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# *Issues in Mentoring Programs for Teachers*

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Hundreds of years ago, the land known today as Kampuchea was a strong and peaceful Asian kingdom. The land was virtually impervious to attack from the fierce nations surrounding it. Their defense? A thick, impenetrable forest of bamboo plants surrounding the nation. For generations, the Kampuchians lived safely and worked together, protected by the stand of bamboo. Their downfall came when one innovative aggressor scattered gold nuggets among the bamboo plants. The Kampuchians scrambled greedily to collect nuggets for themselves, cutting down the bamboo plants to more easily mine the gold. They were no longer working together and their best defense was lost: their nation was overrun and a history of decline began.

In America today, public education is frequently under attack. Our greatest strength as educators should be in working together, nurturing each other, and protected by a strong boundary of valid, research-based educational practice. Instead, teachers generally work individually in often hostile work cultures. After the first year of her move from an upper elementary to a lower grade level, one experienced and capable teacher shared her feelings:

Since moving to the elementary wing of the building, I have felt very isolated from my peers. All I ever see all day is my students. I have only developed one close relationship and I do feel that this has affected my professional self-image. I am becoming very dissatisfied with my situation because I feel like an outsider. Not a day goes by that I don't wish that I hadn't left my old position. I thought the grass looked greener on the other side, but what I found was a lot of crab grass.

When we fail to work together, we increase our vulnerability to attack from outside forces. The result is that experienced teachers become immune to or cynical about schooling and withdraw. Worse yet, the individualistic environment is often fatal to novices and to those most committed to good teaching.

Mentoring programs are a promising strategy to defend and build our ranks by pulling educators together to work and build educational practices. While mentoring programs are receiving increased state and national support, the way we traditionally implement these programs may not be the best way to draw educators together and to provide professional development. Further, the context of American education may not be conducive to effective mentoring practices. This paper raises three issues regarding mentoring practices which have arisen from my collaborative research on how teachers work together in naturalistic elementary school settings.

*Issue 1: Mentoring is just one of the types of support behaviors needed and practiced by teachers in elementary schools.*

Our research suggests that teachers interact for a variety of reasons in elementary schools. A content analysis of over 500 teacher interactions across 76 days showed conversations focused on teaching (problem solving, decision making, soliciting help, giving help, and completing tasks), focused on teachers (expressing frustration and/or helplessness, expressing feelings, empathizing), and general interactions (giving information, receiving information, discussing, conversing lightly, receiving encouragement, giving encouragement, and building relationships) (Bainer and Didham, 1991).

Teachers supporting each other, often referred to as "mentoring," is one function of those interactions. That is, formal mentoring, as it is generally defined and practiced in school districts, is just one way teachers naturally support each other in school settings. Closer examination of over 400 teachers' perceptions of the types of support they give and receive in elementary schools identified six dimensions or types of support practices regularly among teachers (Bainer and Didham, 1994).

- Mentoring—a non-reciprocal relationship for receiving advice, information, encouragement, and guidance from more experienced others in the workplace;
- Supporting—a reciprocal relationship providing mutual psychosocial support including friendship, confirmation, and emotional support;
- Collaborating—a career-enhancing relationship among colleagues that enables them to fulfill professional responsibilities and address student needs and school-related problems;
- Career Strategizing—a non-reciprocal relationship providing visibility, recognition, and responsibility in the school and community;
- Supervising—a non-reciprocal relationship in which solicited and unsolicited feedback is provided; and
- Grounding—providing "insider information" about the ins and outs of the district, school, and larger teaching field.

These findings concur with research in business and industry that a variety of personal and professional support is available in the workplace (Kram and Isabella, 1985). In elementary schools, problems arise when teachers are unable or unwilling to develop support relationships. Lack of supportive relationships leads to poor professional self-image (Cruikshank and Associates, 1980), low job satisfaction (Friesen, Prokop, and Sarros, 1988), and is frequently cited as a leading cause of teachers leaving the profession (Alexander, Adams, and Martray, 1983; Lortie, 1975). These findings are well illustrated by the teacher quote shared earlier.

