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Mentorship and Connection: Improving Teacher Retention in Northern Alberta

by

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Abstract

Formal and informal mentorship relationships seem to increase new and early career teacher (ECT) retention. The purpose of this study is to ascertain the impact of formal and informal mentorship on new and ECT retention in Northern Alberta. Semi-structured interviews with three teachers who moved and chose to stay in Northern Alberta help clarify the factors leading to teachers remaining in Northern Alberta to teach. Participants felt both formal and informal mentorship relationships were important and helpful for their growth as new and ECTs. They also felt a feeling of community and a culture of collaboration were key factors in their decision to stay in their Northern Alberta schools. Conclusions drawn are feelings of community and being a part of collaborative planning efforts increases the desire for new and ECTs to stay and teach in Northern Alberta communities. Recommendations for school and divisional leaders are to invest in both strong centralized and school-based mentorship programs and supporting a culture of collaboration at both the school and division levels to help increase retention of new and ECTs.

Contents

Mentorship and Connection: Improving Teacher Retention in Northern Alberta

Formal mentorship programs have been shown to increase retention of new and early career teachers (ECT) (Hellsten et al., 2011; Kutsyuruba et al., 2014; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004), which has positive outcomes for both student achievement and school budgets (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Whalen et al., 2019). Since personnel and finances are important parts of the complex task of school-based leaders (SBL) (Cranston, 2018) and of vital importance to school division-based leadership (DBL), it is worth investigating the benefits of investing in both school and divisionally based formal mentorship programs.

The Alberta Education Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) (Alberta Education, 2020) outlines the competencies required by all SBLs in Alberta. This document illustrates the wide range of skills and abilities necessary for school-based administrators. Supporting robust mentorship programs falls under a number of these standards, including "fostering effective relationships, modeling commitment to professional learning, leading a learning community, providing instructional leadership and developing leadership capacity" (Alberta Education, 2020, pp. 3-4). However, expecting SBLs to also take on the role of mentor to new teachers is not only impractical in many schools, but also complicated by need of administrators to evaluate new and ECTs (Beck & Servage, 2018; Inzer & Crawford, 2005; Kutsyuruba et al., 2018; Whalen et al., 2019). Though SBLs should not necessarily be direct mentors to new teachers, they still have key roles to play in the creation, maintenance, and ultimate success of mentorship programs in schools (Glickman et al., 2018; Hobson et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2017).

Purpose and Rationale for the Study

The purpose of this study was to gain insights into the impact of formal mentorship programs and informal mentorship relationships on teacher retention in a small, Northern Alberta school division, which I will call the Winter School Division (WSD). Prior research

linking strong mentorship programs to an increased desire to remain in rural or northern

schools exists (Adams & Woods, 2015; Hellsten et al., 2011; Willis et al., 2017), however

literature specific to Northern Alberta is not available. The main purpose of this study was to

ascertain the impact of formal and informal mentorship on new teachers in Northern Alberta

choosing to remain both in their current schools, and in the North. To make this

determination, I looked at the following sub problems.

- To what extent are formal and informal mentorship relationships a factor in new teachers choosing to stay in their positions in Northern Alberta schools?
- What is the impact of formal or informal mentoring on the school's culture of mentorship?
- What is the impact of a school's culture of mentorship on new teachers choosing to stay in their positions in Northern Alberta schools?
- How could mentorship programs be improved to encourage higher levels of teacher retention?

Formal mentorship is defined as "the personal guidance provided, usually by

seasoned veterans, to beginning teachers in schools" (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004, p. 683)

where "the relationship is usually short-term formally, with the hope that it will develop

informally over the long term" (Inzer & Crawford, 2005, p. 33). Formal mentoring also

requires "the organization to develop a program and process for the mentoring to take

place" (Inzer & Crawford, 2005, p. 33) and "where a mentor is assigned by the school,

district or state…" (Desimone et al., 2014, p. 88).

Informal mentorship is defined as "a relationship between two people where one

gains insight, knowledge, wisdom, friendship, and support from the other" and where

"relationships develop because protégés and mentors readily identify with each other" (Inzer

& Crawford, 2005, p. 35). Informal mentors are also "people whom the new teachers

themselves choose to go to for help" (Desimone et al., 2014, p. 88). For the purposes of this

study, I used the following description as a guide. "The spirit of the distinction between

formal and informal lies with the inception of the relationship – whether the mentor was

assigned through a school, district, or state policy or program, or whether the relationship developed organically" (Desimone et al., 2014, p. 91).

