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# Introduction

**T**his book is for teacher mentors, teachers who are thinking of becoming mentors, and for administrators who seek to put in place a mentor program that will assist new teachers with their professional growth. I believe school cultures that reflect a collaborative approach to continuous improvement and professional development will provide much more natural support for teacher mentors than cultures where isolationism is the rule. While I don't claim to provide a step-by-step approach to setting up a school-level induction system, I do lend support to the idea that mentors trying to assist new teachers need support themselves; indeed everyone in the schoolhouse ought to be dedicated to assisting new teachers and accelerating their continuous-improvement journey.

In this book, I have followed the lead of others who use the term *protégé* for the teacher with whom the mentor is working. That protégé may be a novice teacher or one with experience who is new to the school. Over the past 15 years I have worked with thousands of new and veteran teachers, teacher mentors, and substitute teachers. Helping to train these wonderful people was a part of my work as a trainer I enjoyed immensely; that work helped inspire this book.

Storytelling is a powerful teaching tool, and I first introduced the fictional middle school principal, Mr. Crandall, and Trey, a social studies teacher who eventually became one of his best mentors, in my second book, *The Active Teacher* (2010). Their story is continued and concluded in this volume.

Finally, and tragically, we are losing teachers faster in this country than is either desirable or necessary. Induction programs and well-trained and dedicated mentors can make a difference, as we shall see in the following pages.

Enjoy.

*Commit to a personal and professional continuous-improvement process*

Teachers are in the continuous-improvement business. The object is to help Eddie do something today he could not do yesterday, and to assist Eddie and his classmates in their own steady and relentless progress along many fronts. Working with students to set and achieve goals constitutes an important part of their continuous-improvement journey, and teachers need to be relentless in that pursuit of excellence. Students and parents, on the other hand, have every right to expect that teachers be fully committed to their own continuous-improvement efforts.

In our determination to get well when we are ill or stay well when we are healthy again, we enlist the support of medical professionals whom we trust to be current with the latest in medical knowledge and skills. We want our doctors to know everything there is to know about the human body, and we rely on them to avail themselves of every bit of professional development at their disposal. By the same token, students and parents have every right to expect that the teachers in whom they place the education of their children know as much as possible about how the brain operates as it pertains to learning. Since what science is discovering about how the brain functions grows at an ever-increasing rate, teachers and the administrators who support them need to put in place professional-development programs that will ultimately facilitate the intellectual growth and educational progress of students and teachers alike.

Mentors need to arrange for protégés to observe highly effective and successful teachers inside and outside their own buildings (and districts). New teachers need to be part of a collective effort at continuous improvement within the schoolhouse. Faculty meetings can move from being information dumps to becoming opportunities to work on instructionally related issues. Book clubs can help teachers stay abreast of the latest research in the field, and groups of teachers can look at assessment data with an eye toward improving instruction and closing gaps. New teachers who are part of a professional learning community early on will benefit by developing good habits early in their careers. For these less-experienced teachers, Hord and Sommers (2008) maintain, “the connectedness that grows out of studying, learning, and finding new ways to be effective will provide meaning for themselves personally and make a difference professionally” (p. 150).

In observing highly effective teachers in their classrooms, I have noticed that they are constantly trying new strategies and adjusting

## Everyone Is Responsible

In isolationist schools, there may be a perception that mentoring new teachers is in the hands of the teacher mentors alone, with everyone else continuing to do his or her thing, unaffected by the mentor-protégé program. Portner (2005a) calls this “*shortsighted and a prescription for failure*” (p. 76), and he uses the term *collaborative-doing* to describe a situation where “a wide variety of committed people” are actively involved in the induction process (p. 78). Specifically, this supporting cast is responsible for

1. Developing, monitoring, and adjusting their induction policies and procedures;
2. Interacting directly with new teachers to supplement the efforts of mentors; and
3. Supporting new teachers by providing them with time, facilities, and materials. (Portner, 2005a, p. 78)

New teachers to whom it is clear that the entire faculty and staff are committed to their development are far more likely to succeed than in situations where they are left pretty much on their own to sink or swim. Mentors who know this additional assistance for protégés is widely available in the building may well be appreciative of the fact that an effective induction system is operating in a powerful support role. Every professional in the schoolhouse should look at their active and positive involvement in assisting new teachers *as an investment in everyone’s success*. Successful teachers have a positive and lasting effect on the school’s ultimate progress. Figure 2.1 provides a look at how diverse members of the school community can actively assist new teachers.

