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Why do ECE Teachers Need To Be Mentored by ECE Administrators?

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Abstract:

Why do ECE teachers need to be mentored by ECE administrators? At the data site, the research problem was that students are not meeting the required standards of proficiency in state testing and schools are failing to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) as mandated by the No Child Left Behind of 2001. In an effort to comply with the NCLB Act (2001) mandates, the local school district supported ECE teachers through a mentoring program to address student achievement. School leaders at the data site needed research-based findings on the evaluation of the ECE mentoring program. A sample of n = 66 participants was purposefully selected and interviewed. The findings revealed that mentoring helps ECE teachers. Institutes of higher education, professional development providers, administrators' associations, school districts, and school leaders may benefit from having an awareness of how mentoring helps ECE teachers to improve their instructional practices. Effectiveness of teachers can be increased through opportunities for ongoing, systemic, and systematic mentoring; however, mentoring needs to be intentional, ongoing, and both systemic and systematic.

Keywords:

ECE Teachers, ECE Mentors, Professional Development, Mentoring, and K-12 Administrators

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Introduction

The data site is a public school district located in the eastern United States of America. The school district increased ECE teacher collaboration and professional learning in order to improve teachers' instructional practices and student academic achievement. Research studies have explored teaching practices and student academic achievement; however, no scholars at the data site have conducted research to examine why ECE teachers need to be mentored by ECE administrators.

Statement of the Problem

At the data site, the research problem remains that students are not meeting the required standards of proficiency in state testing and schools are failing to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) as mandated by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001). In an effort to comply with the NCLB Act (2001) mandates, the local school district must provide students with an equal opportunity for a quality education. An even more pressing issue is the need to support ECE teachers to address student achievement. School leaders at the data site needed research-based findings on the evaluation of the ECE mentoring program.

Nature of the Study

This qualitative study sought to evaluate the ECE mentoring program through a case study. Data were collected through interviews with the participants who were two ECE mentors and 66 ECE teachers.

Research Question

The research question that guided this study was: Why do ECE teachers need to be mentored ECE administrators?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to evaluate the ECE mentoring program, which was implemented in order to prepare ECE teachers to assist students in raising the level of academic proficiency. The vision of the school district emphasizes teaching practices with the main focus being on lifting the academic achievement to a level that demonstrates a narrowing of the academic achievement gap of all schools within the school district.

Conceptual Framework

This qualitative case study was grounded in the educational theory of John Dewey (1916) and in Vygotsky's learning theory (1978), which states that when teachers are engaged in activities within a supportive learning environment and when they are receiving appropriate guidance, then learning could occur.

Thus, by applying the multiplicity of these learning theories, ECE mentors are able to help ECE teachers improve learning.

Definition of Terms

ECE Mentors: ECE mentors are master ECE teachers who provide ECE teachers with meaningful feedback on instructional practices and support with the ECE program.

Instructional practices: Instructional practices refer to changes in classroom organization with regards to sharing expertise, ideas, and opinions in order to maximize student learning.

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations

This case study was limited to the participants. Each participant was an employee of the school district at the time of the study. Because participants were selected from predetermined criteria, they were considered suitable participants for this study. The predetermined criteria for each participant were: (a) ECE teaching or ECE administration; (b) ECE certified, and (c) agreed to participate in the study. The study was limited to the participants from all schools within one school district, which does not allow for the generalization of the findings to all ECE teachers and administrators. The study was bounded by all schools available for inclusion in this study within one school district.

The participants were considered representative of the total population of ECE teachers and mentors at the data site. Participants' responses to the interview questions were assumed to accurately represent their true perceptions, attitudes, ideas, and feelings.

The participants were made aware of the confidentiality of the data collected. Participants were advised of their confidentiality rights and were assured that real names would not appear in any forum. The researcher informed the participants that no risks would occur from being a participant in the study.

