and school districts.

In our research, we have identified four broad areas in which mentoring can make a significant contribution to the ongoing professional practice of experienced teachers and the school districts in which they work. We present them below, along with some of our survey results and selected comments from the veteran mentors.

- *Mentoring broadens teachers' views of themselves and the teaching profession.* Isolation has been one of the defining features of the lives of classroom teachers. Experienced teachers in many schools do their jobs essentially on their own, behind the closed doors of their classrooms. In contrast, teachers who assume a mentoring role are assigned to multiple classrooms and work in multiple schools. Both the assignment of working in new schools and the experience of being a teacher mentor help experienced teachers shift their thinking from being a teacher in a single classroom to being an educator with a systemic perspective. Mentoring draws classroom teachers out of their isolation and encourages talented teachers to see themselves as part of a teaching profession within a broad community of educators. This widened perspective endures beyond the mentoring experience and can ultimately strengthen the profession of teaching. As one of the mentors we surveyed put it:

The experience of advising across so many sites and classrooms, and with so many people, has really supported an understanding of educational climate and cultural variables. It reinforced my deep belief that people can grow and change given support. — *District program coordinator*

Regardless of their positions following mentoring, the mid-career teachers we talked with reported that mentoring was a transformative experience that enhanced their professional practices, increased their understanding of educational communities, and enabled them to expand their vision of the teaching profession.

- *Mentoring deepens teachers' understanding of teaching and learning.* Fully 94% of the veteran mentors agreed that the experience of being a mentor deepened their understanding of teaching and learning.⁶ These exemplary mid-career teachers gained new insight into teaching, and they looked forward to trying new teaching techniques and incorporating reflection and collaboration into their work. Eighty-two percent of those working as classroom teachers also agreed that the experience of being a mentor expanded their repertoire of teach-

ing methods and increased their ability to analyze student work, use student assessments to guide instruction, and differentiate instruction for students with diverse needs.⁷ Here are some comments on the value of the improved teaching skills the veteran mentors learned, whatever their subsequent positions:

I learned skills that helped me know how to improve teaching and learning, such as talking about equity issues in the context of analysis of student work rather than as a topic by itself. — *Middle school teacher*

* * *

I acquired tools and learned skills that I continue to share and use in my current work as a district literacy facilitator — collecting classroom observation data, the analysis of student work, the language of cognitive coaching. These are tools I will use for the rest of my professional life. — *District secondary literacy facilitator*

Kathy, a new high school vice principal, provided a glimpse into how a veteran mentor who found herself in a position of leadership worked to use what she learned from the New Teacher Project to help deepen other teachers' understanding of teaching and learning. Having been recruited for the position of vice principal, Kathy drew on her mentoring experience to establish a group she called the Teacher Leadership Collaborative. She began with four key teachers. Together they read articles, discussed how they related to issues at their school, and worked together. By midyear, the group had grown by word of mouth to 14 teachers. Kathy explained:

It's similar to a Friday Forum. I just replicated that learning community. It was the first time in the school that I thought, "This is professionalism at its best." We had people who previously wouldn't speak to one another, and now they are starting to do some advocacy pieces with each other!

One of Kathy's responsibilities as a vice principal was teacher evaluation, and she brought to this task an expanded understanding of how to make the experience meaningful for teachers. Kathy used the Standards for the Teaching Profession continuum, which as a mentor she had used to start conversations with new and struggling teachers about their performance and to promote meaningful reflection to improve teaching.

I look at teacher evaluation as a way to improve practice. I ask them a lot of questions about what they want me to look for and how they're going to align it with the goals. I ask for that kind of information, and it's not just me coming in and judging them. It's very different.

Being a mentor was pivotal to Kathy's career. The experience, she told us, "changed my perception of myself from a classroom teacher who is really comfortable with kids to someone who can work with adults and make changes." As a mentor and coach, she learned firsthand how to provide teacher support focused on improving teaching practices.

