

# Addressing Sources of Collateral Damage in Four Mentoring Programs

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*This article examines the types of recurring problems that can inhibit K-12 mentoring team relationships and intervention strategies to remedy those problems. The study examines 149 mentoring teams in four school districts over a 2-year period. Data collection was coordinated by the researcher who was also the trainer for the four school districts' mentoring programs. Each year of the study, the survey and interview processes were repeated. From the analysis of data, the research team identified a common set of recurring problems during both years. Intervention strategies were then identified, introduced, and assessed. Results indicate the need for continual assessment of mentoring programs and mentoring team relationships, financial commitment from the school district, a rigorous mentor selection process, and providing in-service and workshop opportunities for problem solving.*

## SAMANTHA AND ELOISE

Samantha had worked as a fourth- and fifth-grade teacher in the same school district for 9 years. She had an excellent reputation as a teacher and was excited about the opportunity to become a mentor in the district's new mentoring program. After talking with some of her colleagues and the principal about the new role and responsibilities, she applied for the position as mentor. When the screening process was complete, Samantha was informed that she had been accepted as a mentor for Eloise, a beginning first-grade teacher in another elementary school within the district.

Eloise and Samantha met for the first time the day before in-service. They spent time discussing the students, the culture of the school district, the administration and school board, classroom management issues, and a variety of other topics that were on Eloise's mind. That first day seemed quite promising.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

For many new teachers, the transition from their student teaching experience to their first teaching assignment can be traumatic; the same can be true for mentors as well. Part of the transition for the new teacher and mentor is dealing with the responsibilities of a new job (mentoring), along with the other responsibilities they have. Trying to acculturate and integrate the changes, complexities, and realities of teaching and mentoring, along with dealing with problems that are typically encountered in this new environment, can be an overwhelming experience for some (Corley, 1998; DePaul, 1998; Veeman, 1984).

Although no single mentoring program design meets the needs of every school district in every situation, there is a broad consensus regarding the factors that can negatively impact a mentoring program and mentoring team relationships. The following is a discussion of some of those factors.

## MATCHING AND SELECTION

There are clear indications in the literature that both mentor and new teacher can fall prey to ineffective matching practices (Brock & Grady, 1998; DePaul, 2000; Huling-Austin, 1990; Kilburg, 2002; Newton et al., 1994). When school districts limit the number of matching factors, the result may have a negative impact not only on the mentoring relationship but on the mentoring process as well. Those factors include work in the same building (Brock & Grady; Ganser, 1995); similar interests and philosophy (DePaul); willingness to work with the new teacher (Brewster & Railsback, 2001; DePaul; Kilburg); strong interpersonal skills (Kilburg); same grade level and subject (Block & Grady; Ganser); experience (Ganser); and expertise in a variety of areas (Brewster & Railsback; DePaul; Kilburg).

## TIME

Lack of time is yet another factor that negatively impacts the quality of the mentoring relationship and that can determine in some cases whether the relationship will be a success or failure (Ganser et al. 1998; Guyton & McIntyre, 1990). In a study by the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education (1999), "38 percent of protégés who worked with mentors a 'few times a year' reported substantial improvements to their instructional skills. That figure jumps to an impressive 88 percent for those who work with mentors at least once a week" (p. 5). Other studies have shown that when mentors and protégés are provided with time to meet, the end result is usually a relationship that exhibits trust, respect, and a genuine concern for one another (Arends, 1998; Latham, Gitomer, & Ziomek, 1999; Tauer, 1998). However, when that time is reduced because of building

status, busy schedules, or lack of support may be impacted in a negative way, often seen as nothing more than a

an impact on the quality of the mentoring process. As new teachers are entering the profession, it is important to ensure that they receive the support they need to succeed. This support is important because it helps them feel valued and that someone is invested in their success. If support is limited or is not being provided, teachers may feel insecure and frustrated (Kilburg, 2002).

and communication to meet the needs of the new teacher. According to Newton et al. (2001), it is important to instill a sense of belief in the new teacher while allowing them to learn from the mentor. Communication and coaching help to build confidence, which in turn contributes to the success of both the new teacher and the mentor.