In order to aid in controlling investigative bias, the researcher reviewed all transcriptions with experts in the fields of the ECE program. Member checking was applied to minimize investigative bias. Responses that were interpreted by the researcher were presented to the participants holding positions of responsibility for review and analysis. This process ensured that the responses interpreted were indeed the participant's true feelings, expressions, thoughts, and ideas.

Significance of the Study

This study was one of the first to evaluate the aforementioned ECE program at the data site. The findings should provide valuable insight about the significance of the facilitation of a mentoring ECE program. The professional application of this qualitative case study may be of interest to researchers, educators, and administrators.

The findings of this qualitative study may assist school and district administrators, ECE teachers, and board members to make district-wide wise decisions relative to ECE programs and their impact on raising the level of academic proficiency of students as measured by district and state assessments. The findings of this study may assist district administrators with the allocation of human and capital resources on programs that make significant contributions to student achievement.

Literature Review

Learning is an individualized process and rarely is there a *one-size-fits-all* concept. Research has also indicated that students and educators have different techniques with the way they learn (Diaz, & Cartnal, 1999; Knight, 2010; Shin, 2009).

Students who struggle academically have difficulty catching up with good readers (Rapp, van den Broek, McMaster, Kendeou, & Espin, 2007; Rasinski & Padak, 2000; Stein et al., 2008; Strickland et al., 2002) and are unable to graduate from high school, enter college, or find jobs that support them (Lenters, 2006). However, teachers continue to use the one-size-fits-all instructional approach (Allington, 2002; Gaskins, 2005).

Since the inception of the NCLB Act (2002), teachers, administrators, and school districts have been concerned with identifying the best practices to narrow the academic achievement gap. Students with academic difficulties are less likely to achieve in every area of the curriculum (Dryer, Ehri, Flugman, & Gross, 2007; Lo, Wang, & Haskell, 2009). Effective teachers understand the developmental changes of learners (Ippolito, Steele, & Samson, 2008; Lacina & Watson, 2008; Wallace et al., 2007). Hansen (2009) posited that school programs are successful in helping students school administrators, teachers, parents, and community members support these programs enthusiastically.

Effective teachers: (a) use strategies to identify the needs of students and to create effective programs for students (Kame'enui et al., 2006); (b) support educational programs (Strickland et al., 2002); (c) use professional development knowledge to provide high quality instruction (Duffy, 2003); and (d) are highly skilled in understanding of good teaching and instructional strategies (Gambrell et al., 2007). Teachers' decisions affect students (Brownell & Pajares, 1996; Graham & Pajares, 1997). Teachers need to use evidence-based practices to guide their decisions in the creation of instruction (Allington, 2005; Torgesen, et

al., 2007). Instructional practices should include a plethora of strategies that support students (Access Center, 2004). Exemplary instruction should result in proficient outcomes for all learners (Croninger & Valli, 2009).

Mentoring helps teachers to develop positive behaviors and attitudes toward teaching. Through professional development, teachers can identify the specific skills needed to teach. Effective instruction requires specific professional development that targets the skill and knowledge related to specific teaching and learning objectives (Strickland, Kamil, Walberg, & Manning, 2003). Mentoring can be aligned with the needs of the students and may take place through informal and formal means. Informal methods include after-school seminars, teachers' meetings to share ideas, professional journals and books (Van Horn, 2003). Formal methods include pre-service courses, internships in graduate schools of education, and literacy coaches (Theriot & Tice, 2009). Teachers receive support in learning (Ganser, 2000) how to improve student achievement through mentoring to respond to current mandates of NCLB through mentoring, which is about teacher learning (Fitzharris, Jones, & Crawford, 2008; Gasner, 2000). Teachers who engage in professional development do so with the learning needs of their students in mind (Lambert, 2002).

Mentoring programs are beneficial to teachers (Burns & Stechuk, 2003). Teachers who participate in ongoing professional development become able to integrate and manage all the components of instruction (Duffy, 2003). Effective mentoring programs help teachers to become confident learners of instructional practices (Morrow, 2003).