What I learned from the New Teacher Project's version of coaching is that it's not about judgment. It's about taking data and then talking about the practice, and that's huge. You have to make sure you're doing the real work of advising. It's about talking and improving your practice.

Kathy's passion for supporting teachers and for making sure they knew they had the support of the administration infiltrated many aspects of her job as a high school administrator. Like the other administrators who responded to our survey, Kathy placed a high priority on supporting new teacher development. For example, she worked with the administration to budget for every new teacher to take a full day to visit other teachers' classrooms. Just as she had done as a mentor, Kathy provided guidance to the new teachers before their observational visits:

I say, "When you're in Susan's room, notice this and this." Then I have them talk to me about it. I want them to get used to learning from one another and to talk about not just what they're teaching, but how they're teaching.

Kathy also used every opportunity to encourage teachers to reflect on their instructional practices and to collaborate to improve their teaching.

Many veteran mentors emphasized that two specific skills they used regularly as mentors — reflection and collaboration — were integral to their deepened understanding of teaching and learning. Ninety percent of the veteran mentors reported that, since their mentoring experience, they have become more reflective about their own practice, and 90% reported that in their current roles they continue to encourage teachers to participate in reflective conversations about teaching. Kathy summed up:

Helping new teachers make their yearly goals and reflect on their practice motivated me to do the same. Before my experience as a New Teacher Project advisor, my teaching was very "in the moment." Planning and reflecting are a way of life now.

- *Mentoring cultivates leadership development.* In a review of research on leadership in schools, Kenneth

Leithwood and his colleagues stressed, "Leadership not only matters: it is second only to teaching among school-related factors in its impact on student learning."⁸ Experienced teachers participating in full-release mentor programs have the potential to influence broad classroom practice more than ever before. Not only can they affect larger numbers of students through their work with new teachers, but they can also extend their influence by forging new relationships with site administrators, program leaders, and fellow mentors. Developing mentors as educational leaders who can positively influence school cultures is an explicit goal of the New Teacher Center. Experienced teachers who become mentors learn to communicate effectively with administrators, to articulate a vision of best practices in all their work, and to understand the power of their role.

Almost half of the 50 former mentors in our sample were working in leadership positions in 2005. Eleven of the former mentors had become administrators, and they agreed unanimously that their experience as mentors strongly contributed to their ability to 1) talk with teachers about their teaching, 2) work to create a learning environment, 3) act as a change agent at school, and 4) become a school leader more quickly. Here are a few examples of how they have applied their mentoring skills to support new leadership responsibilities:

Instead of going back into the classroom, which was an option, I chose to stay in this leadership role so that I could continue influencing the collaboration and the coaching that is happening. What I felt I could bring to it was the analysis of student work, which I felt was so powerful in the project, and then the whole collegial coaching model.
— *Bilingual resource teacher*

Facilitating meetings was a huge piece that I learned. I used a lot of the norms for meetings, and it really has transformed the culture at this school in terms of what teachers do and expect from meetings here. — *High school vice principal*

I learned how to work with administrators — how we structure environments for good teacher growth at the school or district. I learned to fight for beginning teacher support and bring the best teachers to the district. — *College professor*

Janet, a first-year principal, is a good example of a mentor in a school leadership position applying her mentoring skills to positively influence others and to build strong school communities. Janet felt that the mentoring experience supported her career trajectory from classroom teacher to visionary school leader in just a few years. As an elementary school principal, she saw her primary role as supporting teachers "so they can do a better job." This translated into helping to im-

prove student achievement by building relationships, encouraging teacher leadership, and focusing on instruction — three essential components of the New Teacher Center’s mentoring program.

Janet recalled that a big part of learning to lead as a mentor was “to really think about myself and what I bring to the table and why I was chosen as an advisor.” She took a similar look at the matter of empowering the teachers in her school and found that the techniques she had used to mentor new teachers transferred well to working with her staff. Reflecting upon how the mentoring experience made her a stronger leader, Janet explained:

Now as a leader I’m doing the same things. I think it’s all tied into the relationship building, because I see people, and they all have something to bring. A good leader is going to find a way to bring that out of them, and that’s going to affect student achievement.

