

## ABSTRACT

### AN EXAMINATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF NINE NOVICE PRINCIPALS WHO WERE PARTICIPANTS IN NEW JERSEY'S REVISED MENTORING PROGRAM

#### Introduction

##### Summary of the Problem

According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) the majority of States now have some form of mentoring program in place for beginning school leaders. This includes their own program, in which experienced principals are paired with novices ([www.naesp.org/Peer\\_Assisted\\_Leadership\\_Services.aspx](http://www.naesp.org/Peer_Assisted_Leadership_Services.aspx)). In addition, the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute conducted a landmark study called *School Leadership Study: Developing Successful Principals* (2004), which examined successful programs for the training of beginning principals around the nation. One of the findings of their research was that mentoring is an essential component of successful preparation programs for school leaders. For at least the past ten years researchers have argued for the inclusion of a mentoring component in school leadership training programs, including Fullan (2001), Samier (2000), Bloom, Castagna & Warren (2004), and Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe & Meyerson (2005).

In 2005 New Jersey made several significant changes to its mentoring program including: the program duration went from one year to two years; participants were asked to engage in a series of eight Explorations that are based on ISLLC Standards; and they are required to complete an Action Research Project.

In speaking to many beginning principals who were either just finishing the mentoring program in New Jersey, or else entering into the second year, the researcher heard many concerns expressed about the program, including the following:

- Is the length of the new program either too short or too long?
- Are the mentors adequately trained?
- How are the mentors selected and matched to the protégés?
- Are the revised Explorations and the Action Research Project well-structured learning tools? And are they overly similar to university training?
- Is this more formalized two-year mentoring program a satisfying, productive and useful experience for the protégés?

The elements of a mentoring program that are examined in this study are based on contextual factors that Samier (2000) derived from Kram (1985) and Gehrke (1988), and which she argues are necessary for a successful mentoring relationship. A partial list of these, that are applicable to New Jersey's mentoring program for school leaders, includes:

- A. Opportunities for contact and individual choice in selection of each other, particularly across hierarchical and departmental boundaries.
- B. Sufficient time to develop the relationship (two to five years).
- C. Regulations and procedures allowing them to negotiate goals and activities.
- D. Accommodation of the diversity and uniqueness of mentor and protégé in styles of thinking and working, in order that the mentor can create experiences tailored to the unique vision of professional practice, especially those facilitating collaboration and alliances.

- E. Opportunities to engage in relationship-building activities, especially in developing dialogue.
- F. Privacy and confidentiality in the relationship to address non-organizational issues in the protégé's life, and to disclose problems.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to document the reported experiences of nine beginning principals who participated in New Jersey's revised mentoring program in order to gain a better understanding of this aspect of the professional education of school leaders.

Sub-questions included the following: (1) How have the six of Samier's contextual factors listed above affected these mentoring relationships? (2) What changes to the current program in NJ, if any, would the protégés suggest?

#### Critique of Relevant Literature

There are numerous books and articles on the mentoring of school leaders cited in the Review of Literature in this dissertation. The items summarized below are just a few of the more important examples.

Thomas Sergiovanni (1990, 1992, 1993, 1994a&b, 1999 & 2001) makes frequent criticisms of school leadership models that take a corporate approach such as the "pyramid" or "high performance" styles. Instead, he argues for a "transformative leadership model, where leaders and followers are united in pursuit of common goals" (1990, p. 23). He also argues for a re-imagining of schools as communities of learners, where the principal learns from teachers as well as other principals.

LaPointe & Davis (2006) conducted a study of preparation programs for school leaders around the nation. They identified eight that they considered to be superlative for various reasons. Those included: San Diego Unified School District, in partnership with the University of San Diego; Region I of the New York City Public Schools, in partnership with Bank Street College; The University of Connecticut; and Jefferson County, KY, Public Schools. The researchers concluded that these programs shared a number of characteristics, including high quality candidates, coherent curriculums along with modeling of program theory, and the close alignment of course content to intensive internship experiences, combined with ". . . guided reflection to help candidates process their experiences" (p. 15).

Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe and Meyerson (2005) conducted a review of literature on the development of school leaders throughout the United States. They identify several features that are shared in common by an increasing number of programs around the country. Those included: "Field-based internships, mentoring, cohort groups, tight collaboration between university programs and school districts, curricular coherence, problem-based instruction, and an emphasis on instructional leadership, change management, and organizational development" (p. 21).