Not only do teachers perceive of a variety of types of support, but they also attest that this comes from a range of individu-

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als in the workplace (Bainer and Didham, 1991). This reiterates research from the business world that support tends to be provided by a variety of people at a variety of levels within the hierarchical structure of the organization (Kram and Isabella, 1985).

What does this say to mentoring programs in education? It suggests that the traditional mentor-protégé dyad may not be an appropriate model. One person, assigned to work with a neophyte teacher, may not be capable of providing the professional, personal, and social interactions and support required for healthy professionalism. Instead, teachers may need to turn to a variety of people to meet a variety of needs in the broad education context. A more appropriate model may be the "cluster model" of mentoring, in which numerous situation-centered relationships are developed rather than just one close mentoring relationship. That is, we all need to work together in the school context. Mentoring, or providing support, is everyone's responsibility and our best defense against outside forces that would disrupt or distract us from the goals of education.

### *Issue 2: Support networks differ between male and female teachers.*

Our early research identified a profile of six separate dimensions or types of support perceived of by elementary teachers (Bainer and Didham, 1994; discussed above). Contrary to the popular assumption that novice teachers need and receive more and different types of support than do experienced teachers, data analysis showed no significant difference in the profile of types of support given or received based on the teachers' years of experience. Further, there was no difference in the types of support given or received based on school locale. That is, urban, suburban, and small town/rural elementary school teachers said they needed, received, and rendered the same types of support. Gender, however, did significantly impact support networks. A follow-up study to investigate gender differences in how teachers perceive their support for each other reaffirmed the six separate dimensions of support among female teachers (Bainer, 1995). In contrast, male elementary teachers perceived of eight dimensions or types of support in their networks in elementary schools. While relationships identified by female teachers tended to integrate or blend work-related and psychosocial functions, relationships identified by males served discrete, focused psychosocial or professional functions. Specifically, factor analysis suggested that the female teachers perceived of a dominant Mentoring factor which broadly defined mentoring as a combination of personal and work-related support behaviors. In contrast, the male teachers separated this Mentoring factor into four distinct factors. Males clustered many items related to professional development and success, especially understanding how to influence others and how to function within the organizational structure. Males also separated out a distinct Peer Mentoring factor, in which colleagues take action on the teacher's behalf; and Advocating factor in which a superior or influential person provides opportunities and visibility in a variety of social and professional settings; and a Modeling factor in which the teacher had a clear role model to emulate. The delineation of these four factors sug-

gests a clearer emphasis on professional development and advancement through networking for males than for female teachers, a phenomenon noted in business and industry by Nieva and Gutek (1981). It further suggests that female teachers think of the adults in their workplace as filling a variety of roles or providing support at a variety of levels; sort of as "best friends." This agrees with the findings by Stonewater, Eveslage, and Dingson (1990) which showed that female academics tended to combine personal and work-related support while males differentiated between the two. It also reiterates Gilligan's theory (1982) that females see their personal and professional lives as more intertwined than do males, and their career development more connected to others than would men.

Further, female teachers thought that supportive relationships with others in the school setting, whether current or in the past, had a significant and lasting impact on the way they thought about the support relationships they were currently experiencing. In contrast, male teachers thought that while these relationships had a lasting impact on their career success and mobility, they had little impact on them personally or socially, or on how they performed the daily tasks of teaching. As Gilligan (1982) noted, the women in this study tended to define themselves and their teaching careers in the context of human relationships, maintaining relationships or the tendency to develop support networks across the years of their professional lives. Male teachers tended to be less influenced by relationships with others in the long run. They tended to think about and perhaps to foster support networks related to professional development and success rather than relationships which provide psychosocial or routine work-related benefits. This seems to suggest that while both male and female teachers need support networks, they need and tend to utilize them to different ends.

