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TENSION › ONE

Building a New Identity



New mentors gather at their first training session excited and eager to learn more about their new role. They have agreed to step away from their comfortable past as successful, well-respected classroom teachers in a school with familiar faces and ways of working to take on new responsibilities supporting novice teachers in a variety of schools. Although excited about the opportunity, mentors, who are generally mid-career teachers, have only a cursory understanding of what their new role as full-time mentors really will entail.

Being selected as a mentor is public acknowledgment that one is an excellent teacher with the potential to support novice teachers. Practically overnight new mentors gain the status of being a teacher of teachers with high expectations that they have the skills necessary to transmit their knowledge and classroom expertise to novice teachers.



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By the end of their first school year, mentors share that the job of teacher mentor is much more complex and challenging than they had imagined and the transition to being an outsider in school(s) was more difficult than anticipated. Similar to teaching, they had been thrown into all the responsibilities that the work entails, and with time and experience they gained a deeper understanding of the complexity of the task. Mentors know they are giving up working with children to work with novice teachers, but they don't always realize how significant the changes are on a personal level as they work in a variety of school settings with a variety of adults in their new status as "mentor teacher."

Within the first two months I thought I would never be the same teacher again. I really feel that rather profoundly.... There is so much more to it—the way that you carry yourself matters, the way that you attend meetings.

—JENNY

This [first] year it's been very much about learning the culture of the school and the other people in the school; kind of letting them get a feel for me and not really knowing what was expected and acceptable when you're coming in as an outsider.

—DAVID

The adjustment to their new role begins with each mentor's entry into a school or schools where their thirteen to twenty mentees work. Their identity of having a





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home base is lost unless they work in a school that has a large number of new teachers. Mentors enter as outsiders and draw on their social skills to introduce themselves and establish new relationships. Context really matters. At some schools, they are made to feel welcome by the principal and treated as part of the staff; in other schools, mentors find that feeling welcome or even having administrators and veteran teachers understand the value of their work cannot be taken for granted. Here are some examples of challenges mentors shared in connection with entry into their assigned schools:

I had a voice and respect at the school where I taught. Now I don't.

We're not always made to feel welcome.

I am selling the value of the program at my school.

Learning to navigate through appropriate channels has been a problem.

Not having a space of my own to hang my coat or keep papers is difficult.

Mentors see themselves first and foremost as a classroom teacher of children, and it takes time to transition to seeing themselves as a mentor or teacher of teachers.

I often felt like a fish out of water as I navigated a new system, new position, and working with teachers in areas that were outside of my comfort level. Not only was I learning a new role but also in a very different context than I was used to. I was





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learning how to use the FAS [formative assessment system] tools, build relationships with teachers in several different schools, learn each school's focus and mission, and develop relationships with building administrators without breaking confidentiality. . . . I felt as though I needed to have all the answers when in actuality I had very few.

—MARY

Over the past twelve years I've observed that a good majority of classroom teachers who stay in the profession for an extended period of time reach a state of proficiency and confidence in their practice that allows them to quickly adapt to the variety of challenges and demands in public education. Years of experience using both successful and unsuccessful teaching strategies and techniques build up a "cache" of confidence in knowing what will impact student achievement. This can-do confident attitude promotes effective teacher leadership across a campus. However, stepping out of the classroom teacher role and into the mentor teacher role can erode this confidence. You move from being an experienced master of your craft to the unknown realm of guiding and instructing fellow teachers.

—BECKY

In adjusting to my new role as a mentor, I underwent a very difficult shift in identity. In my role as a





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classroom teacher I was used to being in the role of Mr. Winstead to my students, who saw elements of my personality and life in measured, appropriate pieces. . . . As John, my colleagues got to know all about me, my life, my feelings on topics, and my likes and dislikes, all things that happen in typical interactions amongst coworkers and friends. As a mentor, I knew that things would have to change, but I was unprepared for how much of a new identity I would have to take on.

