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Support for the Beginning Special Education Teacher Through High Quality Mentoring

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Abstract: Approximately 50% of school districts across the nation have reported barriers in obtaining highly qualified teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Beginning special education teachers report that they often feel they lack the prerequisite skills for working with their students, particularly students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Special educators often feel unsupported and overwhelmed by the continuous changes in districts related to No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Additionally, nationwide alternative programs are being developed as a means for special education teachers to clear their credential outside of the university setting. The need for support of these teachers in today's schools is critical. This article highlights best practices for development of high quality mentoring for beginning special education teachers based on meaningful relationships, guidance, and reflective practices.

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INTRODUCTION

"I appreciate the support and guidance of my mentor. Being in special education, my mentor has helped me greatly understand the IEP process and helped me understand how to fill out forms, follow time-lines, etc. My mentor has helped me develop lessons and activities that support the needs of my students. The most valuable component of the [induction program] is having a mentor who understands the special education field."

> *Elementary Education Special Education Teacher*
> *of a multi-grade, multilingual, cross category,*
> *self-contained classroom*

In the field of special education, teachers are leaving the profession at alarming rate. Researchers agree that the first year in the classroom is a turning point for many special educators (Nichols & Sosnowsky, 2002; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997). Mentorship is considered to be a key component in the successful retention of beginning special education teachers (Madigan & Scroth-Cavataio, 2011). In addition to assisting beginning special educators in the rigorous induction process of teaching, assessment, and classroom management, mentoring serves to provide a bridge for special education teachers to work with the growing numbers of diverse learners in schools across the nation.

Who are Mentors?

There are fundamental differences between the role of a school or district administrator who provides evaluative feedback and serve as a gatekeeper to the education field, and a mentor who provides feedback in a non-evaluative manner in the context of a supportive relationship. In many school districts across the nation, mentors or support providers are assigned to beginning special educators. Often these mentors are veteran teachers or experienced program administrators. Generally, the mentor relationship occurs in the beginning stages of the special education teacher's position in the classroom. Quality mentoring conveys pre-service learning, experience, and practice to a deeper and more critical level of understanding for teachers. Mentoring also facilitates the stages of learning from a conscious incompetence level to a conscious competence level. The following excerpts highlight some of the concerns and questions beginning special education teachers have posed to a school district mentor:

> *How can I make sure I'm serving*
> *the needs of my students?*
> Middle school special education teacher of Grades

7–8 multilingual, multicultural, cross category, core curriculum classes

How can I manage the two triennials next week and the four other signed assessment plans?
Grades K–5 elementary special education teacher

Supervising and managing my aide is challenging. I feel sabotaged by her. She interrupts instruction and doesn't listen when I am giving student directions. My aide doesn't seem to understand what her relationship with students should be. She has difficulty managing groups and modifying the assignment to meet their needs.
Middle school beginning special education teacher for sixth-grade self-contained, cross-category, multilingual, multicultural classroom—Grades K–5 elementary special education teacher.

Building the Relationship of Mentor and Teacher

A mentor's role is multifaceted. Building a relationship is the cornerstone of working with beginning special education teachers. Both supportive and collaborative relationships are crucial to teacher success and student achievement. Relationships that are supportive provide guidance and encouragement helping to create a safe environment where learning takes place. Collaborative relationships are critical to meeting the needs of diverse student populations and provide a more efficient means for reaching student and professional goals (Schroth-Cavataio, 2005). A Teacher Information form is included in Appendix 1 to provide the mentor with basic teacher information.

