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Reflecting on Your Mentoring Practice

The Story of My Mother's Gravy

Mentors and apprentices are partners in an ancient human dance, and one of teaching's greatest rewards is the daily chance it gives us to get back on the dance floor. It is the dance of the spiraling generations in which the old empower the young with their experience and the young empower the old with new life, reweaving the fabric of the human community as they touch and turn.

—Palmer (1998, p. 25)

Congratulations! Whether you are supporting a first-year teacher in your district, have accepted the responsibility to partner with a university to promote the growth and development of a student teacher, or just have a general passion for advancing the professional growth of teaching colleagues, you are a participant in the ancient human dance described so eloquently by Parker Palmer—mentoring. Congratulations are in order, as the act of mentoring generates tremendous potential for teachers to be renewed professionally. The fatigue and burnout many teachers feel after numerous years in the profession are replaced with a renewed energy for their chosen field. Mentoring is perhaps the single most important act a veteran teacher can engage in to contribute to the future of the teaching profession.

WHY IS MENTORING SO IMPORTANT?

Let's look closely at some of the logistical variables that heighten the importance of mentoring. First, as a result of demographic trends related to increased student enrollments, teacher retirements, class size reduction, and teacher attrition, an increasing demand exists for public school teachers across our nation. An anticipated two million new teachers will enter the profession within the next decade (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Florida alone needs 30,000 teachers a year and the colleges of education within Florida are only able to provide about 5,000, leaving a need for 25,000 new teachers. Like many states, Florida is developing alternative pathways to teaching, and as a result, many novices are arriving in their first classroom with limited pedagogical preparation.

Recruiting new teachers to fill these positions is critical, but even more critical is keeping new teacher recruits in the classroom. Statistics on teacher retention are grim—researchers have consistently found that younger teachers have high rates of departure (Ingersoll, 2001). In fact, several organizations, such as the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, report, "with the exception of a few disciplines in specific fields, the nation graduates more than enough new teachers to meet its need each year. But after just three years, it is estimated that almost a third of new

entrants to teaching have left the field, and after five years almost half are gone (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003, p. 19). In more challenging contexts, both rural areas and inner cities, these rates are often dramatically higher. Effective mentoring is an essential answer to the daunting attrition-rate problem (Feiman-Nemser, 1996). We need strong mentor teachers, and we need them fast!

Because the need for new teachers is so great, alternative entries to teaching accompanied by mentoring programs have sprouted up across the nation to augment the more traditional university student teacher or full-year internship teacher preparation model. In our work with mentoring, we have witnessed several different mentoring approaches that support traditionally and alternatively prepared teachers, including the following:

- Retired Educators—Mentors are retired teachers and administrators hired by a district to serve as part-time mentors of new inductees. Typically, these retired educators are less familiar with the school context, curriculum, and students within the classroom, but have numerous years of teaching experience to draw upon as they help others learn to teach.
- Cooperating Teachers—Mentors are classroom teachers who host a university student in their classroom for a single-semester student-teaching experience. Typically, these mentors view their role as providing a context for the novice to learn to teach and consider the onus of the responsibility for the new teacher's success as that of the university teacher education program.
- Yearlong Internship—Mentors are classroom teachers who coteach within their classroom with a yearlong intern from a university. These yearlong internships often unfold within professional development schools, where the mentor conceives of himself or herself as a school-based teacher educator.
- Apprenticeship Model—Mentors are classroom teachers who coteach with an alternatively certified teaching candidate. The teaching candidate, or *apprentice*, is paid as a paraprofessional during the apprenticeship year and assumes his or her own classroom the following school year.

- School-Based Mentor—Mentors are typically peers who have their own classrooms within the same school and assume the extra responsibility of mentoring a novice. This person may or may not have experience in the same grade level or subject matter as the novice and typically receives a small stipend.
- Full-Time Cohort Mentor—Mentors are responsible for supporting a cohort of new teachers placed within a single school. This model typically emerges in schools with high teacher turnover and large numbers of alternatively prepared, uncertified teachers. This mentor typically becomes a full-time member of the school faculty and becomes intimately familiar with the students, curriculum, and resources in the school and community.