Rothman (2008) discusses several different types of mentoring programs that have been adopted in various states. In Chicago there is a laboratory school where aspiring principals work at real-world tasks under the supervision of a mentor. A similar program called New Leaders for New Schools is a national program that recruits prospective principals for urban schools and assigns them for year-long residencies with experienced administrators. The Center for Collaborative Education prepares principals in the Boston area through residency programs. One other program cited by Rothman is New York City's Leadership Academy that provides some pre-service training, and also provides mentoring to all new principals during their first three years as administrators.

In examining the character of the relationship, Samier (2000) identifies the importance of trust and respect in a mentoring relationship. She cites Gehrke (1988) who characterizes the relationship as a form of love relationship, but distinct from other varieties such as "friendship, romantic, and familial—on the basis of biology, equity and passion, producing in its ideal form a platonic, formative relationship" (p. 90).

Although some of the factors Samier identified are mentioned in other research, no study has been found that directly addresses how the presence or the absence of these factors directly affects the participants. Later in her research Samier goes on to speak about possible defects inherent in a planned mentoring relationship that is formalized to make it adhere to a set of standardized outcomes. She says:

Programmed mentoring, on the other hand, as a rationalized activity and often of an understandably short term, inhibits both the full development of the necessary relational requirements, and by reinforcing conformity, inhibits leadership which has to transcend organizational realities to organizational possibilities. . . .

Clearly neither formal nor fully formalized mentoring adequately serves all those who could potentially benefit from the relationship. The essential question, though, is if a hybrid form cannot be adequately designed and adopted in an organization which meets the relational qualities of informal mentoring and the equity principles of a program, then which of the two approaches should be adopted in policy? (p. 99).

In discussing some of the problems associated with planned mentoring programs, Samier (2000) says:

On a more theoretical and philosophical level, formal programs are a technical rationalization of a value-laden, idiosyncratic, and irreducible form of developmental relationship. In order to harness mentoring to organizational purpose, it must be redefined to allow for the requirements of planning, made tractable by measurable traits, and deliverable in standardized, if not universally applicable form. Dimensions and practices in traditional mentoring are translated into tools, techniques and instruments in formalized programs. Formal mentoring, as Zey (1986, p. 154) notes, is a “new form of organizational development technology.” By this reduction, mentoring can be marketed as a magic bullet, a panacea, or a compensation for organizational dysfunctions: politics, discrimination, mediocrity, lack of orientation and training. Wunsch (1994, p. 27), notes that “The popularization of mentoring as a ‘quick fix’ for advancement in the workplace has blurred the definition, devalued the concept, and done little to advance the understanding of the process or the relationship.” Successes reported, are not distinguishable from the benefits of other supportive roles. . . (p. 97).

Another highly important aspect of mentoring is whether it is part of a planned program, established as a requirement towards the completion of any form of certification or licensing. Zey (1984) examined mentoring programs established within public administration programs, as well as private sector mentoring programs, and found that a number of factors caused formalized mentoring programs to be unsuccessful. Sometimes the protégé had unrealistic expectations, or did not understand the expectations of the mentor. In other cases participation of protégés was not voluntary, the mentors were overburdened with other responsibilities, or co-workers of the protégé or of the mentor might become jealous or resentful of the relationship. The greatest problems cited were lack of time for contact between the mentor and the protégée, and the lack of choice that protégés had in selecting their mentor.

Hansford and Ehrich (2005) offer a comprehensive overview of a number of studies of mentoring programs for beginning school principals. They conclude with a list of what they consider to be the most important benefits of these programs. A partial listing of these benefits includes: support, empathy, counseling, sharing of ideas, problem solving, professional development, and improved confidence. They conclude by saying, “A program that offered participants support, trust and respect, mentors who listen, confidentiality, encouragement of reflection, networking and the sharing of ideas with a professional role model should be headed in the right direction” (p. 43).

### Research Design and Methodology

The study was designed within the qualitative paradigm as an open ended, in-depth interview study, as recommended by Kvale (1996) for this type of research. This research study consisted of interviews with a diverse group of participating principals, whereby a descriptive qualitative design was the most appropriate

means to gather and interpret data in order to formulate conclusions that may help to better understand the nature of mentoring relationships.