Emotional Support

Emotional support is something beginning educators are not always able to ask for or receive from school colleagues or someone in an evaluative position. Having a mentor who is in a non-evaluative position helps to develop a safe environment enabling special education teachers to meet challenges and expand their teaching competence, hence, leading to individual success and student achievement. The empathy and understanding that a mentor can offer through sharing the same or similar teaching experiences contributes to building a meaningful relationship. Mentors can provide emotional support and instill ownership of success for their special education teacher through their actions and language such as:

- Role-play specific situations prior to their occurrence
- Co-teach a lesson to help develop confidence in implementing a new strategy
- Through discussion, point out teacher-made decisions that led to desired results
- Positively contribute to a teacher's idea or action by using "and" instead of "but" ("That's a really good idea, <u>and</u> ……")
- Try to anticipate and prepare teachers for surprises that occur that do not have a "happy ending"
- Set a time limit for venting about challenges in order to be able to coach instead of just put out fires
- Leave the meeting/conversation on a positive note

Establish Sense of Teamwork

A sense of teamwork can be beneficial in developing trust and easing the beginning special education teacher's feeling of being overwhelmed, particularly during the "survival and disillusionment phases" as described by Ellen Moir, Executive Director of the New Teacher Center (1990). The sense of teamwork is enhanced when the mentor uses language such as "***we*** could….." instead of "you" when making suggestions and collaboratively developing plans. This helps to alleviate the feeling of isolation for the special educator.

Responsiveness and Follow Through

Other important aspects of developing relationship and trust with the teacher are accessibility, responsiveness, and follow through. It is vital that the mentor is accessible through other means in addition to bi/weekly personal contact such as e-mail and phone. Issues with student's parents, paraprofessionals, principals, and students may arise unexpectedly. Having someone to quickly turn to for advice helps the teacher feel safe and not vulnerable. Additionally, timely follow through with support and resources on the mentor's part demonstrates and models thoroughness, respect and thoughtfulness. It also assists the special education teacher with next steps, leading to feelings of achievement and success.

Encouraging ongoing reflection

Relationships between ideas are built through self-reflection as a teacher unites experiences and brings awareness to thought processes. Reflection is the essence of building connections with others. As teachers share and listen to one another, perspectives are increased and a sense of trust develops (Schroth-Cavataio, 2005).

To address the actuality of our culturally and linguistically diverse schools and realities of racially

marginalized groups, teacher reflection needs to reach beyond the scope of their classroom walls to incorporate the political element of their position (Hoffman-Kip, Artiles, & Lopez, 2003). Although the reflective process is initiated during pre-service and is generally comprised of self-awareness achieved through introspection and based on personal experiences, mentoring for equity is engineered through means such as:

- Reflective questioning that focuses their students and problems that occur
- Utilizing entry points to develop thoughtful processes
- Directly addressing issues
  (Achinstein & Athanases, 2005)

This challenges the special educator to become not only a reflective problem solver, but a change agent as well. Therefore, it is a mentor's charge to provide direction responsibly and responsively transmit their own learning with others through reflection, inquiry, and other artifacts and practices. A mentor's knowledge and pacing/leading skills are incredibly important for developing this reflective process. Through the mentor's leadership, teachers will become fully competent in reflective practices that incorporate not only curricular and pedagogical concerns, but sociopolitical contexts of teaching as well. Practical formats/artifacts through which this can occur include discussions of successes and challenges encountered during the recurring mentor/teacher meetings when using the Meeting Record Form (see Appendix 1).

THE ROLE OF THE MENTOR

Through reflective questioning, mentors guide special education teachers to resolve implications of their own biases and focus on student achievement. The instructional, facilitative, and collaborative opportunities, as well as the resources that a mentor is able to provide, help in developing linkage between the teacher's background experiences and that of the students s/he teaches. A watchful eye and ear of a skillful mentor observes and listens for teacher attention, teacher tone, student talk, and student participation. A mentor focuses on instructional strategies and teaching methods that are connected to the experiences and prior knowledge of students and then uses entry points with the teacher to develop thoughtful processes helping to ensure that learning is equitable for all.