Significance of Study

Many studies have been conducted regarding the impact of formal and informal mentorship on teacher retention (B. L. Adams & Woods, 2015; Ahn, 2016; Hobson et al., 2009; McCormack & Thomas, 2003; Petrovska et al., 2018; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004), including studies focusing primarily or exclusively in the Canadian context (Hellsten et al., 2011; Kutsyuruba et al., 2014, 2018; Servage et al., 2017). There is however a lack of studies looking specifically at the Northern Albertan context. The purpose of this study was to discover if the results of the other studies are transferable to this unique context. Northern Alberta is North, without being as isolated as the territories, with a mixture of small urban centers and very rural communities. As one participant said "there will always be people who…can't live without a real mall, fair enough. McDonald's isn't enough for everybody." Does being in between isolated and urban contexts change the significance of formal and informal mentorship on teacher retention?

Literature Review

Mentorship has been studied extensively, both in Canada and internationally. Effective formal and informal mentorship has been linked to improved well being for new and ECTs (Cherkowski & Walker, 2019; Hellsten et al., 2009; Kutsyuruba, Godden, et al., 2019) as well for mentors (Hollweck, 2019). Participation in mentorship and co-planning also appear to increase teacher retention (Kutsyuruba et al., 2018; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Whalen et al., 2019). School and divisional leadership play a critical role in mentorship programs, through funding, creating mentorship opportunities and creating the mentor-mentee pairings (Kutsyuruba et al., 2014; Lowe, 2006; Walker & Kutsyuruba, 2019).

Role of School Based Leadership in Mentorship Programs

School-based leaders hold a significant role in the effectiveness of mentorship programs (Glickman et al., 2018; Kutsyuruba et al., 2014; Lowe, 2006; Walker & Kutsyuruba, 2019; Willis et al., 2017). In their 2019 study, Walker and Kutsyuruba found "[p]ositive and supportive administrators were credited with increasing the satisfaction, efficacy, confidence, and resilience of ECTs"(p. 16), while "when administrators were unresponsive to teachers' needs, their well being was affected, and their sense of isolation and frustration increased" (p. 15). This becomes even more important in small, rural schools where teacher retention is an issue (Lowe, 2006; Willis et al., 2017). Lowe (2006) suggests "mentoring should begin as soon as new teachers are hired" (p. 29) to help new and ECTs, as well as teachers new to the area, become members of both the school community and the community at large. New teachers feeling support or a lack of support from their administration can be one of the major factors in their decision to remain in a specific rural school, or in a rural setting altogether (Willis et al., 2017).

SBLs are frequently tasked with pairing mentees with formal mentors (Glickman et al., 2018; Kutsyuruba et al., 2014; Walker & Kutsyuruba, 2019). For new and ECTs to benefit from a formal mentor, this initial pairing is critical. If the pairing does not result in a positive and trusting relationship, then effective mentorship will not happen (Hellsten et al., 2009, 2011; Kutsyuruba, Walker, et al., 2019; Walker & Kutsyuruba, 2019). SBLs can also help create a culture of collaboration within their schools when informal mentorship and school wide collaboration is fostered (P. Adams et al., 2019; Cherkowski & Walker, 2018; Hewson & Hewson, 2022; Strachan et al., 2017).

Formal Mentorship

Research appears to show a positive relationship between formal mentorship programs and teacher retention (B. L. Adams & Woods, 2015; Hellsten et al., 2011;

Kutsyuruba et al., 2014). Smith and Ingersoll (2004) noted "high rates of beginning teacher turnover are of concern not only because they contribute to school staffing problems, but because this form of organizational instability is likely to be related to organizational ineffectiveness" (2004, p. 687). If new and ECT attrition is undesirable, it would appear the creation and maintenance of a robust mentorship program may be part of a solution to this issue. In 2018, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) published a study on supporting new teachers (Beck & Servage, 2018). One of the recommendations of the study was to "[s]upport professional learning through observations, feedback and instructional coaching" (Beck & Servage, 2018, p. 8), indicating the need for a formal mentorship process for new and ECTs. Kutsyuruba et al. (2018) also found the "[l]ack of a supportive system was the main factor attributed to teachers becoming frustrated enough to consider leaving their profession" (p. 52).

Though generally beneficial, formal mentorship programs do have limitations. In small schools and school divisions, finding a suitable mentor can be difficult (Hellsten et al., 2011). Small schools may only have one teacher in each discipline and large distances between schools may make connecting with a mentor based at a different school more difficult. Even in schools where there are multiple teachers teaching the same or similar courses,

> being an experienced and effective teacher, and being recognized as such, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for being an effective mentor – not all good teachers make good mentors, while not all good mentors make good mentors of all beginning teachers (Hobson et al., 2009, pp. 211–212).

Ensuring prospective mentors have the desire, ability, and time to mentor is important for strong and effective mentorship programs (Cherkowski & Walker, 2019; Hellsten et al., 2009; Hobson et al., 2009; Petrovska et al., 2018).