As previously identified, the mentor should not take authority from the new teacher, but rather collaborate with them. This collaboration is minimized and is not a priority for many mentors. If we can expect to see a positive impact on the mentoring process, communication is a key factor. That is why school districts should consider the professional development of the

## CHANGE AND CONFLICT

For many, the reality of the first teaching and mentoring assignment can be an eye-opening experience. Managing a heavy workload while taking on an additional role without altering current roles and responsibilities can complicate a teacher's life. Add to this the complexities of working with parents and students and trying to adjust to a new environment. All these factors can have a dramatic effect on how the mentoring process is carried out (Corley, 1998; Veeman, 1984). Change can seriously complicate lives. Thus, a small problem or difference of opinion can escalate because of the anxiety and frustration that one or both of the mentoring team members feel in their increasingly complex and changing lives.

Although change is not necessarily viewed as a negative, it can impede the mentoring process. Kilburg (2002) suggested that knowing that some mentoring teams might encounter problems should assist those who are planning and coordinating mentoring programs develop strategies to address the issues of change and provide more realistic expectations of potential problems. Unfortunately, it is important to remember that although change may be planned for, it is not always anticipated or appreciated. As Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) reminded us, "Change is everywhere, progress is not" (p. 345).

## THIS RESEARCH STUDY

When mentoring programs function in a way that nurture and support the new teacher and mentor, the programs are usually effective. Unfortunately, mentoring can become complicated even under the best circumstances, and what seems to have potential for both mentor and new teacher may be a recipe for disaster (Huling-Austin, 1990; Villani, 2002) resulting in collateral damage.

In this study, we were interested in a systematic investigation of the collateral damage that occurred with mentoring team members in programs that we had designed. We wanted to determine if the mentoring programs encountered any problems and if those problems were consistent with the literature. We also wanted to determine what challenges were encountered on a regular basis. Finally, we wanted to evaluate our intervention procedures. Our goal has been to make the mentoring team relationships as free as possible from problems that could negatively impact the mentoring relationship.

By gathering data along these lines, we further hoped to clarify and extend the literature base so that mentoring practices could have more widespread success.

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recorded responses. The same survey and discussion protocol were used in the second year of the study with new mentors and new teachers. The assessment process was part of an ongoing evaluation of the mentoring program and mentoring team relationship. The researcher did not prompt the participants to answer in any specific way.

In step two, surveys were read one at a time, and problems were recorded. Common problems were identified in the surveys. Another trainer was consulted regarding the problems identified. The discussions regarding the surveys were analyzed by reflecting on the data and reducing them to a manageable form. This allowed the research team to compile a list of categories to identify problems that mentoring teams were encountering.

The third step involved identifying recurring problems, from the list of problems identified in step two, that mentoring teams were encountering. Mentoring team members who had identified recurring problems in the surveys were interviewed in small groups and individual settings over the school year. The objective was to collect data through in-depth interviews that would provide a clear picture of the negative impact of those recurring problems on the relationship. The interviewer took field notes that provided more detail to the survey data and then transcribed them immediately following each session. Typically, the interviews were conducted as a part of the four workshops that mentoring team members participated in during the school year. The time given for each group interview was typically 30 minutes on average. Between 10 and 14 mentoring team members were interviewed in an individual setting in one of the school district buildings, each averaging 50 minutes in length. The interviews were conducted to discuss the problems that mentoring teams were encountering on a regular basis and to help form a clearer picture of the collateral damage that was occurring for both team members. From the data gathered in the first three steps, the research team applied a standard of selection to determine which problems would be addressed through intervention procedures. To meet the standard of selection, the problem had to occur on a regular basis for at least four months and for at least 50% of mentoring teams that had recurring problems.

In step four, intervention strategies were selected after the senior researcher met with the mentoring coordinator in the school district's main office. The responsibility of the senior researcher was to provide data regarding the recurring problem or problems and then assist the mentoring coordinator in deciding on an intervention strategy to implement. After the intervention strategy had been implemented, the mentoring team members were interviewed about the strategy for the purpose of determining its success or failure.

THE SECOND YEAR

The average return rate for all four surveys in the second year of the study was 96%. Seventy-eight of the 105 teams surveyed were from two new school districts that had not been a part of the first year of the study. Of those 78, 17 teams indicated that they were having occasional problems in their relationships. From the two districts that had participated in the first year of the study, 7 of the 27 new mentoring teams indicated problems.