Mentors are an asset in providing sources and support for special education teachers to develop community resources that aid teachers in connecting to and learning about the culture(s) of the school and surrounding community. Ultimately, the mentor's role is to facilitate the attainment of professional teaching standards. The path for each special education teacher is varied depending on copious factors, and therefore the mentor needs to be flexible and fulfill numerous roles. Functions mentors perform include:

- Making suggestions
- Advising
- Helping
- Informing
- Consoling
- Listening
- Sharing awareness
- Processing
- Collaborating
- Communicating
- Modeling
- Observing
- Advocating
- Leading
- Facilitating

This work is accomplished in varying formats resulting in a mentor's role being multifaceted. These roles fall into three general categories: students, curriculum, and professional duties. Figure 1.0 provides examples of types of situations for the different circumstances.

Effective mentorship relationships should include the following components:

1. Ongoing formal (structured) and informal (naturally occurring relationships) mentorship opportunities
2. Assigned mentors should be carefully screened for compatibility with teachers. Variables such as background experiences, gender, race, linguistic, and family status should be taken into consideration.

Figure 1.0

STUDENTS	CURRICULUM	PROFESSIONAL DUTIES
• Observe student behavior with specific focus and provide teacher with recorded data • Collaboratively analyze student work • Help design rubrics for behavior and content areas • Help in developing classroom management system • Assist in developing classroom student profile • Share ideas for instructional strategies, accommodations and modifications to meet student needs • Help design, organize, and set up classroom	• Collaboratively plan lessons and units of study based on grade level and ELL standards • Find and provide content resources • Observe instruction and facilitate reflection and determining of next steps • Provide information on differentiating instruction • Model lesson that includes pre- and post- conference • Organize classroom visitations to veteran teacher classrooms • Help prioritize and determine ordering budgeted materials	• Facilitate communication between teacher and administration/ parents/ / specialists • Facilitate self assessment and goal setting based on teaching standards • Advocate for teacher with administrators • Help plan and organize for parent communication • Assist in determining school and community resources • Provide examples of Back-To-School organization, agenda, and handout • Assess students and develop IEPs

SUMMARY

As a mentor listens to a special education teacher's reflections, s/he becomes aware of the individuality of the teacher, understands when the teacher is stuck, and moves toward communication to assist the special educator in viewing his/her practice from a different perspective. In addition to being flexible, mentors need a "repertoire of supports" in order to change hats, moving fluidly between a consulting role to an instructional role, to a collaborative role, or to a facilitative role (Achinstein & Athanases, 2005). This continuum of support opens doors of opportunities for the mentor to do more than transmit knowledge. In response to our rich cultural and linguistically diverse classrooms, mentors are facilitators of *knowledge transformation* (Achenstein & Athanases, 2005). This practice can support special educators in the development of their roles as transformative change agents in the culture of the school, community, and their lives as educators. The teachers grow in their accomplishments and become leaders as their relationships develop, just as the model of the mentor-teacher relationship developed through the mentor's supportive and skillful work. In the words of a special educator in the field:

> "Thank you for all your have done in the past and continue to do. I find little "[mentor] moments" throughout my teaching days where I think back to something you have said or something you have taught me. Thanks!"
> *Elementary Education Special Education Teacher in a grades 3-5, self-contained classroom*

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Appendix 1: Teacher Information Form

TEACHER	SCHOOL SITE

• Name:
• Home Address:
• Home Phone:
• Home E-mail:
• Cell Phone #:
• School phone/extension:
• School e-mail:
• Education background:
• Work Experience:
• Volunteer experience:
• Birthday:
• Interests/Hobbies:
• Favorite Snack:
	• School:
	• Grade level:
	• Room #:
	• Start Time:
	• Breaks:
	• Prep:
	• Lunch:
	• Dismissal:
	• School Address:
	• School Phone #:
	• School E-mail:
	• School Fax#:
	• Office contact:
	• Administrator/Principal:
	    o Name:
	    o Contact Information:

Schroth-Cavataio, 2009

Appendix 2: Meeting Record Form

WHAT WENT WELL	WHAT CAN GO BETTER
ACTION PLAN	**WHAT, WHO, WHEN**

Next Meeting Date:
Schroth-Cavataio, 2009