There is a strong relationship between teaching practices and participation in professional development (Smith, Hofer, Gillespie, Soloman, & Rowe, 2003). Motivation is intrinsic and internal (Thompkins, 2003) and extrinsic (Baker, 2003). Teachers need to understand the importance of providing an environment in which students choose to be motivated (Hall, 2006; Lacina & Watson, 2008).

Teachers in schools with high achieving test scores are using a variety of research-based teaching strategies (Klecker & Pollock, 2006). Lifelong learning imposes training (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006) because learning is continuous.

Research-based strategies and differentiated instruction should be provided to teachers, when teachers are engaged in mentoring then learning can occur (Kearsley, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers need research-based instructional practices (Ferrero, 2005). The practices of teachers may successfully engage students (Ancess & Wichterle, 2002; Cline & Nocochea, 2006; Kannapel & Clements, 2006; Kariuki & Wilson, 2002).

Co-teaching refers to educators working together with equal standing (Bouck, 2007a; Gordon, 2006; Murawski & Dieker, 2008; Rea et al., 2002).

Teachers must be willing to compensate for weaknesses by working together (Murawski & Dieker, 2008).

Professional learning communities (PLC) encourage collective learning and application of that learning (Hord, 2004). Educators who operate within a culture of continuous learning question, investigate, and seek solutions for school improvement and increased student achievement (Fullan, 2006) and for learning from each other to improve teaching and learning (Kose, 2009). Teachers assume responsibility for their students and their own learning (Rooney, 2007). Teachers of professional learning communities solve their most complex problems by tapping internal expertise (Hirsh & Killion, 2009) and develop and implement more effective instructional practices (Jacobson, 2010). Teachers should work together (Chenoweth, 2009). Job embedded professional learning can improve teacher practice and student achievement (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Professional learning communities can offer teachers ongoing opportunities to learn together, apply learning to the classroom, and reflect on what works and why (Chappuis, Chappuis, & Stiggins, 2009). Teachers can learn from their peers (Wallis, 2008). Effective professional development must be results driven, standards based, and job-embedded (Greene, 2003) in teachers' daily work to improve student learning (Kelleher, 2003). Successful schools take professional development seriously (Danielson, 2002). Professional knowledge should be coupled with application of skills combined with reflection-on-action and enabled by critical feedback (Wassermann, 2009).

Teachers who reflected on their instructional practice become better at their instructional practices (Stockero, 2008). Teachers trained by constructivist teachers have a more positive effect on student achievement (Alsup, 2004). Peer coaching is a professional development program for teacher growth (Zwart et al., 2007). Jordan, Ory, and Sher (2005) asserted that coaching is the bridge between theory and practice of the peer coach researching a problem and translating the research to useful practice for teachers. Hjalmarson (2008) explained that a teacher is the most important person in implementation of curriculum and understanding of students.

There is a relationship between high student achievement and mentoring programs (Lewis, 2008). Mentoring helps teachers to change their instructional practices (Reeves, 2007) and to solve problems by helping teachers listen to their own thoughts, reflections, and instincts (Garbriel, 2005). More training in instructional practices helps teachers to provide better instruction (Harris & Dwyer, 2008).

Research Design

A qualitative case study was chosen because this study was based upon the participants' feelings.

A qualitative design is most effective for inquiries involving human life (Miller & Crabtree, 1992). Case studies of several individuals are effective (Creswell, 1998). A scope of particularity and complexity was embedded in this qualitative design (Stake, 1995), which allows the researcher latitude to investigate social trend inquiries using methods that are interactive and humanistic (Creswell, 2003). Case studies are the method of choice when the researcher is interested in understanding a person or program, particularly when there is interest in learning the particularity and complexity of the case or cases (Stake, 1995). An in depth analysis of the case study promotes the understanding of each case's important particulars. For the purpose of this case study, each participant is classified as a case. The researcher's main objective was placed on investigating and exploration (Hamel, 1993). This qualitative design was examined by inductive logic, reasoning from specific to general terms (Hamel, 1993).

