

Mentoring early career special education teachers

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For some time, special education has been plagued by shortages of qualified teaching staff and by high turnover rates for these staff. While several factors—external, employment and personal—are largely responsible for this situation, the research demonstrates that the initial professional experiences of early career teachers are closely associated with their longevity in the field. This paper reviews the literature on mentoring support for beginning teachers, mentoring models and the use of information technologies in mentoring support. The paper concludes with recommendations for methods of support for Australian early career special-education teachers.

Introduction

In most developed countries, teaching is a relatively large occupational area comprising around 4 per cent of the workforce (Nickson & Kritsonis, 2006) but the profession faces seemingly chronic difficulties in Australia and in many other countries, with a high turnover of early career teachers. The situation is exacerbated in the current climate of teacher shortages and recruitment problems in many curriculum areas, and an ageing teaching workforce with significant numbers of impending retirements (Lauder, 2008).

In some areas of education the situation for teachers is especially challenging. For example, in Australian special education settings, 42 per cent of staff are aged 50 years or more, and only 62 per cent of special education teachers have a special education qualification (Thomas, 2007). For some time, the international literature has noted significant problems with the attrition and retention of special education teachers (Billingsley, 1993; Billingsley, Carlson & Klein, 2004) in both regular school and special school settings (Talmor, Reiter & Feigin, 2005). The nature of special education contributes to these difficulties because, in addition to the challenges associated with regular classroom teaching, special education teachers must also deal with the administration of the *Australian Disability Discrimination Act*, collaborate with a variety of support staff (including teacher's aides, counsellors and therapists), advocate to include their special education students in regular school settings, develop and maintain individualised education programs for their students, and support students with a wider range of abilities and support needs than those experienced in the regular classroom.

Various studies illustrate the difficulties in the area of special education. There is a chronic shortage of qualified special education teachers (Nickson & Kritsonis, 2006). One-quarter of new Australian teaching graduates will leave the profession within five years (Kelly, 2008). US special education teachers are more likely to move from special education or to leave teaching than other teachers (Ingersoll, 2001), and some studies show that the turnover rate for special education teachers is one and a half times that of regular education teachers (Miller, McKenna & McKenna, 1998). Attrition of this magnitude exacerbates an already serious problem of a shortage of teachers qualified to fill special education positions. There are significant costs associated with this attrition. Norton (1999) estimated that replacing a teacher costs 25 per cent of that person's annual salary, but a higher cost of losing qualified special education teachers is paid for by disadvantaged students who lose the opportunity to receive instruction from experienced staff. In the context of such difficulties, this paper will critique a range of issues relating to mentoring for early career special education teachers, and highlight areas that are significant to the Australian agenda of research, policy and practice in this vital domain of teacher development.

Induction and mentoring

In reviewing the early career teacher literature, Whitaker (2000) noted a strong association between the level of support early career teachers see themselves as receiving and their decision to leave, and that a successful first-year experience is crucial in the retention of special education teachers. In New South Wales, for example, as part of a first-year induction program, school-based mentoring is being increasingly provided to beginning teachers (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2006). As part of the larger and critical role of professional development for emergent teachers, mentors can offer practical and emotional support, act as role models, and facilitate the development of essential instructional and administrative skills (McCormack, Gore & Thomas, 2006). A key feature of mentoring is that, as an individualised work-based learning model, it ties learning directly to workplace tasks and responsibilities. The effectiveness of mentoring is closely allied to the expertise of the mentor as well as the quality and type of support provided to early career teachers, and the presence of a school climate in which critical reflection is encouraged (Nickson & Kritsonis, 2006; Parker-Katz & Hughes, 2008).

A range of interrelated factors is associated with teacher retention. These include external factors (such as teacher preparation), employment factors (such as working conditions and rewards) and personal factors (Boyer, 1999). Consequently, mentoring (an employment factor) is just one factor influencing a special educator's decision to stay in the field. Nevertheless, mentoring, along with access to curriculum resources and cooperative planning, is reported by early career teachers to be one of the most highly valued strategies of support (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002). Mentoring has received substantial practical and policy support in recent years across generic school education systems after evidence was found that the experience of the first year of teaching is crucial

to teachers' future in the profession (Wasburn-Moses, 2005). In this context, mentoring is best viewed as an essential component of a teacher's induction program that begins with pre-service education and extends throughout the teacher's career.

