

7-27-2018

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Recommended Citation

Turpeinen, Kendra Berger, "Exploring Factors of Effective Virtual Mentoring of Novice, Rural K-12 Teachers" (2018). *2018 Program & Posters*. 3.

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Exploring Factors of Effective Virtual Mentoring of Novice, Rural K-12 Teachers

Kendra Berger Turpeinen, PhD

Problem

Novice, rural K-12 teachers are at risk of leaving the teaching profession because of a lack of suitable access to effective mentoring support associated with the limited personnel and material resources in their rural school systems.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how virtual mentoring of novice, rural K-12 teachers through digital communication technologies reflected Hudson's five-factor model of mentoring.

Significance

- Numerous researchers have examined in-person mentoring, but few have explored mentoring through digital tools to support novice teachers in rural schools. This study contributed to a growing trend of implementing digital tools to support novice teachers.
- An increased understanding of virtual mentoring may provide insight for strengthening existing virtual mentoring programs or to encourage rural K-12 districts to consider virtual mentoring as viable support for new teachers.
- This study also contributed to solving the problem of finding suitable mentor matches in teacher induction programs in rural schools. Effective induction of rural teachers impacts 30% of schools in the U.S.

Social Change Implications

Impact on Individuals

Virtual mentoring may provide the support that novice teachers perceive they need related to mentor matching, reflection, and problem-solving.

Impact on Educational Organizations

Virtual mentoring is a potential support to increase the retention of teachers working in local, rural schools.

Impact on Society

Virtual mentoring is a possible support for new teacher mentoring programs in states with rural populations.

Conceptual Framework

Hudson's (2004) Five-Factor Model of Mentoring
Effective new teacher mentoring includes these elements:

1. Personal Attributes of the Mentor
2. Pedagogical Knowledge
3. Modeling
4. Feedback
5. Mentoring in System Requirements

During data analysis, the element of System Requirements was revised to be described as System Knowledge.

Relevant Scholarship

- The body of research related to virtual teacher mentoring is significantly smaller than research related to in-person mentoring.
- Research on the benefits of using digital tools for mentoring interactions with new teachers showed contradicting evidence.
- Novice, rural teachers face unique challenges that might be alleviated by mentoring support, but few, if any, studies demonstrated whether virtual mentoring is effective for rural teachers.
- Research related to Hudson's (2004) model has been conducted with in-person mentoring. A gap remained whether virtual mentoring creates an environment that is conducive to fostering similar dispositions and mentoring activities that Hudson claimed are important for supporting new teachers.

Research Questions

Central Question

How does virtual mentoring of novice rural teachers through digital communication technologies reflect Hudson's five-factor model of mentoring?

Related Questions

1. How do novice, rural teachers describe the virtual mentoring experience?
2. How do mentors of novice, rural teachers describe the virtual mentoring experience?
3. How do novice, rural teachers and their mentors interact during the mentoring process as revealed in archival data?

Participants

- 1 Case from an established Virtual Mentoring Program
- 2 Mentoring Pairs; Total of 4 Participants

Novice Teachers

- Working in Years 1 through 3
- Employed full-time at a rural school
- Received primary support from a virtual mentor
- Communicated with the mentor using digital tools

Mentors

- Minimum of 7 years teaching experience
- Matched with novice by grade level and/or content
- Communicated with novice using digital tools

Procedures

Data were collected for a period of 2 months.

1. Administered **Demographic Surveys** to ensure participants met inclusion criteria.
2. Conducted **Interviews** with novice, rural teachers and mentors by phone or Skype.
3. Collected **Reflective Journal Questions** by email.
4. Collected **Archival Data** from virtual mentoring discussion forums in the 2016-2017 academic year.

Analysis

Data analysis involved assigning a priori codes from Hudson's model and exploring new, emerging themes that were recorded in Word documents and Excel worksheets.

Findings

- All **5 of Hudson's elements** of face-to-face mentoring were present in the virtual mentoring interactions. **Feedback** during mentoring had the least representation in the data. Mentoring in **pedagogical knowledge** had the greatest representation.
- Key **personal attributes** of the mentor included being knowledgeable, supportive, responsive, and positive, while demonstrating a growth mindset.
- Virtual mentoring provided **flexibility, responsive mentoring, and access to a professional learning community**. Furthermore, virtual mentoring interactions fostered **affective support, reflection on practice, and sharing resources**.
- Mentoring in **system knowledge** was limited by mentoring pairs not sharing a common school building.
- Virtual mentoring fostered valuable **reflection on practice**.

Interpretation

- These findings extend previous research related to in-person mentoring into the virtual domain.
- Similar to other studies of virtual mentoring, mentoring in system knowledge is limited when mentors do not share geographical space with a novice teacher.
- For the novice, rural teachers, virtual mentoring reduced professional isolation and enhanced their professional knowledge, findings that aligned with previous research on the needs of rural teachers.
- Virtual mentors in this study demonstrated similar characteristics to mentors studied during in-person mentoring exchanges.

Limitations

- Only **one case** reduces replication
- **Small sample size** (4 participants) reduces transferability
- **Limited access** to all of the virtual spaces in the virtual mentoring program impacted exploration of five factors of mentoring
- **Timing** of data collection was 5 months after the academic year

Recommendations

1. Conduct virtual mentoring studies with rural, novice teachers from other disciplines and grade levels.
2. Explore the element of mentoring in system knowledge in other virtual mentoring studies.
3. Explore how virtual mentoring in pedagogical knowledge impacts student outcomes.
4. Explore how virtual mentoring supports critical reflection on practice by novice teachers.

Acknowledgements

Dissertation Committee

Dr. Darci Harland, Chair
Dr. Gladys Arome, Methodologist
Dr. Shereeza Mohammed, URR Member