The model within which you find yourself mentoring has implications for the types of support your mentee will need. For example, you may be mentoring preservice teachers in an undergraduate- or graduate-level teacher education program with relatively little classroom experience. You may be mentoring new teachers in your school who are engaged in the induction phase of their career and who are graduates of traditional teacher education programs and have completed a student teaching or internship experience. You may be mentoring new inductees at your school who increasingly arrive through alternative routes to teaching as they transition from a wide range of other careers, including the military, accounting, social work, and others.

In addition to these varied entry routes to teaching, novice teachers vary tremendously in age, life experiences, culture, race, language, and ability. They each bring to their teaching career teaching knowledge gained through their own experiences in K–12 education. Some of their experiences may be quite consistent with research-based teaching practice; however, the majority of these new teachers may possess beliefs that run counter to what is currently known about powerful instructional practice.

This immense variability in who is being mentored heightens the need for strong mentor teachers who possess a sensitivity to differentiating mentoring practice based on their mentee's background, life experiences, and needs. Mentors need to individualize for *every* new teacher, and each individual mentor teacher will need to carefully

consider how he or she will facilitate the novice teacher's development. Figure 1.1 presents the logistical factors that contribute to the need to individualize for every mentee, illustrating the complexity of mentoring. As a result of this need for differentiation, tremendous responsibility is placed on your shoulders to support the success and survival of both the novice teacher you are mentoring and the children who learn within the novice's classroom. Remember, the *survival* of the novice teacher refers to whether they are able to navigate the complexity of the work life of a teacher within a bureaucratic system. The *success* of the novice teacher connects to the novice's ability to help children *learn*. Mentoring requires your attention to both survival and success.

In addition to the distinction made between novice teacher success and survival, who you are as a mentor teacher and who your mentee becomes as a classroom teacher is also dependent on your school context. Are you mentoring in a rural, urban, or suburban community? What is the socioeconomic status of the students in the school you serve? Are you teaching in an elementary, middle, or high school, and is that school public, private, religious, or charter? The logistical variables alone that surround mentoring serve to heighten the importance of quality mentoring! Regardless of who you are mentoring, or in what context you are mentoring them, this book is designed to help
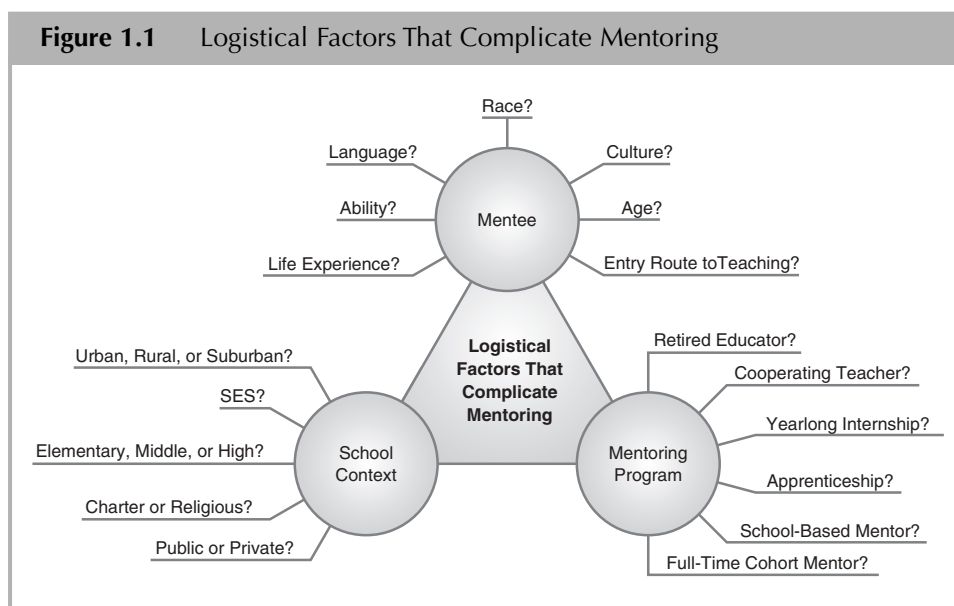
Figure 1.1   Logistical Factors That Complicate Mentoring

you visualize your role as mentor, differentiate for each mentee you work with, and enhance the mentoring skills you already possess and enact each day in your work with novice teachers.