Early career teachers value mentoring support that meets their immediate planning needs, that provides personal support and that is ongoing (Boyer & Gillespie, 2000). Mentoring in the first years of teaching typically and desirably moves through a series of stages (Whitaker, 2000). Early stages may be best described as 'survival', focus on the beginning teacher, and include emotional support, fulfilment of procedural requirements, behaviour management and the development of teaching programs. Later stages concentrate more on teaching processes, the learning outcomes of students and forms of external support such as networking with relevant professionals (for example, the Australasian Association of Special Education). In a recent Australian study of teachers and students in inclusive classrooms, collegial support and practical reflections on practice were highlighted as vital aspects of professional growth and development (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2007).

Evaluation of mentoring

Despite increased attention on mentoring, there has been very limited empirical evaluation of its purported advantages. Griffin and colleagues (2003) reviewed 10 US studies of special education teacher induction (many including mentoring) conducted between 1991 and 2001. These studies reported early career special educators having high satisfaction with mentoring, improvements in perceptions of self-confidence and collaboration, and intentions to remain in teaching for the next five years. The perceived effectiveness of mentoring was significantly correlated with intention to remain in special education (Whitaker, 2000) but Andrews and Quinn (2005) found that the quality and quantity of mentor support varied widely. This has been confirmed anecdotally by leaders in the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (R. Budden, personal communication, 11 February 2008). Although the Australian states and territories have policies on the induction of early career teachers, induction is seen as primarily a school responsibility and there is considerable variation across and within states in the implementation of induction programs. Further, the most recent Commonwealth government report available indicates that more than one-third of early career teachers were either dissatisfied with the induction they received or they received no induction at all (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002).

An extensive survey of beginning teachers and other school staff conducted by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (2002) showed a discontinuity between the views of supervisors and early career teachers. In every case, supervisors' opinions about induction support provided were more positive than early career teachers' views. According to supervisors, 82 per cent of schools use mentoring; only 39 per cent of early career teachers claim to have experienced mentoring, despite valuing it highly. Fewer than a third of supervisors provided mentors with training and only 28 per cent indicated that

their mentors were given release time to fulfil their role. This situation articulates with the findings of a recent US study reporting that one-third of early career special educators did not find the mentoring provided to them to be helpful (Billingsley, Carlson and Klein, 2004). The main criteria used in Australian schools to match mentors to early career teachers is curriculum area or year level rather than mentor skills and willingness to do the job. This implies a narrow interpretation of mentoring as an experienced teacher passing on knowledge and teaching strategies rather than encouraging enquiry and reflection.

Mentoring models in regular and special education

The growing literature on teacher mentoring suggests diverse purposes and models of delivery across and within educational jurisdictions. Certainly, it is not possible to generalise about any one dominant method given the heterogeneous program descriptions in the literature. Having said that, it is generally accepted that a structured mentoring program is integral to broader induction and professional development processes in schools and districts.

In the USA in 1997, the Council for Exceptional Children (1997) identified several key themes in the literature on mentor support for emerging teachers:

- mentors provide emotional support to new teachers, enhance reflective practices and lessen a sense of isolation,
- mentor programs need to be well planned and involve teachers who volunteer as mentors
- facets of mentoring include direct shared experience and discussion, consultation with and observation of other teachers and the provision of timely opportunities to interact on issues of importance to classroom practices and school/district protocols.

Interestingly, the Council also noted that in 1997 there was little evidence of the effectiveness of mentoring in relation to teacher retention. The Council's position was that all US special education teachers had to receive a minimum of one year of mentoring when they entered the profession. Since that time, our understanding of the effectiveness of mentoring programs has improved somewhat.

In their survey of 10 US teachers in their first few years of teaching, Conderman and Stephens (2000) explored the nature of the mentoring provided to participants, and their views on its effectiveness. They noted that 'successful mentoring programs encourage the development of a relationship between mentor and mentee while providing assistance tailored to the needs and challenges of the beginning teacher' (2000, p. 17). The importance of a flexible approach that builds on a positive and empathetic relationship is a theme that is repeated in much of the applied literature on mentoring models. As Table 1 indicates, mentoring may occur in a range of ways. The key point is that teacher needs are identified and dealt with in a constructive manner; how this occurs may be less important than the affective and professional outcomes that are achieved.