What does this suggest about mentoring programs in education? These findings suggest that male and female teachers may need different considerations and resources in order to develop professionally and to establish healthy, comprehensive networks in the elementary school workplace. Taken further, it reminds us that "mentoring" or programs aimed at developing support networks within schools may need to be highly individualistic and situation specific. That is, a "cookie cutter" approach to mentoring will be minimally effective. Individualized approaches and program options are essential, even within the same building and district, if we are to pull educators together for the common good.

### *Issue 3: Informal mentoring occurs in schools whether or not formalized programs exist.*

Our research as well as the research from business and industry attest to the importance of support relationships to emotional health and professional effectiveness. Further, our research suggests that an active informal network of support relationships exists in elementary schools whether or not a formalized mentoring program exists (Bainer and Didham, 1995). The results of this quantitative study echo the results of Cole's qualitative work (1991), leading her to raise the question: Why should we make artificial what comes naturally? That is, why

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invest considerable time and money to formally structure relationships that can and do occur naturally, especially if that formalization inhibits the development of other naturally occurring support relationships? One teacher shared her experience with formal and informal mentoring as follows:

My first year teaching, I had a mentor, and I can admit that it was a waste of time. Because I was assigned to her, nobody else talked to me. It was an absolutely horrible experience. The second year the significant relationships with other employees that I made were on my own. These happened naturally and to this day we still have a wonderful work relationship/friendship. My mentor from the previous year is someone I don't even talk to now. We never had anything in common from the beginning. Hopefully, administrators can learn to see the significance of teacher support systems, because I almost quit that first year. I'm glad I stuck it out and tried on my own the following year. I know how important those relationships are to the work environment. My co-workers are half the reason I get up in the morning!!

What does this say about mentoring programs in education? As this teacher report suggests, support among teachers may be better encouraged by focusing attention on the school context rather than by adopting a structured program that mandates traditional mentoring relationships. Administrators who direct efforts toward creating a conducive environment in which meaningful interactions can take place might see better results, and at less expense in fiscal and human resources. This includes considering the use of space. Are there places in the building for teachers to interact? Are they comfortable spaces, or do the furnishings send a "stay away" message? Are they accessible, or only available when students and special programs aren't using them? Designation of time is also vital. Can teacher schedules be arranged to provide time for collaborative planning, sharing resources, and just talking about teaching and about themselves? Are professional days full of required meetings and speakers, or is there "down time" for teachers to interact and build relationships? How can extra duty assignments be made to capitalize on teacher professional and personal interactions? What incentives are available to encourage teacher collaboration and problem solving? A more flexible, "user friendly" elementary school setting seems essential to establishing an environment in which the range of support behaviors can naturally develop and flourish.

Support behaviors can also be fostered when teachers focus on a mutual problem or challenge. Such situations stimulate teachers to collaborate toward a common goal. One district experienced this when the state science curriculum was changed. The need to change the district curriculum presented a challenge to teachers, and terrified many of the most experienced teachers. A representative group of teachers took leadership in reworking the curriculum, listening to professional development needs perceived by the teachers, and building a year-long professional development program. The constructivist-based program enabled teachers to identify their own professional goals, and to

select from a menu of options to create a personalized professional development program. Subsequent evaluation showed that one of the most valued aspects of the program was that it served as a catalyst for networking among the teachers. Teachers valued the opportunity to talk and process with others located in the next classroom or the next building, thus developing informal networks of support built around a common goal of reforming the science curriculum (Bainer and Wright, in press).

This networking and support, around a common goal of enhancing education, will provide teachers with a strong defense against outside forces. It provides a model of teachers working together and nurturing each other, and practicing valid, research-based educational practice. It has reduced cynicism and fear among the teachers, and drawn teachers into a stronger commitment to good teaching. In addition, it provides personal and professional benefits for the teachers, empowering them to delightfully do their best at educating children in today's troubled classrooms.

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