This study took place over a period of over four months and involved an in-depth data collection process and analysis. This qualitative research design afforded the researcher the opportunity to interview participants in order to obtain a deeper inquiry per individual.

The researcher's relationship to the participants was that of just a researcher and not a figure of authority. In order to minimize potential bias and coercion, a research assistant not affiliated with the involved local school district who had never participated on program evaluations assisted the researcher. To aid in controlling investigative bias, the researcher had the research assistant review all transcriptions. Member checking was applied to minimize investigative bias. During the qualitative phase of data collection, the researcher was actively involved in the interview and surveys process, collecting, organizing, and analyzing all data generated.

The unique design of a qualitative study includes extensive time spent with participants and narrative data outcomes added to the value of this study. In order to ensure validity, the researcher employed strategies to check the accuracy of these findings. Validating the accuracy of findings requires that the researcher and the participants agree on the credibility and authenticity of the methods as well as the outcomes involved in the study (Creswell, 1998).

The researcher acted as the primary instrument in the data collection process (Merriam, 2002). The qualitative data were used to generate rich and descriptive information needed to answer the research questions (Merriam, 2002). The researcher chose this design as it exemplifies the characteristics of qualitative research by focusing on understanding how the study participants create meaning of the aforementioned mentoring programs. In this study, the

researcher was interested in understanding the essence of the phenomena of the mentoring program at the data site by examining the perspectives of the participants.

The researcher developed the interview process to collect meaningful data from the perspective of the participants about the study's aforementioned qualitative research questions. The researcher collected data using interviewing techniques in attempts to answer the research questions, and to focus on understanding the world from the perspective of the participants. The researcher was the primary data collection tool. The focus of the researcher was to maintain a strong study. Thus, the researcher developed all interview questions based on the current literature review in order to ask questions that generate quality data to enable the triangulation process that may promote the most accurate representation of the research findings.

Researcher's Role And Instrumentation

As a qualitative study, the researcher did not put his own perceptions, understandings, and prejudices of phenomena into this study and focused on how the participants experienced the phenomena (i.e., ECE mentoring program). The researcher provided each participant with information about the data collection process and to help the participants understand any potential conflicts and/or biases.

In this qualitative case study, direct sources of information included interviews with the participants. The interview data for each participant were triangulated as part of the within-case analyses. The open-ended interviews were conducted by the researcher to seek insight about the aforementioned issues. An expert panel of experienced program evaluators reviewed the researcher-generated interview protocols. The members of the expert panel ensured that the content of the questions posed to the participants were appropriate, relevant, and not leading in any manner. The members of the expert panel reviewed and assessed the interview protocols and suggested revisions that were adopted into the protocols.

Validating the accuracy of findings requires that the researcher and the participants agree as to the credibility and authenticity of the methods as well as the outcomes involved in the study. The unique design of a case study includes extensive time spent in the field with participants and narrative data outcomes, which all add to the value of a study. To ensure validity for this research study, the researcher employed strategies to check the accuracy of these findings through the process of member checking.

Interview Protocols

The direct source of information was in-depth open-ended interviews with the participants. The interviews were conducted during a ten-week time span in the spring of 2010. The researcher conducted the interviews. The total time of interviews was over 50 hours. The researcher followed the interview protocols created by the researcher.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher took notes during the interviews. Member-checking helped the researcher ensure that the information reported from each participant had been recorded correctly. This qualitative research design was based on the desire to understand the meaning of the phenomenon of the ECE mentoring program from the perspectives of the participants. The sample size consisted of the participants about the phenomenon being studied. The participants made a worthwhile contribution to the study. This type of sampling was used based on criterion-based purposeful sample that best represented the objectives of the research study where the participants provided qualitative data. Verbatim written transcripts were produced for data analysis purposes.

