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Is Mentoring Right for Me?

Reasons for Becoming a Mentor

If you have started reading this book, you've probably already asked that question of yourself. Or maybe your principal has tapped you on the shoulder and asked if you would be willing to serve as a mentor for a new teacher or a student teacher. You've been a successful classroom teacher for a number of years now. Your classroom runs smoothly, much more so than it did when you first started. As you have improved your own teaching skills, the students you've taught have achieved high test scores and have engaged in meaningful projects that have demonstrated that they are learning what you are teaching. You know you've always gotten along with most of your peers, and you genuinely enjoy talking about teaching and learning when someone asks you for some advice or feedback. But, although it's gratifying to be asked to work with a new colleague, you wonder what this new responsibility will mean. You may be wondering, Am I right for the job?

Am I right for the job?

If the previous scenario describes you and your professional work, then it is possible that you may make a good and effective mentor. But being a successful teacher is not enough. Although you will certainly need the credibility that being successful in a classroom brings with it, the skills and talents that you have developed to work with children are not always directly transferable to working with another colleague. For instance, much of your success may be attributable to the fact that you carefully plan and

sequence lessons and deliver them in appropriate "chunks" to your students in a teacher-centered presentation, a direct instruction format. You know the state curriculum and high-stakes accountability objectives on which your students' progress will be measured, and your instruction focuses on helping students develop the skills necessary to meet these objectives. Your students engage in activities designed to reinforce these objectives, for which you have consciously set very clear parameters as well as rules for engaging in these activities. Such a clear prescription, tried and true for your students' success, may be a prescription for disaster in working with a new colleague. A new teacher, in fact, may actually resist these directive attempts to help improve his or her practice.

But, let's assume that you may be right for the job. Why, on top of everything else that you have to do, would you want to do it? Don't you have enough on your plate in planning for your own classes and meeting the other expectations of sponsoring clubs and supervising the lunchroom? Don't you think the committee work looking into revamping the language arts curriculum will take up enough of your time? Why would you want to add one more responsibility on top of all the others?

Reasons for Becoming a Mentor

Why would someone want to become a mentor? Several reasons come to mind immediately (see Figure 1). First, it is an opportunity to give back to the profession in which you have invested so much (Freiberg, Zbikowski, & Ganser, 1996) and to gain the satisfaction of starting a new colleague on the right path. It is likely that someone important to you

provided you with the same guidance when you first began your career, and this is an opportunity to reinvest that good karma.

Reasons to Become a Mentor

Opportunity to share your expertise for the good of the teaching profession.

Opportunity to reflect on your own practice as you work with a new colleague.

Increase your visibility and status as a professional educator.

Incentive compensation or stipend or other extrinsic reward.

Figure 1

Second, mentoring another teacher provides an opportunity for you to reflect on your own practice as you work with someone new to the field. This has been identified as an unintended benefit of mentoring programs (Coppenhaver & Schaper, 1999; Salzman, 1999, 2000). In Coppenhaver and Schaper's work with more than 850 mentors, for example, teachers regularly cite that they have learned to think about and reflect on their own teaching practices as they have observed someone else. They have also stated that they plan to use information and skills that they learned in their mentor training to look for ways to improve their own teaching.

Third, just as being the coach of the football team provides individuals with a professional "status" within the school and larger community, so too can being the coach of new teachers provide you with