Informal Mentorship

Informal mentorship has also been linked to job satisfaction and retention for new and ECTs (Cherkowski & Walker, 2019; Desimone et al., 2014; Kutsyuruba et al., 2018; Kutsyuruba, Walker, et al., 2019), possibly even more strongly than formal mentorship (Beck & Servage, 2018). If informal mentorship relationships are important in relation to teacher retention, knowing how to help foster these types of relationships will prove fruitful. The 2018 ATA study also recommended "[p]rioritiz[ing] informal mentorship" (Beck & Servage, 2018, p. 8) and tasked "[s]chools and districts [to] take steps to increase the effectiveness of informal mentorship by offering teachers protected time and space to work together, and by encouraging the development of positive school cultures" (p. 53). This same study found "most teachers…cited informal mentorship" (p. 10) as the most beneficial support offered during their first years of teaching. Those having had positive mentorship experiences have been shown to be more likely to help new and ECTs later in their careers (Servage et al., 2017). Desimone et al. (2014) go as far as to suggest

> [a] 'mentor coordinator' could assess the specific types of assistance the novice teacher might be missing from her formal mentoring relationship and other induction activities and help her identify and build informal relationships to compensate for what she is missing (p. 103).

With so much evidence pointing to the positive impact of informal mentorship, there appears to be great benefit to schools and school divisions who focus on fostering these important relationships.

Connection to Colleagues

Feeling a general connection to colleagues is another factor in teacher retention (Ahn, 2016; Beck & Servage, 2018; Cherkowski & Walker, 2019; Kutsyuruba et al., 2018; Kutsyuruba, Walker, et al., 2019; Servage et al., 2017). As Cherkowski and Walker (2019)

phrased it "[w]hile an ongoing, one-to-one mentoring relationship can be incredibly formative, so too can a network of peer mentors and vital friends in the workplace who support one another's well-being and are around to provide practical support" (p. 352). This finding is important for the Northern Alberta context where due to school sizes and teacher turnover, it may not be possible to find a mentor within the school itself. However, if the school and division can create a culture of collaboration and connection, teacher retention may be positively impacted.

Kutsyuruba et al. (2019) found "[r]elationships with colleagues provided a sense of connection and belonging that, in turn, sustained teachers through numerous challenges and supported their well-being and mental health" (p. 308). While some new and ECTs in these studies felt they needed subject specific supports, many more felt they needed "to interact informally with colleagues to assist and support them in regard to both teaching processes and socialisation induction issues" (McCormack & Thomas, 2003, p. 134). This connection to supportive colleagues gains even more importance if there is either no existing mentorship relationship, or if there is a failure in the formal mentorship relationship (Hellsten et al., 2011; Hobson et al., 2009; Kutsyuruba, Godden, et al., 2019; Walker & Kutsyuruba, 2019).

Main Ideas from the Literature Review

Formal and informal mentorship, connection to colleagues and the support of SBLs are all important in supporting the growth of new and ECTs. It is important for schools and school divisions to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their mentorship systems to increase new and ECT retention and well-being. New and ECTs who are supported by at least one colleague in a non-evaluative way felt more successful in their first years of teaching. A combination of formal and informal mentorship, supportive SBLs, and a culture of collaboration appears to be the most effective way to support new and ECTs.

Method

This qualitative study used aspects of the phenomenological approach (Plano Clark & Cresswell, 2015) to gain understanding of the impact of mentorship on three teachers' decisions to remain in Northern Alberta. Teachers were asked questions regarding formal and informal mentorship relationships, school mentorship culture and why they chose to stay and teach in Northern Alberta. The respondents' answers help provide a deeper understanding of the factors surrounding teacher retention in Northern Alberta.

Target, Accessible, and Actual Respondent Groups

The target respondent group were teachers who moved to Northern Alberta as new or early career teachers, who participated in a formal mentorship program, either through their school division or their school, and who chose to stay in the North. The accessible respondent group were teachers in Northern Alberta who live and work around Snowytown and worked in the Winter School Division (WSD). Teachers who were originally from Northern Alberta were excluded from the respondent group as isolating mentorship as a reason for them to stay in their school and community may be more difficult. The actual respondents were chosen by purposeful sampling (Plano Clark & Cresswell, 2015) from the WSD. The participants were chosen by convenience sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and all were known to me. None of the teachers taught at the same school. All participants signed a consent form (Appendix A) and were given a letter of introduction (Appendix B).

Kayla started her career in Northern Alberta, after moving from another province. She participated in a divisional mentorship program and had a formal mentor in both schools she worked at in her first year. She chose to stay at one of the schools from her initial assignment and obtained a continuous contract. She now has over 7 years of teaching experience. Kayla works in a community of just over 7000 residents. Her school

population is between 250-300 in four grades. Kayla teaches primarily junior high school students.

