

“The mentorship program has definitely been effective for me. It’s made me stop every single week and think about everything that I’m doing in the classroom and everything that I’m practicing.”
(Carole, Interview, 1.23.15)

Implementing a Teacher Mentorship Program in a Private Early Childhood School: An Action Research Project

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Abstract: This action research study examined the effectiveness of a teacher mentorship program in the first year of its implementation. It was conducted in a private early childhood school (Stroum Jewish Community Center Early Childhood School) with two hundred students between the ages of three months and five years. This study was conducted between August of 2014 and March of 2015. The teacher mentorship program examined in this action research study was generally found to be effective (as self-described by participants) in the first year of its implementation. Findings in this study also included recommendations and implications for the implementation of future teacher mentorship programs in early childhood schools.

Research Questions:

- Will mentor and mentee teachers deem the SJCC ECS teacher mentorship program effective in the first year of its implementation? Why or why not?
- Which aspects of this mentorship program will teacher participants (mentor and mentee teachers) identify as contributing to its effectiveness? Which aspects will teacher participants identify as inhibitors to its effectiveness?
- How will participating in a formal mentorship program affect the experiences of new teachers in the SJCC ECS? In which specific areas will mentee teachers seek mentorship from their mentor teachers?

Literature Review: A review of the literature revealed that teacher turnover, particularly in private schools, is a prevalent problem nationwide. Research has suggested that teacher mentorship programs can act as effective means of reducing teacher turnover in schools. Numerous studies examining teacher mentorship programs have indicated that there are specific characteristics of teacher mentorship programs that are likely to increase their effectiveness. These include:

- Asking teachers to volunteer or apply to be mentors;
- Providing mentor teachers with stipends or financial recognition for their work as mentors;
- Providing mentor and mentee teachers with adequate time for meeting with one another outside of their regularly scheduled classroom hours.

These characteristics were taken into consideration in the formation of the framework for this teacher mentorship program.

Methods: The participants in this action research study were the five mentors and 11 mentee teachers engaged in the SJCC ECS mentorship program in the 2014-2015 school year. Data were collected in a variety of ways: Field notes, reflection sheets, surveys, interviews, audio recordings of meetings, focus group transcripts, and research memos were analyzed to evaluate the effectiveness of the SJCC ECS teacher mentorship program in the first year of its implementation.”

Findings: Through the processes of data review and data coding numerous findings emerged. The most general of these findings is that both mentor and mentee teachers participating in the SJCC ECS teacher mentorship program deemed it to be “effective” in the first year of its implementation, and explained why they felt this way. Additionally, the following findings appeared repeatedly across data sources in this study:

- Though mentee teachers received mentorship in multiple areas, they were particularly eager to learn from their mentors about how to navigate new relationships with colleagues, families, and students in the school.
- Mentor and mentee teachers experienced scheduling and logistical challenges in their meetings with one another, which led to a loss of valuable meeting times.
- In addition to providing constructive mentorship to their mentees, mentor teachers benefitted both personally and professionally from acting as mentors themselves.

Support for each of these findings is present in relevant literature on the topic.

Limitations:

- *Generalizability:* Because this action research study was conducted in a private early childhood school over the course of only seven months, the findings in this study cannot be generalized to all teacher mentorship programs. Instead, because this study provides insight into the SJCC ECS’s implementation of a teacher mentorship program, the findings in it are directly applicable only to our particular school.
- *Role of Researcher:* Another limitation in this study is my role as both a researcher and administrator in the SJCC ECS. Because I am the direct supervisor for many of the mentor and mentee teachers participating in this teacher mentorship program, it is possible that their responses in the data were different than they otherwise might have been had they not been submitted to an administrator. ‘
- *Unexamined Potential Data Sources:* There were numerous areas in which data could have been collected in this study that were not examined. For example, it is likely that mentor and mentee teachers engaged in informal conversations with one another outside of their scheduled meetings that may have impacted the effectiveness of mentorship, but the content of these conversations and their implications were not studied. Further, although reflection sheets were collected from all mentor and mentee teachers, only four of the 11 mentee teachers were interviewed individually.

Next Steps: The findings in this study suggest implications for future implementations of teacher mentorship programs in early childhood schools. Recommendations include:

- Supplying training for mentor teachers in addressing the needs of mentee teachers prior to beginning mentorship;
- Providing consistent times for all mentor and mentee teachers to meet with one another outside school hours, and implementing accountability measures to ensure that mentor and mentee teachers consistently attend these meetings;
- Granting mentee teachers (as well as mentor teachers) adequate monetary compensation for their participation in the teacher mentorship program;
- Allowing more teachers to serve as mentors, so that the benefits associated with acting as mentors could be spread more broadly across the faculty;
- Ensuring that all mentor and mentee teachers paired together teach students of similar ages;
- Providing time for mentor and mentee teachers to observe one another in their classrooms

Were the SJCC ECS to implement a teacher mentorship program that allowed for the application of the recommendations listed above, the school would likely see positive impacts for new teachers, experienced teachers, and students alike.