Of the 17 mentoring teams interviewed that were having some problems, 10 said that they were encountering problems on a recurring basis. The two school districts that participated in the first and second year of the study found that 3 of the 7 mentoring teams were also encountering problems on a regular basis (Table 2).

It is noteworthy that the recurring problems were essentially the same during the first and second years of the study. Because we considered whether this finding of consistency could be an artifact of our scoring, we could not identify a confounding or biasing factor.

TEACHERS' RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION PROCEDURES

Once a mentoring team had been identified as having a problem or problems that were negatively impacting its working relationship, intervention procedures were introduced by the mentoring program coordinator or the mentoring program trainer. (It is important to note that each of the 35 mentoring teams typically encountered multiple problems during their partnerships.)

Table 2. Common Problems Encountered by Mentoring Teams, Year 2

All Problems Encountered	Recurring Problems
(1) Lack of time	(1) Lack of time
(2) Over dependency on mentor	(2) Mentor and new teacher not in same building
(3) Not in the same building	(3) Mentor and new teacher not in same subject
(4) Not in the same subject	(4) Several new teachers sharing one mentor
(5) Not at the same grade level	(5) Poor match between mentor and new teacher
(6) Not in the same specialty	(6) Poor communication and coaching skills
(7) Unwilling to collaborate	(7) Lack of emotional support
(8) Personality conflicts	(8) Personality conflict
(9) Mentor was volunteered by principal	
(10) New teacher not willing to take advice	
(11) Mentor's lack of confidence	
(12) Mentor was too authoritarian	
(13) Poor communication and coaching	
(14) Poor match between mentor and new teacher	
(15) Lack of emotional support	

Questions regarding the types of and the types of problems that basis, the data indicated the fol-

average return rate for all four sur- 75% (33) said that they had no prior experience had been very variety of problems in their mento- identified, the 11 team members those problems were recurring. mentoring teams that were encounter- problem manifested another. Time ems. Table 1 identifies the types mentoring teams and a list of recur- : mentoring relationship.

Mentoring Teams, Year 1

Recurring Problems
Lack of time for observing and meeting
Not in the same school
Not in the same subject
Not in the same specialty
Not at the same grade level
Poor match between new teacher and mentor. This typically included one or more problems identified from the list of common problems in year 1 of the study.
Poor communication and coaching skills
Lack of emotional support

make it . . . I was using time as an excuse to not do what I was supposed to do.

A majority of mentoring team members understood that time would be an issue. They also understood that it was too difficult for administrators to rearrange their schedules so that they would have time to meet. As a result, most of the team members were willing to work through the time management concern. As one mentoring team noted, "We understood that we probably wouldn't have the time needed to carry out all of the mentoring conversations that we needed to have. So we just did the best we could."

In one case, a veteran teacher was relieved of his position as a mentor because of negative comments made regarding the school district's board of directors and the principal. The mentor was extremely angry at being relieved and indicated that he believed "the administration and the school board were out to get me." The new teacher felt a great deal of relief because he didn't have to listen to the mentor constantly complain about the school board and the administration anymore. The new teacher felt that the mentoring coordinator was looking out for his best interests, especially when he was given a new mentor. He saw that as a positive step, not only for himself but also for the mentoring program. One of the comments the new teacher made captures his relief:

I've never run into a situation like this before where someone just wanted to complain about the administration and the school board all of the time, even when he was mentoring me. It was awful . . . I was beginning to wonder if others were encountering the same thing. When the mentoring coordinator and superintendent talked to me about what was going on, it was such a relief. I felt like this huge rock had been lifted from my shoulders.

Three new specialists to a school district experienced having only one educational specialist whom they shared as their mentor. The mentoring program provided no other options for them. As a result, the new specialists felt that they were not being given the appropriate help necessary to do their jobs. Although they understood the reasons that the district did not provide more help, that didn't relieve the anxiety and frustration that they felt almost every day. For at least one new specialist, "it felt like I was being left out in the cold with very little support." Yet another specialist expressed her frustration in the following way:

It's hard for me to believe that the school district released some of the veteran specialists and then hired specialists with limited experience within the next 2 years. The unfortunate part about this is that we all

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problems identified time as the  
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Consequently, each felt very comfortable with the new partnership and didn't want the school district to provide them with an "assigned" mentor. The mentoring coordinator agreed to their request.