Catherine began her career in another part of Alberta as a supply teacher. Her first full time contract was in Northern Alberta. She participated in a formal mentorship program with the division and had a school-based mentor assigned to her. Another teacher was also identified as a mentor, though not officially designated by the school. She continued to teach at the same school after her first year and obtained a continuous contract. She now has over 4 years of teaching experience. Catherine works in a school with between 225-275 students in four grades, in a community of just over 7000 people. Catherine teaches both junior and senior high school students.

Ingrid moved to Northern Alberta after teaching for one year in another province. She participated in a divisional mentorship program and was assigned a school-based mentor. She also remained employed at the same school, obtaining a continuous contract. She now has over 9 years of teaching experience. Ingrid's school population is between 450-500 from kindergarten to grade 12 and located in a community of approximately 3000 residents. Ingrid teaches both junior and senior high students.

Data Collection Procedures

Participants were interviewed for approximately one hour, using a semi-structured interview approach. Interview questions (Appendix C) included items pertaining to participant involvement in formal mentorship programs, informal mentorship relationships, feelings about becoming mentors themselves as well as how they would structure a mentorship program. They were also asked about their decision to move to and ultimately stay in Northern Alberta. Interviews were conducted by video link.

Data Analysis Procedures

After the data were transcribed, participants were given pseudonyms, and geographic and school names were fictionalized. An inductive thematic analysis (Plano Clark & Cresswell, 2015) was conducted to identify repeated ideas or patterns in the participant interviews, as well as looking for significant differences in experiences. A comparison was made between participant experiences with formal mentorship relationships, informal mentorship relationships and overall school culture. Participant experiences were then compared to similar studies on mentorship.

Trustworthiness

All respondents were from the same school division and lived in the same town, though they were employed at different schools. The schools were in communities of between 3000 and 8000 residents. The schools all had student populations larger than 250 and less than 500. All respondents taught primarily grades 7-12 and did not teach the same students in a single classroom all day. The participants were chosen specifically because they had experienced mentorship in their schools after moving to Northern Alberta from elsewhere in the province or country.

To help ensure credibility, respondents were asked for clarification, and answers were paraphrased to increase understanding. I used paraphrasing during and after the interview to confirm I was correctly interpreting the respondents' answers. The themes which emerged in the study were consistent with the prior research on the topic of formal and informal mentorship**.**

Limitations

Within the small respondent group, their experiences were quite similar. This similarity in data limited my ability to find alternative experiences which may have challenged the homogeneity of the data. All respondents were female, making it difficult to

determine if gender affected the results of the study. All respondents also remained within their communities and schools. Finding a teacher who had experienced formal mentorship and chosen to leave the community may shed light on other factors affecting teacher retention in Northern Alberta.

Findings

To gain insights into the impact of formal mentorship programs and informal mentorship relationships on teacher retention in Northern Alberta, all respondents were asked questions regarding their formal and informal mentorship experiences, the culture of mentorship in their schools, and how they felt the mentorship program in the WSD could be improved. When looking at the responses to these questions, five themes emerged. Firstly, trusting relationships are foundational to all mentorship relationships. Secondly, having a positive mentorship experience creates a feeling of responsibility towards new and early career teachers later in a teacher's career. The third was around the importance of SBL involvement in mentorship programs. Fourthly, a robust mentorship program at the divisional level is desired, even if the respondent did not have a supportive divisional mentorship experience. Lastly, feeling strong support from the entire school impacts a desire to remain in Northern Alberta.

Building Trusting Relationships

Trust has been shown to be an especially critical component of any successful mentorship relationship (Beck & Servage, 2018; Cherkowski & Walker, 2019; Hobson et al., 2009; Kutsyuruba, Godden, et al., 2019; Kutsyuruba, Walker, et al., 2019). The respondents in this study supported this conclusion. Two respondents, Kayla and Ingrid, did not form trusting relationships with their divisional mentors. Kayla indicated "I wouldn't say that I was super comfortable with the divisional [mentor] I was with" and she "just wasn't as comfortable with her" compared to her school-based mentors. Ingrid felt the same way

about her divisional mentor, saying "I always felt judged…it was not [a meeting] that I looked forward to" and she "found that the school-based mentor was way more helpful than the division mentor." Ingrid did add "when the division mentor changed, it was a way better set up, with more formative feedback and a lot more help," indicating a higher level of trust with the new divisional mentor and the new process. She also felt the purpose of the division-based mentor was better explained when the new mentor arrived, and he made it clear "I'm here to help you with this…I'm coming in to do observations and give you suggestions. You don't have to follow them; I'm not judging you." Catherine had a different experience with her divisional mentor. She felt he was "very, very helpful...and he made it really clear that he was in no way evaluating my teaching…he gave really good feedback." These statements further support the research showing the importance of the fit between the mentor and the mentee (Hellsten et al., 2011; Kutsyuruba et al., 2018; Petrovska et al., 2018; Templeton & Tremont, 2017).