## Provide Ongoing Professional Development

Mentoring should not exist as the *sole* induction program of any school; mentoring should instead be one essential component of that overall support system. Powerful induction programs are much more than that and “are comprehensive, last several years, have clearly articulated goals, and provide a structured and nurturing system of professional development and support” (Wong, 2005, p. 43).

## Facilitating Learning-Focused Conversations

The induction program at Shellie’s school was part and parcel of the overall continuous-improvement model, and the entire faculty was part of this system. This made Trey’s job as Shellie’s mentor much easier because when he chose to speak with her about data, research, reflection, engagement strategies—these were all terms and concepts understood by a collaborative and innovative faculty. Mr. Crandall, the school’s principal, made sure inservice time was not wasted on “administrivia,” and instruction was the focus of small- or large-group meetings. The fact that so many teachers were continually trying new instructional strategies made it easy for Trey to find someone in-house for Shellie to observe. In that middle school, teachers spent a great deal of time looking at performance data and seeing the data results, not as threatening, but as valuable feedback. The language of the mentor-protégé relationship between Trey and Shellie was the language of the school, and there was no disconnect between the conversations they had and those at faculty and leadership team meetings.

Effective communication along these lines requires mentors to do less talking and more listening; this may be difficult for mentors who believe their job is to give new teachers good advice drawn from the deep well of wisdom and experience. This is a natural tendency in the absence of an induction system that teaches otherwise. One problem with this essentially

one-sided conversation between mentor and protégé is that the latter may listen politely and then do what the context of their own background and experience tells them to do.

The difficulty with advice is that is essentially just information, and it falls into the category of “telling isn’t really teaching.” In order for a new teacher to affect change in her classroom in a substantive way, she needs to be engaged by the mentor in a conversation that has her reflecting on her own classroom instruction or on what she has seen and heard in other classrooms. There is no other way to say this: If one person in a conversation does all the talking, the other is free to smile and nod while mentally disconnecting. In order to find out what the protégé is thinking, the mentor has to stop talking and start

### Mentor/Protégé Focus

Mentors would do well to listen far more than they talk when meeting with protégés. It is in the listening that solutions to problems can be found. It is in the reflection done by the protégé, and facilitated by the mentor, that real learning takes place and real progress is made. Self-reflective conversations between mentors and protégés can develop self-evaluative skills that will serve new teachers down the road.

Shellie was amazed, and maybe a little awestruck. She had indeed been watching these seventh graders, and their body language told her they had enjoyed the entire activity. They had moved, paired, shared, thanked each other, and landed back in their seats with no fuss or confusion. They had obviously become used to doing this, and she circled the PVF notation she had made in her notebook, making a further mental note to ask Mrs. Bondurant about it. At the end of the class period, as the students left the room to yet another upbeat song, Shellie gathered her purse and notebook. She waited until the kids were gone to approach Mrs. Bondurant, whose preparation period followed this one.

The two of them sat down at one of the quads, and Shellie placed her notes in front of her. They made small talk for a few minutes, and discovered they had both graduated from the same university only four years apart. Mrs. Bondurant, or Katie, as she now encouraged Shellie to call her, had been lucky enough to land at a school that valued its new teachers and their development as much as the leadership team at Shellie's new school. Katie had been able to visit several outstanding classrooms during the course of *her* first three years, and admitted she had her eyes opened.

"Honestly," said Katie, "Had there been no induction program here, the classroom you saw today might not have developed along these lines. Because they worked with me early—and I had a wonderful mentor by the way—I avoided the isolationist tendencies I see at other schools where collaboration and support are simply not available."

"I can't remember seeing a classroom where the students were so engaged," said Shellie. "They seem to thrive in here, and I did not see one discipline issue for the entire class period."

Katie smiled. "I appreciate the compliment. Actually, I have not written a discipline referral in four years. I attribute that to the fact that I don't contribute to what I consider 'pressure-cooker' teaching by making the kids sit all period long, watching video after video, doing worksheets, or listening to me babble on about this or that. I learned early, thank goodness, that the kids need to be doing the work. My job in here, as you saw, is to facilitate process. In other words, I *model* and they *do*. I *model* and they *do*. They need to be engaged in their own learning."

Shellie looked at her notes, saying, "What is PVF?"

Katie laughed. "After months of using that strategy I have stopped spelling it out. PVF stands for Paired Verbal Fluency, and I first saw it used in a workshop during my first year of teaching. The idea is that if two students are asked to share, one of them may