All 35 of the new teachers said that emotional support was a critical aspect of the relationship with their mentor. Unfortunately, a few new teachers felt that they were not receiving that support, even after the mentors had received training in how to develop supportive relationships in workshops and in-service training. One new teacher said, "I don't think that the training my mentor received was real helpful. Although she provides some support, it wasn't enough to make a difference." On the other hand, almost all the mentors felt that they were doing their jobs and providing the needed emotional support. It was interesting to note that in two cases, the mentors didn't agree on the type of emotional support needed by new teachers. They believed that the new teachers needed to "be dealing with things on their own." In other words, as one new teacher suggested, "thrown into the lions' den."

The intervention procedures that were introduced included more problem-solving time in workshops and meeting with the mentoring coordinators to begin a dialogue with the mentor and new teacher. For the most part, these interventions were helpful. Although many of the mentors felt that they were doing what they were supposed to, what many found was that, "[they] began to realize in the conversations that [they] were having with the coordinator that there are degrees of support, and what may work for one new teacher may not work for another. That was helpful information."

Seven of the new teachers did not have mentors with teaching experience at the grade level they were assigned to teach. The intervention for 3 of the 7 was to ask another veteran teacher who had taught at that grade level to mentor along with the original mentor. Most of the new teachers said that they appreciated having the new mentor, but they also indicated that this was something that should have occurred at the beginning of the school year, when the mentors were first assigned to the new teachers. One comment made by a mentor was also supported by the three new teachers: "The school district should have known this wasn't going to be a good match for us, but after they realized there was a problem, they provided the help we needed." Two of the 4 new teachers who were not assigned a second mentor had already made connections with a teacher at their grade level at their school and didn't need an assigned mentor. Both new teachers expressed, "Both of us were disappointed that the school district didn't provide us with mentors that taught at the same grade level, but at this point, we're very happy with the mentor we now have, mainly because we got to pick them."

One of the mentoring coordinators made the following comment, which was helpful in understanding why some of the schools did not assign a

## CONCLUSION

This study has sought to illuminate some of the problems that mentoring teams encountered on a recurring basis and their responses to intervention procedures that were introduced. By introducing the different intervention procedures, mentoring team members and mentoring program coordinators were provided with opportunities to articulate the challenges they faced. By reflecting on and verbalizing their practices, all the mentoring program coordinators and most of the mentors and new teachers were better able to understand the problems encountered and deal with them more effectively. The potential value of this practice is that it provides school districts and university personnel with another lens through which to view the challenges encountered by mentoring team members and mentoring program coordinators.

The researchers believe that the real value of this study rests upon documenting a more complete account of problems that mentoring program coordinators and mentoring teams encounter as they work through the transitional process of developing and sustaining new mentoring programs and mentoring relationships. Planning and carrying out regular conversations with mentoring teams regarding their practices helps to build confidence and a professional culture that values relationships, reflection, and collaborative practices. Some of those conversations, which are included in the recommendations, need to explore self-assessment as a part of the reflective process. Part of managing the health of any mentoring program is developing an assessment process that is in the best interests of all participants. Roskos and Boehlen (2001) wrote that when teachers are able to assess their own performance, they see more clearly the foundation and instructive role of the self-assessment.

Finally, our data show that school district personnel and education faculty need to share the results of their investigations to build on the limited research base that currently exists in the professional education literature. As educators learn more about the problems that mentoring teams encounter beyond those typically found in the literature, they will be in a better position to more fully explore the intervention techniques. We must monitor the progress of our efforts through well-designed research for the dual purpose of informing practice and policy and discovering those questions that have yet to be asked.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The significance of this study does not rest on these results and conclusions, although they are helpful. Our data suggest that a more formal approach is necessary in a study of this nature. The study's real significance lies in

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determine what recurring problems needed to be addressed. Once a problem was identified as part of the mentoring team's routine, the group would be exposed to an intervention treatment created by the mentoring program coordinator. After the completion of the intervention, the intact groups would be repeatedly posttested to determine the effectiveness of the intervention procedures.

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His most recent research interests are  
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ctional feedback, study skills, and  
helped found two schools where he