All three respondents felt the relationship with their school-based mentor was a strong one. Both Ingrid and Catherine admitted going to their school-based mentor, even years later, when they have a question or are looking for guidance. Ingrid indicated "I had Valerie as my mentor at school, in that formal capacity for, I don't know, eight years now, because I don't think she ever stopped being my mentor." Catherine also continues to ask her mentor for advice saying, "sometimes someone will come to me and be like "How do you do this?" I'm like, well, you know my mentor teacher Krista…let's go ask her together and see what she thinks." The continuation of the mentorship relationship years after the end of their participation in the mentorship program appears to show continued trust and respect between the two parties.

Though all three respondents did make connections with their formal school mentors, and in Catherine's case, with the divisional mentor as well, each also sought out

informal mentors. Kayla felt she needed to connect with an informal mentor due to her schedule making it difficult for her to meet with her formal mentor. Catherine sought out informal mentors when they taught the same courses as her. Ingrid connected with a more experienced teacher who helped with her overall well-being.

> I didn't realize until he retired how much of a mentor he was for me, and my teaching partner, and my like literal other half. I didn't realize how much he was a part of my teaching life here. He will still come and check on me and he's been retired for three years now.

In these cases, the informal mentorship relationships complemented the formal school mentor relationship. This is one area where the experiences of the respondents differ with prior research. Much of the research appears to show that informal mentorship relationships tend to be more impactful than formal ones (Desimone et al., 2014; Kutsyuruba, Walker, et al., 2019). Informal mentors were found to be more impactful than the divisional based mentor for Kayla and Ingrid, whereas all three of the respondents in this study found the importance of the relationship with both formal and informal school-based mentors to be similar.

School Cultures of Mentorship

When asked to describe the culture of mentorship in their schools, all three respondents felt their schools were incredibly supportive of new and ECTs, even though the formal divisional mentorship program had ended. Kayla discussed the continuation of the school based formal mentorship program, even without direct divisional support when saying "if you are a new teacher, you are getting paired up with a designated mentor, and that becomes your kind of go to person. You might have a designated mentor, but you can go to anybody." Ingrid also indicated a continuation of a formal mentorship program in her school after the dissolution of the divisional mentorship program, when she said, "when we

get new teachers, they're assigned a human being that's been there generally for a while, and most of the time it is in your subject area, and we check in constantly with each other." Catherine also felt her school had a strong culture of mentorship despite the end of the divisional mentorship program. "I think that there is now kind of an expectation that when someone new comes in we'll all kind of like help… so that's something that we like, just we do that."

All the respondents felt their mentorship experiences made them more likely to help new and early career teachers in the future. As Catherine put it,

> my good experience having been mentored made me think that if one of these student teachers needed to come and ask me questions, or observe my class, that I would… just share some of the same wisdom that was given to me. Like, I have lots now as a foundation to be a mentor.

Kayla felt her mentorship experience "probably enhanced" her desire to become a mentor herself. Ingrid felt if she had had a "different experience, [she] would be less likely to want to" be a mentor herself. This may indicate a link between a positive mentorship experience and a willingness to reach out to new and ECTs in the future.

Role of School Administration

The three participants indicated school administration plays an important role in successful mentorship programs. When attending a career fair, Kayla stopped at the Winter School Division booth where she spoke to a school administrator who "sold the mentorship program. It definitely drew me here." This illustrates the importance of having mentorship as a part of the recruitment of teachers.

Both Kayla and Ingrid recognized their SBLs were the ones who chose their formal mentors, with Ingrid indicating administrators "don't take on mentees but they oversee all of it to make sure everything is kind of flowing smoothly." At the same time, Ingrid also noted

"if our mentor was busy, we could always go to her [the principal], and she would kind of be the de facto mentor for whatever we needed." This demonstrates the importance of new teachers having trusting relationships with their administrative teams.

Kayla felt the SBLs role was "the creating of partnerships", "providing time" and "facilitating" the program, rather than as active mentors themselves and the administration "could step in and have some conversations" if the mentorship pairing was struggling in some aspect. She added principals should be monitoring the mentorship pairing to "see how they were interacting with one another during meetings [and]… in the staffroom", just in case intervention was needed. Catherine realized the importance of "support from both your principal and division to… get a sub and leave the school for a day and go to another school" if your school was too small to have a mentor in your subject area.

Desire for a Divisional Mentorship Program

Regardless their experiences in a formal, divisional mentorship program, all respondents felt it was imperative for school divisions to prioritize the continued implementation of a formal divisionally led mentorship program. Though Kayla did not connect strongly with her divisional mentor, she indicated the importance of a divisionally led mentorship program, designed to allow "the time to collaborate with other first-year teachers, who were going through the same thing." She also felt the division should try and have a "designated mentorship block each day" for new teachers to "work with a school based or divisional based mentor… observe other teachers, and [have] prep time so that you are not completely overwhelmed and burning out." The importance of trust in the divisional mentor was also important for her. She acknowledged her own lack of trust in the divisional mentor she was assigned but noted "a couple of years later, the divisional mentor was someone they really trusted. They relied on them because that person was amazing in

that role and put them at ease." Finding the right personality for the mentor was mentioned as being key for the success of any divisionally based program.