Table 1 Typical forms of mentor support

<i>Forms of support</i>	<i>Description</i>
Face-to-face interaction away from class	Scheduled release time in the staffroom to allow discussion of issues, document analysis, identification of resources and to set goals for future meetings
Scheduled whole group meetings	Usually convened at a school or district level, neophyte teachers may receive professional input and participate in solution-focused activities mediated by an experienced senior teacher
Telephone follow-up	The mentee receives calls at designated times or is able to call their mentor for discussion relating to a particular issue that is relevant to them
Online forums or discussion groups	'Live' or time-limited opportunities for multiple participants to log responses, questions or suggestions, sometimes centred on a particular theme or dilemma
In-class modelling	The mentee has an opportunity to observe a demonstration of strategies in a classroom

In practice it is most likely that factors such as the time available to mentors and mentees, physical proximity, personal preferences and other individual considerations play an important part in the provision of support. In one situation, informal conversations in the staffroom may be sufficient. In another situation, professionals may agree to email each other at a regular time and to meet face to face.

In one case report, a newly trained teacher of children with autism was paired with an experienced colleague in another school who had a successful track record working with children with similar needs (Boyer & Lee, 2001). The two teachers regularly met, phoned and emailed each other. The mentor received a stipend, points towards her licence to teach and a training program. The mentee also participated in an ongoing professional development program. In their analysis of group data from a larger project, these authors suggest that such mentoring experiences may assist in retaining staff in their chosen career, while acknowledging that others have shown that mentoring is not a final determinant of whether people stay or leave the field. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of this investigation is the overt focus on tangible benefits to participation by the mentor.

DeWert, Babinski and Jones (2003) analysed the impact of an online collaborative consultation model for new US teachers that involved the input of eight members of the local university education faculty, four experienced teachers and twelve novice teachers in general education. Study of email comments and discussion themes along with phone interviews and a survey suggested that first-year teacher participants had a sense of support amidst the multiple demands of their new roles, even reporting heightened problem-solving skills as a function of this program.

Along the same lines in the Australian context, two online mentoring systems (Beginning and Establishing Successful Teachers [BEST] and Personal Development, Health and Physical Education [PDHPE]) that centred on teachers' curriculum or stage specialisations were reported by Herrington, Rowland, Herrington and Hearne (2006). In the first experiment, newly graduated early

childhood and primary teachers were involved in a virtual cafe, the goal of which was to 'communicate with a mentor and access issues-based resources that will assist them in solving real classroom problems and issues they have in their new job' (2006, p. 4). Designed as communities of practice and learning, this site and the complementary version for PDHPE teachers aim to serve as accessible and constantly refreshed sources of support and development for professionals who are finding their feet in the classroom. Although only preliminary data have been published on these initiatives to date, such approaches appear to provide a very functional alternative to more traditional modes of mentoring for novice teachers.

How do new teachers feel about the types and the effectiveness of mentor support they receive? Andrews and Quinn (2005) provided a survey opportunity for a sample of first-year teachers to rate and comment on their mentored experiences. All first-year teachers in a US educational district were invited to take part in the investigation. The goal was to investigate whether there were differences in the reports of teachers who had been assigned a mentor at the district level, those who were provided with a mentor by their principal, and novice teachers without a mentor. A total of 135 teachers responded and several interesting findings were noted. First, there were significant differences in the total support scores reported by teachers with a mentor assigned by the district, and those without a formal mentee, although this finding is constrained by the low number of participants. Second, teachers with a mentor reported that curriculum and instruction were the areas in which they received least support. Conversely, most support was related to information about school policies and procedures, as well as dimensions of personal and emotional processes. A small number of participants reported low levels of support received despite the specific allocation of a mentor to them. This finding was difficult to untangle, with factors such as lack of mentor motivation, poor school climate and potential personality clashes proposed as confounding variables (Andrews & Quinn, 2005).

Online support technologies for mentoring

Mentoring models have become more complex and flexible with the advent of online communication technologies. Online technologies allow mentoring relationships to be created from a much larger pool of participants than traditional face-to-face encounters within individual schools or school districts. Such technologies can reduce the pressures of close scrutiny on beginning teachers at their school site by allowing a degree of anonymity in the mentoring process, and they can allow teachers to participate in mentoring activities at times that suit them. Online mentoring is potentially less expensive (in terms of time and travel) than some face-to-face mentoring programs. As the internet plays a larger role in teacher training and information sharing within the profession, it is likely that beginning teachers will be increasingly comfortable with this form of mentoring.