HOW DO YOU ENHANCE YOUR MENTORING SKILLS?

Mentoring requires planned, intentional reflection on the ways years of experience as a thoughtful, reflective, reform-minded teacher can be captured and translated effectively to the next generation of teachers. We define *reform-minded* as a progressive stance toward teaching that acknowledges the importance of research-based practices, problematizing teaching and learning, and embracing change with the aim of educating all children. The goal of mentoring must be to cultivate these reform-minded practices in the novices who are entering the profession.

In the past decade, there has been a heightened interest in mentoring. Similarly, teacher education reformers "regard the mentor-novice relationship in the context of teaching as one of the most important strategies to support novices' learning to teach and, thus, to improve the quality of teaching" (Wang, 2001, p. 52). The importance and the heightened interest in mentoring as well as the increasing and pressing need for quality mentors has bred a number of manuals, guidebooks, and workshops on mentoring that identify the basic technical skills necessary for effective mentoring. Texts such as Hal Portner's *Mentoring New Teachers* (2003), and Hicks, Glasgow, and McNary's *What Successful Mentors Do* (2005) are excellent resources that help mentors develop the foundation for working skillfully with novice teachers. However, in addition to understanding the technical skills that provide the foundation for the act of mentoring, it is also important to reflect on the ways these skills play out with different novices and in different contexts.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO BE REFLECTIVE ABOUT ONE'S MENTORING?

On the surface, this may appear to be a silly question. After all, it would seem that with numerous years of teaching experience under

your belt, mentoring would be a natural process that would just happen as a result of sharing the same classroom and children with a student teacher, or in serving as a buddy for a novice teacher, answering questions and sharing district and school procedures to help him or her through his or her first few years of teaching. Yet, research tells us that outstanding teaching does not readily and intuitively translate to outstanding mentoring. For example, in an extensive research study comparing mentor teachers in the United States, United Kingdom, and China, Wang (2001) found that

> Relevant teaching experience, though important, is not a sufficient condition for a teacher to be a professional mentor. Mentors who are practicing or moving toward practicing the reform-minded teaching may not develop the necessary conceptions and practices of mentoring that offer all the crucial opportunities for novices to learn to teach in a similar way. Thus, when selecting mentor teachers, not only is it important to consider the relevant teaching experiences of mentors but it is also important to identify how mentors conceptualize mentoring and their relevant experience in conducting the kind of mentoring practices expected. (pp. 71–72)

Identifying how you conceptualize mentoring, therefore, is a critical process that can only happen as a result of reflecting deeply on mentoring. Teaching novices to teach can be extremely rewarding, but extremely complex as well. Consider the summary Wang (2001) provides of the needs of novice teachers:

> Research suggests that to learn to teach for understanding, novice teachers need opportunities to form a strong commitment toward reform-minded teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) and to develop a deeper understanding of subject matter (Ball & McDiarmid, 1989). They need opportunities to learn how to represent what they teach effectively in classrooms (Shulman, 1987) and how to connect what they teach to students with different backgrounds (Kennedy, 1991). They also need opportunities to learn how to conduct the kind of reflection that supports their continuous learning to teach (Schön, 1987, p. 69)

Because the needs of the novice are many, and each novice is different, there is no single way to mentor that will work with every novice in every context in the same way. Mentors need to reflect on their skills and make decisions about which basic mentoring skills must be invoked with each novice in each context at different times and for different purposes throughout the mentoring process. Becoming reflective about your mentoring and developing your own unique mentoring identity through the reflective process deepens your ability to influence the novice teacher. Becoming reflective about your mentoring recognizes the unique challenges individuals learning to teach face, and raises your voice in discussions of reform-minded teaching. Through becoming reflective about your mentoring, you contribute to the grand professional conversation about the future of education in this country. You breathe new life into your own career, you breathe new life into the teaching profession itself, and you breathe new life into the education of children across the nation.