Ingrid had a similar divisional mentorship experience to Kayla and felt an important part of the divisional mentorship experience was meeting other new and ECTs. She appreciated the opportunity she was given to build those relationships.

> It was always nice to get together with the other new teachers in the division because generally we were experiencing the same thing…. It was nice to have that and make those connections. I can still call [those colleagues] and be like I'm stuck on this; I need your help.

Fostering a culture of collaboration amongst new and ECTs was considered by both respondents to be a key role for a divisional mentor or mentorship coordinator.

Catherine's divisional mentorship experience was much more positive than those of Kayla and Ingrid. She indicated the importance of going back to a similar program to the one she participated in, with a divisional mentor doing classroom observations and connecting with new and ECTs. Catherine also felt it was important to have a divisional mentor or mentorship coordinator to help ECTs navigate the challenges beyond their classrooms, including formal evaluations and career planning.

> I think that ideally you would have a first-year mentor division person and a first-year person within the school, but I think that it wouldn't be a bad idea to have some career mentorship for beyond your first year going forward… I think about some of the new teachers that I know…who are going through their evaluations for a permanent contract. And I think…those wonderful teachers shouldn't be unsupported, just because its not their very first year.

The desire to increase the scope of the divisional mentorship program shows how beneficial Catherine felt the program was for her, and the other new teachers in the program with her.

Desire to remain in Northern Alberta

All three respondents chose to stay in Northern Alberta to teach, though none of them felt they had no other alternative. Kayla indicated "because that culture of mentorship, the culture of collaboration and community was so evident in our school that is what… made me want to stay." Ingrid stayed because

> it was not quite like trial by fire here, like it was in the previous [province]. This [experience] was much more structured and friendly and gave new teachers more in regards to… formal mentors or the school based formal mentors. And that was a huge thing in wanting to stay. I felt like I was part of the school community.

Catherine moved from a large urban centre to Snowytown and chose to stay for a variety of reasons, including cost of living and the ability to get a permanent contract faster than in the cities. She did however say:

> There are small towns and small schools where I think if the living experience hadn't been so good, I would have said, let's try a different town, let's try a different school. So, I think that if I had come North and not enjoyed my experience, I would have just moved on.

The respondents all felt their experiences in their schools and communities were positive and supportive, so they had no desire to leave. Snowytown's unique geographic location does not appear to change the mentorship needs of new and ECTs compared to the research conducted in other parts of Canada (Hellsten et al., 2011; Kutsyuruba et al., 2018; Servage et al., 2017), and the world (B. L. Adams & Woods, 2015; McCormack & Thomas, 2003; Petrovska et al., 2018)

Main Findings

The main findings from this study are new and ECTs want and need mentors and supportive colleagues. The origin of the mentorship relationship, either formal or informal, is

not important, it is the trust the mentee feels toward the mentor which is paramount. New and ECTs also want to feel supported by their school-based administrative team, through providing time for mentorship activities and as someone to help if their formal mentorship relationship is struggling. The largest contributor to desiring to remain in Northern Alberta to teach was a feeling of connection to the rest of the school staff. A culture of collaboration made the participants feel a strong attachment to their school communities. Regardless of how effective they felt their divisional mentorship experience was, all believe it is important to have a school-based mentorship program as one more support for new and ECTs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study indicate formal and informal mentorship programs are less important to teacher retention than the feeling of belonging to the school in general. Even when the formal divisional mentorship program was not considered as effective, teachers stayed on because they felt connected to their colleagues and schools. This finding would indicate the need for SBLs to pay particular attention to LQS competency 4e "creating meaningful, collaborative learning opportunities for teachers and support staff" (Alberta Education, 2020, p. 4). If retention is linked to a feeling of belonging, having teachers feel connected through collaboration is one step SBLs can take to foster increased interconnectedness amongst their staff.

Despite all participants indicating the feeling of belonging as most important, all the participants also believed it was crucial to have a formal mentorship program, to both support new and ECTs and to foster a culture of mentorship within their schools. This demonstrates SBLs must be cognizant of finding suitable mentors for their new and ECTs. Though informal mentorship was also effective, it places the burden of finding a mentor on the new and ECTs, rather than where it should be; on SBLs.

All participants also acknowledged the importance of SBLs in creating the necessary conditions for a successful mentorship program. Beyond simply finding mentors for new and ECTs, the participants noted substitute teachers were often needed to facilitate time to collaborate with mentors and colleagues. As it is SBLs and DBLs who set budgets and approve substitute teacher requests, both must be supportive of mentorship programs to make the budgetary allowances necessary to make the experience as effective as possible.