Janet’s mentoring experience broadened her understanding of the importance of cultivating relationships and supporting teachers as they begin to see themselves as leaders. Both activities work to build momentum for improved teaching and learning.

- *Mentoring supports communities of practice.* Teachers who take time away from classroom teaching to serve as mentors in an intensive induction program for new and struggling teachers are likely to return to school positions with an increased interest in working in a professional learning environment. Two former mentors commented on the value of certain aspects of the culture they had experienced:

The professional development staff meetings were really a model for me, as far as trying to bring back into the schools the feeling of being honored as a professional, the feeling of being able to study something, discuss it with your peers, and maybe implement some tiny change in your practice. On Fridays, those three-hour staff development meetings were unbelievable because they don’t usually happen at schools. — *Bilingual resource teacher*

My mentoring made me much more aware of the importance of intentional and collaborative reflection on practice. We’ve made it a priority to build in more time for this at my sites. — *District program administrator*

Another key element of the mentoring experience that veteran mentors want to sustain in their own workplaces is collaboration. As mentors, these veteran teachers had many structured opportunities to discuss practice and to form professional partnerships. When they returned to their schools, they naturally advocated for

structured time that would allow the same kind of collaboration.

Some former mentors with whom we spoke were able to successfully put into practice their vision of an authentic, collaborative community of practice akin to what they had experienced as mentors; others found it very challenging. The roles that mentors assume after mentoring, as well as their school contexts, influence their ability to use the skills and perspectives they gained as mentors. Site administrators reported satisfaction when they succeeded in supporting the creation of a professional learning community in which both experienced and new teachers could work together. One administrator explained, “For us as advisors, to have the time to talk was critical to our success, and now I believe it’s critical for my success as a leader at my school.”

Classroom teachers had more limited opportunities to put into practice the coaching and support strategies that they had learned as mentors. They noted that national and state policy changes had taken place while they were full-time mentors, and they pointed out that these changes constrained curricula, teaching styles, and assessment schedules and left little room for autonomy and initiative on the part of teachers. Some were frustrated that they could not find the time to introduce to the teachers at their schools the kinds of coaching and reflective processes that they had come to value as mentors. Moreover, the limited time available to work with other teachers was often consumed by agendas that did not leave room for in-depth conversations about instruction.

I came away from the SCNTP with so much more knowledge, understanding, and awareness of the huge job we face as teachers. In a way it was almost crippling to know so much and have too little time to actually put it into action. It nags at me. The reality of full-time teaching is that there is often no time to do basic prep for the next day, much less creative, differentiated, assessment-guided, always standards-based, and engaging lessons. — *Elementary teacher*

I think I had much more responsibility and esteem and leadership when I was at the project than I’ve had since I left the project. School has been less intellectually stimulating, less exciting, less cutting-edge, less hopeful. The New Teacher Project was a very energizing place to work, and I’m not finding that to be the case now, and I miss that. — *Reading intervention and literacy coach*

Like these teachers, some administrators also noted that they felt constrained by a system that would not let them do what they thought was in the best interests of student learning. One frustrated administrator explained, “District-mandated pacing guides and time-

liness of data results impede support for teachers to analyze student work and use data for instruction.” Former mentors want to develop professional learning communities that support teachers as they try to get used to talking about “not just what they’re teaching, but how they’re teaching.”

The veteran mentors remain strongly committed to integrating best professional practices into their new roles, and they want to influence the school organizations in which they work. As teachers, leaders, and colleagues, they are eager to construct and participate in a school culture of professional practice that includes authentic collaboration and inquiry directed toward improving professional practice.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of our research provide clear evidence that mentoring has powerful implications for practice far beyond the benefits of the mentoring relationship itself. Former mentors carry with them new knowledge, skills, and values that can positively influence students, other teachers, school organizations, and the teaching profession. Upon returning to work as teachers, leaders, and colleagues, former mentors have played leading roles in cultural shifts in their schools that encourage distributed leadership and the development of adult learning communities focused on reflective conversations about teaching and learning.