One way to reflect on mentoring is through deep examination of who one is as a teacher, and the ways one's teaching identity translates into the development of a unique and effective identity as a mentor (Ganser, 1998). In our work with mentors, we have found the use of metaphors to be a powerful venue to generate deep examination of one's identity as a mentor. More than two decades ago, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson helped us to think in a whole new way about the language that we use, as they asserted in their book *Metaphors We Live By* that metaphor is much more than mere poetical and rhetorical embellishments. According to these authors,

> Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3)

Similarly, Parker Palmer asserts that good talk about good teaching and the identity from which good teaching comes can occur through the exploration of metaphors and images that can enrich a teacher's sense of the self who teaches (Palmer, 1998). Parallel to Parker's line of logic, we believe exploring metaphors of mentoring can generate good talk about good mentoring and enrich a mentor's sense of self as both teacher of children and teacher of teachers.

Hence, the purpose of this book is to help readers reflect deeply on the act of mentoring and find their own identity as a mentor teacher through the examination of different stories and metaphors used by accomplished teachers to guide their mentoring practice. Each chapter describes the case of a mentor teacher and his or her interactions with the protégé with whom he or she works. Following the text of each chapter is a series of questions carefully crafted to facilitate rich conversation among colleagues about mentoring. By reading about the lives of mentor teachers who conceptualize the mentoring role in varying ways, as well as engaging in dialogue with teaching colleagues to tease apart the inherent complexities of mentoring evident in each metaphor presented in this book, we hope you will gain unique and rich insights into your own life as a teacher and mentor. To exemplify this process, we end this chapter with a story written by Bobby Ann Starnes (2001). The story depicts the process a daughter goes through as she longs for her mother to teach her how to make gravy.

Last Thanksgiving, I tried to make my mother's gravy. As always, I failed miserably. Standing at the stove stirring the mixture, getting it wrong again, I had a vivid image of the day I asked my mother to teach me.

She seemed puzzled, as though she thought the ability to make gravy should have been transmitted genetically. She could not recall anyone teaching her. Almost reluctantly, she agreed. So I stood by her side at the old Kelvinator range in our small kitchen, pencil and paper in hand, ready to record every detail.

She began with the same cast-iron skillet she had used every morning for as long as I could remember. "You put the drippings in the pan," she said, turning the burner to medium high. I quickly wrote "medium high" on my paper. My mother looked at me in disbelief.

"How much?" I asked, anxious to get down every step and detail.

"Oh, just some," she replied, spreading the goods evenly over the skillet surface. Just some, I thought. Just some!

"Now, mix the flour in," she said, pulling her cup out of the Gold Medal bag.

"How much?"

"Enough," she said in an impatient tone. "You put enough flour in to get the right thickness."

Well, yes, I thought. You'd certainly want to use enough. It wouldn't make sense to use too much or too little. But how much is enough? I was still trying to figure out what to write, when, at what seemed a completely arbitrary moment, she said, "Now

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a pinch of salt…a dash of pepper." I wondered how to convert "a pinch" into teaspoons and what the difference between a pinch and a dash might be.

She mixed the ingredients until the paste reached the right consistency—a consistency only she seemed able to detect. Then she added milk, whipped the spoon around a little, and voila, perfect gravy.

Mother never used a recipe, and she laughed lightly when I suggested she write one out for me. My mother understood gravy. She just knew how much of this or that she needed—salt, pepper, milk, and butter in quantities of a pinch, a dash, a handful. She knew how to thicken or thin, how to get it just brown enough. She knew how the ingredients interacted. And by watching carefully, she knew when to add each. She could see a problem before it occurred, and she knew how to head it off. She paid attention, and even when she seemed distracted by the potatoes or the bread or crying children, she kept it all in her head and responded to each situation at just the right moment. I don't remember things ever burning or a time when all the food didn't reach the table at the same time—hot foods hot, cold foods cold. No matter how complex the meal or how numerous the distractions, she could focus on everything at once and pick up the signals that prompted her to act.