Having a combination of formal divisional mentorship, formal in school mentorship, informal mentorship and a feeling of community and connection in a school, appears to be effective in retaining teachers in this small part of Northern Alberta. SBLs and DBLs control much of what is needed to make a mentorship program function and they help to create and foster school cultures. Due to this integral role, the following recommendations are specific to them.

Recommendations for School-Based supports

With these conclusions in mind, WSD would benefit from bolstering their mentorship program and ensuring all schools foster a culture of collaboration. One recommendation would be to ensure each new teacher has a designated mentor from their school. Ideally this pairing would be within the same subject area or grade (Hobson et al., 2009), if possible, in their school context. The participants in this study found their school-based mentors particularly important to their sense of community and well-being. Because of the foundational importance of this pairing, SBLs would benefit from professional development regarding the importance of the fit between the mentor and mentee, as well as their role in monitoring the efficacy of this relationship (Glickman et al., 2018; Walker & Kutsyuruba, 2019).

In practical terms, SBLs can enhance mentorship programs by trying, as much as is feasible, to create a schedule where new and ECTs have embedded time to meet with their

mentors. If the time is embedded in the schedule, the need to pay for substitute teachers, or have someone internally cover these meetings is minimized. Allowing new and ECTs to observe other teachers is beneficial (Whalen et al., 2019), as well as having mentor teachers observe their mentees teach. Full day coverage for mutual observations and debriefing would still need financial support.

SBLs can also ensure new and ECTs do not have a teaching schedule "seasoned teachers already in the school did not want" (le Maistre & Paré, 2010, p. 560) and by having "stable and manageable assignments so [new and ECTs] can focus more on professional growth" (Beck & Servage, 2018, p. 53). The reality of many WSD schools means some new and ECTs will have split classes, be teaching outside of their area of expertise, and possibly in more than one building, as Kayla had to, however, new and ECTs should not be expected to do more than their experienced colleagues, under more difficult conditions (Willis et al., 2017).

Within schools, creating communities of inquiry (Glickman et al., 2018), where staff work together on agreed upon goals, can help foster a culture of collaboration. It is likely, when collaboration is the norm in a school, helping new and ECTs is seen as part of what everyone does. As Catherine said, "as a culture, I think that there's now kind of an expectation that when someone new comes in we'll all kind of like help". Being part of collaborative teams allows new and ECTs to work with and connect with staff members who are not their formal mentors. This can lead to new supportive relationships (Kutsyuruba et al., 2018; Kutsyuruba, Walker et al., 2019) and possibly informal mentorship pairings.

Recommendations for School Division Based Supports

Another recommendation would be for the school division to also have a mentorship coordinator (Desimone et al., 2014) or divisional mentorship lead. Again, the participants found this role to be especially important. The job description and purpose of this position

would need to be truly clear to the new and ECTs to ensure they understand the non-evaluative nature of the position. The participants felt having non-evaluative classroom observations to be very beneficial to the learning of new and ECTs, which is supported in the research (Beck & Servage, 2018; Hobson et al., 2009). Due to the small size of many schools in the WSD, the mentorship coordinator could put new and ECTs in touch with teachers at other schools who teach the same subjects or grades. This could help support new and ECTs in their curriculum development, whereas the school-based mentor would support them in their overall well-being and the day-to-day management of their classrooms (Desimone et al., 2014; Kutsyuruba, Godden et al., 2019).

The school division leadership can also work to support a culture of collaboration within and among schools. Supporting collaborative endeavours between schools can help new and ECTs form connections with those outside of their schools (P. Adams et al., 2019; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Divisional-based leadership can support new and ECTs as well by creating the time and space for new teachers to meet each other (Beck & Servage, 2018). Support from other new teachers was also identified by the study participants as being desirable and beneficial. With a school division as geographically dispersed as the WSD, budget constraints would limit the feasibility of repeated in person meetings. However, if the school division could support one or two in person meetings near the beginning of the school year, other meetings could happen virtually, as the relationships between the new and ECTs would have already begun. Hosting a session during the divisional professional development day in August and the ATA professional development day later in the fall could help to reduce the costs, as teachers are already together, in person, on those days.

Considerations for Future Study

Future study would be needed to see if a culture of mentorship exists broadly in schools and school divisions not having formal mentorship programs, or if formal structures

are needed to create a lasting culture of mentorship. Regardless of which comes first,
school divisions can help create the conditions necessary tor collaboration through
structures such as professional learning communities, generative dialogue or collaborative
response (P. Adams et al., 2019; Hewson et al., 2015; Hewson & Hewson, 2022).

Future study would also be needed to see if specific types of mentorship programs
are more effective in rural or northern areas. One size does not fit all when looking at the
structure of mentorship programs.