### Sample

The nine beginning principals had all completed at least one year or more of the mentoring program for administrative licensing. The nine interview participants were initially identified by letter, from A – I, throughout all of the initial stages of the study. For the discussions that follow, each participant was assigned a pseudonym whose first letter corresponded to the letter coding in order to make it easier for readers to keep track of the individuals. The assignment of pseudonyms also maintains the gender of the subjects.

Andrew, Bernadette, Deborah, Francis, and Gregory listed their ages as “below fifty years of age.” The other participants did not provide their ages. It was, therefore, not possible to compare their ages or level of maturity.

Each one of the participants had at least five or more years as a teacher before entering into an administrative program. All nine of the participants completed their administrative programs at accredited colleges or universities in the State of New Jersey. After having been hired as an administrator, under a provisional Certificate of Eligibility, each of the participants was then required to ask the State Department of Education to be assigned a mentor, with whom they would be working for a period of two years. During that time period the participants would be required to complete a series of eight explorations and a job-embedded action research report. In addition, each participant was expected to attend meetings of their peer support group, as scheduled by their mentors. All of the participants, except for Helen, were interviewed when they were in the final six months of their two-year mentoring program. Helen had just completed her first year, and was about to begin the second year.

The nine beginning principals work in six different school districts located in Morris County, Middlesex County and Warren County.

The District Factor Grouping did not appear to have any significant impact on the study. However, this may have been due to the fact that the participants all came from very similar districts, usually with above average socio-economic levels. The only significant issue that the researcher could identify was that most of the participants did reflect upon the substance of their discussions during the peer group meetings. The participants’ perceptions of the usefulness of these discussions were directly related to whether their peers or the mentors that were present had had experience with parents, students or issues that were similar to their own. Elizabeth and Helen were the only ones who reported a concern that their mentors’ work experiences were different from their own. However, they reported that this was due to differences in experience in specific professional job functions, rather than to any difference in experiences between any particular District Factor Groupings. For example, Elizabeth was initially hired as a principal. After one year she changed jobs and became a supervisor of personnel in her district. She felt that her mentor was no longer able to assist her, and they mutually agreed to terminate their relationship. Elizabeth then asked the State for a new mentor who had experience in personnel issues. After she was assigned a new mentor who had that type of experience she finished her second year with that other individual.

Helen expressed concerns about the fact that her mentor had never worked as a principal, but only had experience as a superintendent. She planned to continue this relationship, but she felt that it would have been a more productive experience if her mentor had had similar job related experiences.

### Research Instrument

The instrument, which is the set of open-ended interview questions, addresses aspects of the mentoring relationship, from the point of view of the protégé. The interview sessions allowed the researcher to assimilate and analyze responses, in order to identify any meta-themes that arose. The instrument consists of a set of twenty-three questions that have been geared to a beginning principal. Related follow-up questions were used in order to encourage participants to give the fullest possible responses. All of the

questions were correlated to at least one of Samier's contextual factors. A sampling of the first five of the interview questions is provided below in order to provide the reader with a sense of the instrument.

#### Interview Questions

1. What do you recall of your expectations for working with a mentor, before you started the program?
2. Did your experience with your mentor meet your expectations? Why or why not?
3. If you ever decide to become a mentor yourself, would you do more than your mentor, less than your mentor, or the same as your mentor?
4. Would you have preferred that your work with your mentor encompassed more or less than the eight explorations and the research project? Explain
5. How would you describe your overall experiences with your mentor in terms of usefulness to you in your professional development?

#### Data Analysis

While the data for this research was being collected through the voluntary taped interview sessions with nine beginning principals, a Researcher's Log was used for organizational purposes and as a means of recording interview data. It was also used as a vehicle for recording of the researcher's thoughts and impressions during the interview phase. The log was then employed during the analysis phase in order to add important data that could assist in a better and more accurate interpretation.

The data for this study were analyzed using more than one model. To start with, the responses to the interview questions were examined for similarities and differences between the various participants.