Types of online mentoring

The Internet permits a range of online mentoring models. The simplest model is email communication between mentor and mentee. More complex models involve

the establishment of general communities of practice online, with membership open to selected groups or, in some cases, any interested education professional. These groups can incorporate designated mentoring relationships, or operate informally. Such groups can interact via threaded email forums (for example, DeWert, Babinski & Jones, 2003; Gareis & Nussbaum-Beach, 2007), or through websites that provide general communication and specific mentoring, offer resources and links, and incorporate blogs and chat-room facilities (for example, Herrington et al., 2006). Other mentoring programs are managed by web-based teaching platforms such as Blackboard or Web CT (for example, Paulus & Scherff, 2008).

The increasing accessibility of video-based online communication allows for face-to-face video meetings between mentor and mentee in different locations, or video presentations from a mentor to a group. There is currently little research about the uses of video-conferencing applications in mentoring activities but they are likely to be incorporated into one-on-one or small group mentoring activities as their use becomes more widespread.

Online mentoring formats can allow a mentor to communicate with just one beginning teacher, or with a group. Communication can also occur among beginning teachers themselves, and between mentors. As Gareis and Nussbaum-Beach noted, 'the group forum provide[s] a multiplicity of interactions and relationships not characteristic of conventional one-to-one mentoring relationships' (2007, p. 239). Communication can be in real time (utilising chat-room formats) or asynchronous (participants contribute at a time of their choice). Online mentoring programs can have varying degrees of supervision with some facilitated and monitored by academics in teacher training departments (for example, Gareis & Nussbaum-Beach, 2007; Herrington et al., 2006).

The effectiveness of online mentoring

Most studies find that teachers' self-reporting of their experiences with online mentoring is generally positive (for example, DeWert, Babinski & Jones, 2003; Herrington et al., 2006; Paulus & Scherff, 2008). One pilot study (which focused on first-year teachers, experienced teachers, and university faculty contributing to a threaded discussion forum) listed some of the positive results identified by beginning teachers as 'increased emotional support, decreased feelings of isolation, increased confidence as teachers, more enthusiasm for work, increased reflection, ability to adopt a more critical perspective, and improved problem-solving skills' (DeWert, Babinski & Jones, 2003, p. 317). Beginning teachers are not the only participants to have reported positive effects; the mentors in some studies have also described learning and benefiting from the exchange of views (for example, Klecka, Cheng & Clift, 2004).

An advantage of online mentoring over traditional face-to-face mentoring identified by some studies (e.g., DeWert, Babinski & Jones, 2003; Paulus & Scherff, 2008) is the possibility of a larger peer group participating in the mentoring process. Beginning teachers are often isolated from each other, and a one-on-one mentor relationship does not always facilitate the realisation that their experiences

and concerns may be widely shared. Being part of a larger group of beginning teachers allows them to see that they are 'not the only one' with a particular problem, and this can contribute as much to their emotional support as their mentor's responses. It can also encourage them to be more reflective about their own teaching practices when other beginning teachers in the online group raise particular issues or questions.

Like any text-based communication, some online technologies run the risk of losing the tonal and expressive information present in face-to-face communication, leading to potential misunderstanding and lack of engagement. This problem was identified more strongly in some of the earlier studies of online mentoring (for example, Seabrooks, Kenney & LaMontagne, 2000) but Paulus and Scherff found that their subjects compensated for this by demonstrating 'intense emotional engagement, responsiveness to others, and meaning making through story telling' (2008, p. 123). They used each other's names, injected humour into their messages and disclosed personal information that helped to establish relationships of trust and support. Gareis and Nussbaum-Beach (2007) also found that groups in online mentoring forums tended to communicate in a networked fashion and had the potential to evolve into authentic 'communities of learners' that helped to transcend the isolation many beginning teachers experience. These findings may reflect the fact that online communication is becoming more widespread in many domains, so people are simply becoming more proficient at it and developing solutions to the problems identified in its early stages.