Final Thoughts

In the context of this study and the Winter School Division, Catherine summarized
the general feeling regarding the importance of mentorship.

You hear so many teachers who come up from [urban centres] who come up to a

small town in the North, and they, you know, take one look around the town and they

stay a week, and then they're gone because… who can live in a small cold place

with no friends, with no connections, without feeling supported? And so, I think it is

dangerous for us, not dangerous, but it's silly for us… it's potentially unwise for us to

take the risk of losing good teachers because we haven't supported them and

helped them through that transition. …That grounding and that support, like I think it

can make a difference and I think not having it, it gives us the potential to lose

people who otherwise might be really wonderful and stay.

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Appendix A

University of Alberta Adult Participant Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Adult Participant Consent Form

EDPS 509 Research Assignment: The impact of mentorship on teacher retention in Northern Alberta

Researcher: Jen Favreau

Date Range of Research: February 5-April 17, 2022

I, _____ (name of participant), hereby consent to participate in the research, The impact of mentorship on teacher retention in Northern Alberta.

I understand that my participation includes:

- a one hour to one hour and half interview with Jen Favreau
- all parts of the interview will be transcribed both audio and video recorded

As per the Letter of Information, I understand that:

- My participation in this research is voluntary.
- I may withdraw from the research without penalty until March 19, 2022
- All information gathered will be treated confidentially.
- No identifying information will appear on written representations of the data: pseudonyms or numerical coding will be used to convey the data.
- The data will be used for the purposes of completion of the Master of Education in Educational Studies (MES) program and may be used in future presentations and publications in the educational context.
- The plan for this research has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, I can contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

University of Alberta Ethics ID# Pro00096710

Educational Policy Studies

7-104 Education North • University of Alberta • Edmonton • Canada • T6G 2G5
Telephone: (780) 492-7625 • Fax: (780) 492-2024

Appendix B

Letter of Introduction

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Jen Favreau
favreau@ualberta.ca

January 31, 2022

Recipient Name
Recipient City, Province Postal Code

Dear <Recipient Name>,

I am a graduate student in the Master of Education in Leadership and Educational Policy Studies program at the University of Alberta. The purpose of this letter is to ask you to take part in a research assignment for my EDPS 509 Research Design and Data Analysis course. My assignment is intended to look at the importance of mentorship in teacher retention in Northern Alberta. Your participation would involve completing an introduction and demographic survey and complete a short one hour to one hour and a half interview. Your participation is voluntary; there will be no consequence to you should you decline to participate or decide to withdraw from participating.

In order to gather data for my research assignment, I will be conducting semi-structured interviews with three participants from Northern Alberta. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. Please note:

- You may choose not to answer any question.
- You may opt out of this research assignment once responses have been submitted. To do so, please submit your request by email by March 19, 2022 and I will destroy all data.
- I will send you a transcription of the interview as well as a summary of the main points I understood you to make by email; you will have the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the transcription and my interpretation of it.

Should any concerns, complaints, or questions arise from your participation, you may contact me or my instructor, Dr. Jose da Costa (jdacosta@ualberta.ca).

Educational Policy Studies

All data will be handled in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants:

- Participant names will not be revealed. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms or numerical coding will be used in all written representations of the data.
- Hard copy data will be locked and will be destroyed on my completion of my graduate program.
- Digital data will be stored on my computer under a secure password-protected system and will be destroyed on my completion of my graduate program.
- Data will be used to complete my EDPS 509 course, my graduate program, and may be used in future presentations and publications in educational contexts.

Thank you for considering this invitation to participate in my research. If you wish to participate, please sign the attached consent form and return it to favreau@ualberta.ca by February 12, 2022 I have included two copies of the consent form: one is to be signed by you and the other is for your own records.

The plan for this research has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, you can contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Should you wish a copy of my research findings, I would be pleased to provide one on your request.

Sincerely,

Jen Favreau
Graduate student in the Master of Education in Leadership and Educational Policy Studies
Faculty of Education, University of Alberta
780-624-9687
favreauj@ualberta.ca

University of Alberta Ethics ID# Pro00096710

Educational Policy Studies

Appendix C

Interview Schedule

1. Describe your experiences with a formal mentorship program in your first years of teaching in Northern Alberta.
    a. How did your formal mentor make you feel comfortable sharing?
    b. If you could change that experience, what would you change?
2. Tell me about your experiences with informal mentors during your early career in Northern Alberta.
    a. How did this informal relationship come about?
3. Tell me about the culture of mentorship in your school.
    a. Do you think that your mentorship experience was unique?
4. How has your mentorship experience influenced your feelings about being a mentor?
5. Tell me about your decision to move to Northern Alberta as well as how important your formal or informal mentorship relationships when choosing to stay.
    a. Did you feel that you had the option to leave either Northern Alberta in general, or the school that you are at?
6. If time and money were not factors, what would your ideal mentorship program look like?