Kvale (1996) divides the analysis of interviews into several steps (all italics are the author's):

. . . In a fourth step, the *transcribed interview is interpreted by the interviewer*, either alone or with other researchers. Three parts of this analysis may be discerned; first, *structuring* the often large and complex interview for analysis. This is usually done today by transcription and by programs for computer analysis of qualitative material. The next part consists of a *clarification* of the material, making it amenable to analysis. . . The *analysis proper* involves developing the meanings of the interviews, bringing the subjects' own understanding into the light as well as providing new perspectives from the researcher on the phenomena. Five main approaches to the analysis of meaning are condensation, categorization, narrative structuring, interpretation, and ad hoc methods. (pp. 189-190)

After looking for similarities and differences, the analysis in this research took a two-pronged approach, starting first with "meaning categorization," which means that categories were created according to major themes, which were Samier's contextual factors. Interview statements were then numerically coded to indicate the category into which they fell. After categorization the researcher then applied "meaning interpretation." In this way the data was then applied to Samier's contextual factors in order to determine how these matched up with the actual experiences of the interviewees. In most cases the data could be organized according to whether particular factors were present or absent within each relationship. If a factor was present, then follow-up questions could be organized accordingly, using a table format. If a factor was absent then it was also possible to group other related responses together as well. The tables of data that resulted clearly indicated how the presence or absence of a given factor had influenced the overall relationship. By comparing all six tables, and looking for commonalities or discrepancies the researcher was able to identify relationships between the factors, and also to identify any outliers.

#### Results and Findings

All of the findings reported here are arranged according to Samier's contextual factors (see above).

#### Factor #1: Opportunity for Individual Selection of Mentor.

Those participants for whom a strong relationship was important either wanted or needed some input into the selection process. Samier feels that reaching across hierarchical and departmental boundaries is important. Based on the experiences of these participants, the State may be in a better position to facilitate that aspect of the selection process.

The peer groups seemed to be a valuable relationship-building tool for all of the protégés. Since some mentors will inevitably be better than others, the small group meetings provided an opportunity for interactions with a wider circle of experienced administrators.

#### Factor #2: Sufficient Time to Develop Relationships.

Four of the protégés, who perceived the relationship to be of value to them in their day-to-day professional lives, made the greatest use of the time, and had the greatest expectations for continuing the relationships in the future. The other five protégés, who perceived that the only purpose of the relationship was to accomplish the State-mandated activities, were the ones who placed the least amount of value on their relationships. As a result, added time for them would have been irrelevant.

#### Factor #3: Opportunity to Negotiate Goals & Activities.

Those who felt they had more input were generally more satisfied with the overall mentoring experience than those who felt that they were given less input. Similarly, those protégés who were most satisfied with their mentor relationships generally reported that they were given more opportunities for input. Those who had formed a stronger bond with their peer groups than with their mentors were also the ones who generally felt they had less input into the process.

#### Factor #4: Accommodation to Unique Mentor & Protégé Styles (Were activities shaped to suit needs, especially those facilitating collaboration and the formation of alliances?)

Three protégés felt that their mentors had made an attempt to shape the requirements to suit their individual needs. They also indicated that they had found the peer group meetings were conducted in such a way that the protégés were able to form relationships with their colleagues that they would use again in the future. This bonding happened as a direct result of intentional planning on the part of the mentors.

A second group of three participants did not find that there was a great deal of accommodation in regard to how the activities were to be completed. The mentors had a preconceived view as to how they were to be completed. Although these mentors were not particularly flexible in how they shaped the activities, they did make an effort to facilitate collaboration between the protégés.

The last group of three did not believe that their mentors had been flexible in shaping the activities, or how they were to be completed. Their peer group meetings were not conducted in such a manner that collaborative relationships could be formed easily. Any relationships that formed were more likely to have been by accident instead of having been intentionally planned by their mentors. These three protégés were also the ones who reported the least overall satisfaction with their mentoring experiences.

#### Factor #5: Opportunities for Relationship-Building Activities

Most of the participants felt that the contextual factor was present in their relationships, and they were satisfied that there were sufficient opportunities for them to develop whatever level of relationship they wanted to establish with their mentors. Most participants indicated that they felt their relationship allowed them opportunities for dialogue. Those participants who experienced difficulties with their mentor relationships also expressed that there was some corresponding lack of communication.