When you're having a bad day as a classroom teacher, you can turn to your colleagues, answer the "How are you doing?" question honestly, and just vent for a bit. I found, during my first year as a mentor, that my day and my feelings about how things were for me were secondary to the needs/feelings/thoughts of my teachers, as it should be when they are in crisis or just want to talk, celebrate, etc. That was fine because my work focused on their needs and their growth, but I couldn't help feeling that I was disconnected from the context in which I was working. I felt that I needed to wear a mask to go with this new identity of "everyman," someone who was whatever that person needed me to be at that moment.

—JOHN

By the end of the second year, mentors have worked with many more novice teachers, are more proficient





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at their job, and more comfortable in their role. Some remarked as follows:

I didn't know what I didn't know last year! Even though I'm better at it, it's harder because I have more awareness of what's going on. We've had more training, which included issues of equity, ESL learners, and EC [early childhood] learners. I'm learning more about what's going on and I'm finding it's more complex.

—PAUL

I'm much less intimidated about walking into their classrooms this year than I was last year. I have more knowledge of what my role really is and what's possible in my role. And, I know more of the faculty at both schools than I did last year and have learned the dynamics a little bit.

—JENNY

After mentors feel comfortable with their new identity as a “new teacher mentor,” they still run into many situations in which they wonder, “What's my role in this situation? How should I behave? What's my responsibility under these circumstances?” Mentors must make judgments regarding how to behave in a variety of unanticipated situations. The dilemmas and challenges they face represent the typical tensions of mentoring. Following are a few examples of the issues mentors confront. Some of the issues cross over with themes covered in other chapters and will be discussed in more detail later.





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What's my role with the principal? Sometimes principals want to put us to work on their agenda and I need to maintain confidentiality.

People have high expectations for what we produce out of the teachers we mentor. What's my role and responsibility when a teacher is not performing adequately and is not following my suggestions?

I find it challenging to have to sit quietly and be an observer rather than jump in and fix things. . . . Knowing that I have good skills as a teacher . . . to what extent can I make sure students receive good teaching?

Working with third years who think they are fine and don't recognize that they still have areas in which they need help with. . . . How do I help them in a professional way?

Standing on the outside and looking in is hard. . . . I see site-based decisions that take time away from important things. I see all the things that teachers have to put up with. What role can I play to help conditions improve?

Working in new schools, mentoring new teachers, and participating in sustained mentor training help mentors shift their perspective from being a classroom teacher to that of an educator with a broader perspective. What several mentors described as gaining a "global" perspective has implications for their vision of good schools, good teaching, and how to help teachers improve their practice.





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Becoming a mentor expands the vision of midcareer teachers as to how they can contribute to improving schools and the teaching profession.

Being able to see it from the teachers' perspective, to be able to see it from the administrators' perspectives, and to be able to see it from the principal's perspective, which is different from the administrators' perspectives as well as the other people in the building that support staff that's there. That has been one of my hugest learnings this year.

—MELISSA

The shift from having the perspective of a classroom teacher to that of an educator was transformational for many mentors and has implications for how they work with other educators and view the profession of teaching.

The biggest insight that I gained is having this global perspective... Whereas as a teacher I was quite happy to just close my door and be in my room because I was good at it and my kids were good at it in my room and so it was easy to just think, "All you other people figure out how to get it good in your room." That's different for me now. It's really changed the way I look at education.

—NANCY

Mentors are first and foremost experienced teachers, some of whom had taught in only one school prior to their being selected as a district mentor. Their experience





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as mentors broadens their understanding of teaching and learning in different school cultures. As principals and veteran teachers see the value of their support to new teachers, and mentors become more knowledgeable and comfortable in their role, mentors become more confident and able to support teachers in more ways. As mentors move from being a first-year mentor, a second-year mentor, and then a third-year mentor, their growing experiences support an increasing number of beginning teachers with different strengths and needs and increases their understanding of how they can influence the quality of teaching across school contexts and working conditions. Building one's identity and skills as a mentor is a developmental process rather than a static occurrence.