Data Analysis

Data from the interviews were used to answer the research questions that guided this study. After transcribing the interviews, typing up notes, and reviewing the survey responses, within-case analyses were conducted by the researcher for each case.

During the reviewing of the transcripts, the researcher thoroughly examined the participant's responses. The participants' interview responses provided information on how deeply connected the relationship was between the perceptions of the participants and the effectiveness of the program evaluation. The next phase of the analysis process was the coding of the data. During the data analysis process of this qualitative case study several thoughts and ideas can be common to the participants during the reading and deciphering of the interview transcript survey responses. For triangulation purposes, the responses were cross-checked. The triangulation process involved making sense of the multiple sources of data to provide common themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The participants' ideas, thoughts, attitudes and feeling may be strongly represented through triangulation using qualitative data. The researcher cross-checked the sources of data during the triangulation process. Once the data were thoroughly organized and examined, themes were identified that represent an underlying concept. The researcher deciphered each interview transcript to identify categories and themes necessary were included in the final document.

The researcher examined the themes that emerged across all cases and conducted a thematic analysis. A commonality among the participants'

responses was found. The analysis process revealed the participants' views on the themes that were identified. Interview data analysis enabled a more thorough examination of the participant's feelings on the programs under evaluation. The researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim. The comparison of data across the participants allowed themes to emerge and provide the researcher with a broader and deeper perspective on the phenomena.

Evidence of Quality

The trustworthiness component was used to endorse the credibility of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Addressing researcher bias in a qualitative study was important (Creswell, 1998). Qualitative researchers use at least two sources of trustworthiness in any given study (Creswell). A process was followed to ensure that the responses that were recorded were indeed the participants' true feelings, expressions, thoughts and ideas (Creswell, 2003) (i.e., member-checking).

Presentation of the Cases

The researcher examined the data thoroughly on an individual basis. ECE respondents asserted that "in-house" mentoring opportunities help teachers to effectively implement the curriculum.

Teachers can receive help from mentors with regards to the assessing of the children. Teachers who receive mentoring on a *regular basis* improve their instructional strategies. During mentoring, mentors share expertise about teaching and learning strategies needed to help the children learn new concepts. During mentoring, teachers receive *feedback* from the mentors through classroom observations, meetings, and co-teaching.

Mentoring at the school level helps teachers strengthen their teaching skills. Mentoring is about *professional growth*. Mentoring should be ongoing, job-embedded, results driven, standard-based, and deeply connected to teaching and learning. Mentors can help new teachers through interactions, classroom observations, and meetings. Mentoring can be effective even for experienced teachers. Mentoring is not following the curriculum but about improving teaching and learning.

The participants reported that they had *positive experiences with mentoring, which they called peer coaching*. Specifically, mentoring helps teachers identify different techniques to incorporate into their lessons. The participants reported that mentoring *had an effect on their instructional practices*. Exchanging ideas with peers is a valuable tool for teachers because teachers can present to other teachers different, efficient, effective, and more interesting methods of teaching. Mentoring allows teachers to experience the teaching styles of other teachers.

The participants reported that mentoring *had an effect on their classroom environment* because mentoring helped teachers to bring change to their classrooms. Mentoring is a good way to support *each other* and to improve *areas of*

weaknesses. The participants asserted that mentors identify appropriate pedagogies to enhance mentees' learning and professional development by listening and suggesting both teaching methods and workshops and providing feedback.

Theme

A theme emerged during the interviews. The theme revealed the participants' attitudes and feelings toward the ECE mentoring.