#### Factor #6: Privacy and Confidentiality

Participants felt that the State recognized the importance of this contextual factor by requiring that mentors come from outside of the protégé's district. All of the participants indicated that they recognized

the importance and necessity of this provision. All of the mentors appeared to have made efforts to protect the privacy of their protégés in a variety of ways. However, it was evident that not all of the participants experienced a relationship that was close enough to allow for the sharing of information other than that which was related to the State requirements.

### Conclusions

In all cases the contextual factors impacted the experiences of the protégés. In any instance where the relationship between the mentor and the protégé was weaker, it was usually related to whether the contextual factors were considered to be important, as evidenced by whether the mentors or the designers of the program incorporated them into the mentoring relationship.

In the cases where the State has incorporated any of these contextual factors into their program, it appears to have been more accidental than purposeful, because of the apparently random manner in which they were being implemented, as well as the lack of training in these contextual factors provided to the mentors.

In the cases where protégés experienced weaker, less successful relationships the root cause could usually be traced back to the absence of one or more of the contextual factors.

This research study indicated that the year that the State added to the program was only a hindrance to those who developed an unsatisfactory relationship, if the other contextual factors were absent.

Those protégés who cared the most about establishing a successful relationship from the onset wanted to have some type of input into the mentor-selection process.

## Discussion

### Strengths of the Research

This researcher was interested in learning about the experiences of nine beginning principals who have participated in New Jersey's revised mentoring program, as part of their professional training as school leaders, in order to weigh these against Samier's contextual factors for mentoring programs. The study was designed within the qualitative paradigm as an open ended, in-depth interview study. As stated by Fullan: "An understanding of what reality is *from the point of view of people within the role* [author's italics] is an essential starting point for constructing practical theory of the meaning and results of change attempts" (p. 137). A qualitative interview study was a method of choice for exploring experiences from the perspectives of participants (Kvale, 1996; Mishler, 1986; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Seidman, 1998). This study investigated the topic from a qualitative-naturalistic-formative approach. According to Michael Patton (2001) the choice of a qualitative design is appropriate to a developmental or changing program. "The qualitative-naturalistic-formative approach is especially appropriate for developing, innovative or changing programs where the focus is on program improvement, facilitating more effective implementation, and exploring a variety of effects on participants" (p. 53).

### Limitations of the Research

Several limitations are inherent in this study and are acknowledged as follows:

- This study is limited to the responses and perceptions of school administrators in New Jersey public schools.
- This study is limited to nine beginning principals in New Jersey.
- This study is limited to the possible personal and professional biases of respondents due to their own life experiences or training regarding mentoring relationships.
- This study is limited to the chosen form of methodology, as the data chosen is that which is of interest to the researcher.

- This study is limited to the specific list of questions designed by the researcher.
- This study is limited to the analysis of responses and perceptions of respondents by the researcher.

#### Implications for Practice and Research

In light of the fact that, as mentioned above, this was a qualitative study of the experiences of nine participants, it is not my intention to generalize from such a small sample. However, these findings are consistent with the arguments made in the lead article by Samier (2000), as well as with many of the researchers cited in the review of literature, such as Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe and Meyerson (2005). The findings thus suggest that the following implications be considered.

- The State of New Jersey should consider if it would be helpful to intentionally and purposely incorporate all of the contextual factors into its mentoring program.
- The State of New Jersey might provide better training for mentors, which includes teaching them to use all of the contextual factors in an integrated manner.
- It may be beneficial for the State to include more opportunities for relationship-building activities, and teach mentors how to incorporate these into meetings.
- Mentor selection should be controlled by the State, but it may need to be better managed. Important factors that need to be considered: Geographical proximity, similar professional experiences and familiarity with student population.
- The State should consider allowing protégés more input into the selection of activities, in order to make them more relevant.
- It may be helpful for the State to consider creating consistent guidelines for how assignments should be evaluated.
- The State could probably make more use of available research. Databases on mentoring have already been created by Stanford University and the International Mentoring Association.
- The State should consider forming a partnership with local universities to manage the mentoring program, provide better training, create consistent criteria for assessment, eliminate redundancies, and create the conditions for integration of the contextual factors.
- Any other States that currently have a mentoring program for school leaders, or which are thinking of developing such a program, should also consider all of the implications listed above, since their relevance is not limited solely to New Jersey.

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