After last Thanksgiving's failure, I finally gave up on ever being able to make my mother's gravy. Instead, I decided to make my own. Dumping the food into the sink, I smiled as I remembered myself anxiously trying to copy her every movement exactly. I can't make hers, I thought, but she taught me a lot about gravy. As a result, I learned to make my gravy. And it is good. (Starnes, 2001)

Similar to the daughter in this parable, this book requires you to reject the notion that there is a perfect or simple recipe for effective mentoring. Rather, you have the power to *understand mentoring* by discovering the unique, effective form of mentoring that lies within you by carefully and critically scrutinizing the ways seven teachers metaphorically conceptualize their roles as mentors. For, as Parker Palmer asserts, "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique: good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (1998, p. 10). Similarly, good mentoring cannot be reduced to technique: It comes from the identity, integrity, and understanding of the mentor.

While there is no one recipe for mentoring, we do know a good deal about the individual components that formulate the knowledge base for mentoring. Therefore, in Chapter 2, we examine mentoring by defining effective mentoring and looking at each discrete component of the effective mentoring process—creating an educative mentoring context, guiding a mentee's professional knowledge

development, and nurturing the development of a mentee's professional dispositions.

Next, in Chapters 3 through 8, you will meet seven effective mentor teachers, and get glimpses into their mentoring practices through the metaphor they utilize to conceptualize mentoring—Darby, a story-weaver; Kevin, a jigsaw puzzle enthusiast; Robin, a tailor; Tracy, a coach; Claudia, a mirror; Paige, an interior designer; and Wesley, a real estate agent. Although you cannot become Darby, Kevin, Robin, Tracy, Claudia, Paige, or Wesley, these teachers can teach you a lot about mentoring.

At the close of each chapter, you may deepen your understanding of mentoring as you further explore each teacher's mentoring identity and integrity through careful deliberation and discussion of the chapter questions raised to help generate insights into the shadows and strengths each metaphor reveals, as well as the ingredients each mentor used to create his or her own unique approach to mentoring. In discussion of the metaphors with others, you may also discover the guidance mentoring metaphors may offer during the more difficult and arduous times of teaching another to teach. Rooted in an image that arises from somewhere in our psyche, metaphor can save us from the quick technical fix we always long for when we examine the complicated process of teaching and teaching others to teach.

As a result of this text, we hope you will be well on your way to making your own mentoring gravy . . . and we know that it will be good!

Chapter 1 Exercises

To foster deep reflection on mentoring, it is critical to take an inventory of who you are professionally and what you currently believe about mentoring. These exercises are designed to foster this process.

1. Create a mentoring platform (similar to a political platform that shares one's espoused beliefs). To create this platform, brainstorm a bulleted list that represents your beliefs about what effective mentoring is. Begin your bulleted list with the statement, "I believe effective mentoring is . . . "

2. Which components of this bulleted list are the most challenging to enact as a mentor? Which are the easiest to enact as you mentor?

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3. Write your own autobiography of mentoring by reflecting on your experiences learning to teach and your first few years of teaching. Name the most critical incidents in your own learning-to-teach process. What role did mentoring play in these critical incidents? How do your own experiences learning to teach translate into your own philosophy of mentoring? Discuss how you came to hold the beliefs you described in your mentoring platform.

4. Create a time line of people who influenced your life as a professional. Describe how each one contributed to your learning.

5. Follow the guide provided below to design a "Mentor's Coat of Arms." In Space 1, draw a real or mythical animal that best describes the mentor you want to be. In Space 2, choose a real symbol, or create your own design, for an insignia that best describes the mentor you want to be. In Space 3, choose one color in any shade—or a rainbow effect—that best describes the mentor you want to be. In Space 4, draw one character, real or fictional, that best describes the mentor you want to be. In Space 5, choose one word that best describes the mentor you want to be. How you write that word should also help describe the mentor you want to be.