Gareis and Nussbaum-Beach (2007) noted that the content of participants' communication, as well as offering personal support and affirmation, had a strong focus on teaching practices, with such discussions often arising out of beginning teachers' stories about particular classroom experiences or challenges. The relative anonymity that is a feature of online communication can provide opportunities for beginning teachers to 'vent' their frustrations and to seek support (Paulus & Scherff, 2008). Further, anonymity can allow teachers to raise questions that they do not feel confident enough to articulate within their schools (Klecka, Cheng & Clift, 2004). Online mentoring technologies have another potential advantage in that they can provide a long-term record of mentoring communications. Participants can save email messages, and discussion forums can retain and archive discussion threads so that they can be reread and reflected upon by participants at a later date or after experiences that make the messages more relevant (Paulus & Scherff, 2008; Seabrooks, Kenney & LaMontagne, 2000).

A drawback for online mentoring is the low rate of usage in target groups, and declining usage over a period of time (Klecka, Cheng & Clift, 2004). Herrington and colleagues (2006) acknowledged this problem by setting up their community of practice with a cohort of graduating students from pre-service programs, who knew each other and had motivation to maintain contact with each other. Other research (for example, DeWert, Babinski & Jones, 2003) supports the suggestion that online group mentoring is most effective if it begins with face-to-face community building activities.

Future directions in mentoring policy, research and practice

As the possibilities for online interaction and information sharing grow, it is important to identify those technological features that lend themselves to the mentoring relationship, and to find ways to avert some of the problems that have been identified with these forms of mentoring. Technical problems still accompany online mentoring models, and these may discourage teachers and mentors who are less computer-literate or who live and work in environments with poor Internet access.

Gareis and Nussbaum-Beach (2007) suggest that further research could identify more clearly the differences between the communication that happens in online mentoring and in face-to-face mentoring. One example they describe is the fact that online forums often have a number of 'lurkers'—visitors who rarely or never contribute to the discussions, but read them and benefit from them in unknown ways. Klecka, Cheng and Clift (2004) reported that beginning teachers may be more likely to start as 'peripheral participants' (or lurkers) and that many use this opportunity to learn the norms of the online environment.

Some of the characteristics of successful online mentoring and community building have been analysed using qualitative case studies (for example, Paulus & Scherff, 2008) and it will be beneficial for these findings to be incorporated into preparation and training of mentors and facilitators. Unless these skills are developed and maintained, online mentoring relationships may be short-lived. The flexibility of online technologies can be exploited to meet the needs of those who prefer some anonymity in their mentoring relationships, and also those who need aspects of face-to-face communication to feel engaged and supported. Seabrooks, Kenney and LaMontagne (2000) suggest that video conferencing should be explored to enhance the options available to both mentors and mentees.

Gentry, Denton and Kurz (2008) call for research that uses more empirical measures to confirm teachers' self-reported improvements as a result of technology-based mentoring. They also point out that the ultimate test of all forms of teacher mentoring will be measurable improvements in the outcomes of their school students. In this regard, the research in this area would do well to make use of robust outcome measures. Relying on satisfaction indices to evaluate mentoring programs will do little to advance our knowledge base because of the highly subjective nature of such measures. Longitudinal studies are needed that assess such constructs and measures as teaching self-efficacy and changes in pedagogical practice.

A further area of development for educational authorities is a consideration of the appointment of mentors. The use of mentors from staff at the early career teacher's school may create tensions between assessment and assistance and is likely to result in the selection of mentors from a quite limited skill pool. Beginning teachers generally complete a probationary period in their first years of teaching with full certification dependent on a satisfactory assessment by school supervisors. Thus, it is not surprising that many early career teachers express a reluctance to be open with mentors whose evaluations may contribute to probation decisions (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002).

There are very few examples of mentors being provided from outside the early career teacher's school (for example, from the local area). This is surprising, given that this mentoring support model reduces the chance of conflict of interest and can overcome the competing demands experienced by mentors. Although the research is quite limited, some findings offer potential in the design of innovative models of mentoring support in special education (Andrews & Quinn, 2005). These findings suggest that the use of externally appointed mentors with demonstrated special education teaching expertise and offering online support are likely to offer important advantages over school-based mentoring support.

As an important variable influencing early career teachers' longevity in the profession, mentoring support deserves much more than the cursory and inconsistent attention given to it by many educational jurisdictions. Given the considerable resource investment in the initial training of teachers, the increased likelihood of special educators leaving the profession in comparison to their regular education counterparts, and the critical shortages of suitably qualified and experienced special education staff, the profession stands to profit considerably from a more consistent and efficient approach to mentoring.

Keywords

mentoring	special education	early teachers
staff development	teacher orientation	information and communications technology

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