Theme: Teachers' Need More Mentoring

ECE teachers believe in mentoring. Teachers reported that mentoring helps them maintain student interest and engagement. Other teachers reported that mentoring helps them to improve teaching practices and student achievement. Teachers emphasized that mentoring should be implemented by experienced, caring, and dedicated administrators. All teachers responded that mentoring has positive effects on teachers' teaching practices because they identify their strengths and weaknesses through mentoring. Peer mentoring is helpful for teachers because they grow professionally and their teaching practices are improving.

Discussion

The findings of this study are in line with the scholars who asserted that teachers need to be supported to identify appropriate pedagogies. A change process is necessary for teachers to improve their instructional practices (Gilbertson et al., 2007; Ho, 2000; Latz et al., 2009; Lynch et al., 2007; McMillian, 2007; Miller & Glover, 2007; Morin, 2001; Murray et al., 2009; Sadler & Sugai, 2009; Wagner, 2001). The findings of this study also in line with the scholars who asserted that teachers' decisions affect student outcomes and classroom environments (Allington, 2002; Brownell & Pajares, 1996; Cummins, 2007; Graham & Pajares, 1997; Patterson & Manning, 2008; Taylor, Anderson, Au, & Raphael, 2000; Valencia & Buly, 2006). Effective teachers differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students (Allington, 2006; Croninger & Valli, 2009; Levy, 2008; Muhtaris, 2008; Strickland, et al., 2002; Torgesen, 2004).

The findings of this study also in line with the scholars who asserted that staff development is results-driven, content-focused, research-based, aligned to standards and assessments, defined by student needs, intensive, sustained, collaborative, and job-embedded (American Educational Research Association, 2005; Birman et al., 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Elmore, 2002; Fullan, 2007; Greene, 2003; Hargreaves, 2007; Hirsh, 2000; Hirsh & Killion, 2009; Institute of Education Sciences, 2007; Kelleher, 2003; Mitzell, 2007; Reeves, 2010; Richardson, 2007; Sparks 2000; Tomlinson, 2005; Viadero, 2007; Wassermann,

2009; Western Regional Educational Laboratory, 2000b; Zepeda, 2008). Mentoring has the potential to encourage teachers to learn and apply new theories and practices and to diagnose and plan instruction to increase student learning through inquiry, action research, reflection, collaboration, and mentoring (Crowther, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 2005/2006; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Fullan, 2007; Hirsh, 2004; Holler et al., 2007; Joyce & Showers, 2002a; Laitsch, 2003, 2004; Lowden, 2005; Richardson, 2007; Sever & Bowgren, 2007; Waters et al., 2003).

The findings of this study also in line with the scholars who asserted that confidence in instructional practice may lead to higher student achievement scores (Alsup, 2004; Clarke, 2006; Cossentino, 2004; Frykholm & Glasson, 2005; Klinger, 2004; McMillian, 2007; Stockero, 2008; Zwart, et al., 2007). The findings of this study also in line with the scholars who asserted that mentoring/coaching is related to high student achievement (Harris & Dwyer, 2008; Lewis, 2008; Reeves, 2007; Schelfhout et al., 2004; Whitmore, 2005).

Summary

Mentors should provide mentee teachers with meaningful feedback on instructional practices. By utilizing the skills and knowledge of mentors, teachers can provide support to students to increase their proficiency levels and be ready for entrance to K-1 curricula. Effective interactions between mentors and mentee teachers are necessary to help teachers improve their instructional practices. This study shed further light on the importance of providing assistance to teachers through mentoring opportunities.

The findings indicate that ECE teachers need additional support and professional development through mentoring. Therefore, future studies might formulate more research questions about specific types of professional development opportunities. Teachers indicated the need for support through mentoring in the areas of instructional strategies, sharing of lesson plans, student assessment, collaboration with district stakeholders, and community involvement.

The findings of this study have made positive contributions to the field of research on the importance of providing support to teachers and administrators. The findings of this study are in line with the findings of other scholars with regards to mentoring and professional development. Mentoring programs should focus on increasing the awareness of the necessity of additional mentoring programs that focus on improving instructional practices.

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