The extent of the influence of the mentoring experience on the teachers who serve as mentors depends, of course, on the program in which they participated. Districts that adopt a full-release model of mentoring and provide a serious training component stand to exert greater influence on the professional lives of mid-career teachers. As Betty Achinstein and Steven Athanases note, “Mentors are not born, but developed through conscious, deliberate, ongoing learning.”⁹ The New Teacher Center Induction Model features a set of guiding principles and a philosophy that drive the program and mentor development. By highlighting collaboration, leadership, inquiry, formative assessment, and communities of practice in the training, the program enables mentors to develop new knowledge, values, and habits of mind. Teachers who participate in the New Teacher Center Induction Model as either novice teachers or mentors learn to see adult learning as central to their professional practice.

The importance of building a teaching profession in which there are stages of learning that continue throughout a career has received broad recognition. A 2005 report on teacher induction from the National Com-

mission on Teaching and America’s Future notes:

The learning of intern or novice teachers should be part of a seamless continuum in which content knowledge and pedagogical skills move in tandem through teaching, observation, dialogue, and reflection. This requires the involvement of many players and stakeholders: teacher preparation programs, hiring districts, certification boards, schools, and professional organizations.¹⁰

Whatever path mid-career teachers take following their time as mentors, they carry with them a new set of beliefs and values that can ultimately improve school organizations and positively influence students, other teachers, and the teaching profession. Administrators should consider the benefits of restructuring schools to capitalize on the valuable experience that these veteran mentors have to offer. Creating an organizational structure that enables mid-career teachers to leave classroom teaching for two to three years to work with novice teachers is the first step, but the ultimate benefit to school districts will come when these teacher leaders return. Will the districts be ready to take advantage of their valuable experience?

1. Jian Wang and Sandra J. Odell, “Mentors Learning to Teach According to Standards-Based Reform: A Critical Review,” *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 72, 2002, pp. 481-546.

2. Janet Gless, “Transformational Mentoring,” in Betty Achinstein and Steven Z. Athanases, eds., *Mentors in the Making* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006), pp. 165-76.

3. Personal interviews were conducted with eight site-based administrators, four resource teachers, four classroom teachers, and two college professors. All names of interviewees are pseudonyms.

4. See also Ellen Moir and Gary Bloom, “Fostering Leadership Through Mentoring,” *Educational Leadership*, May 2003, pp. 58-60; Melissa Friberg, John Zbikowski, and Tom Ganzer, “Where Do We Go from Here? Decisions and Dilemmas of Teacher Mentors,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, 1996; and Susan Hanson and Ellen Moir, “Beyond Mentoring: The Career Path of Mentor Teachers,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, 2006.

5. Cassandra M. Guarino, Lucrecia Santibañez, and Glenn A. Daley, “Teacher Recruitment and Retention: A Review of Recent Empirical Literature,” *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 76, 2006, pp. 173-208; and Bonnie B. Mullinix, “Selecting and Retaining Teacher Mentors,” *ERIC Digest*, ED 477 728, 2002.

6. Forty-seven out of 50 respondents marked a 4 or 5 on a 5-point Likert scale, with 5 being the highest level of agreement.

7. Forty-one out of 50 respondents marked a 4 or 5 on a 5-point Likert scale, with 5 being the highest.

8. Kenneth Leithwood et al., *How Leadership Influences Student Learning* (New York: Wallace Foundation, 2004), p. 1.

9. Betty Achinstein and Steven Athanases, “New Visions for Mentoring New Teachers,” in idem, eds., p. 3.

10. Kathleen Fulton, Irene Yoon, and Christine Lee, *Induction into Learning Communities* (Washington, D.C.: National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2005), p. 22. ■

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