

Current Issues in Middle Level Education

Volume 28 | Issue 1

Article 4

August 2024

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Recommended Citation

Weller Swanson, Karen and Caskey, Micki M. (2024) "Community of Practice Mentoring to Retain Middle School Teachers," *Current Issues in Middle Level Education*: Vol. 28: Iss. 1, Article 4.

DOI: 10.20429/cimle.2024.280104

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/cimle/vol28/iss1/4>

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Community of Practice Mentoring to Retain Middle School Teachers

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe and explain a mentoring initiative for supporting and retaining middle school teachers. First, we examine the persistent problem of teacher retention in U.S. schools, particularly in middle schools. Then, we describe a mentoring initiative—a community practice mentoring model that is well-suited for facilitating professional learning and addressing the retention issue. We define community of practice and note how communities of practices work in schools. We argue that a community of practice model is both a powerful conceptual framework for mentoring teachers and a practical approach to supporting middle school teachers' practice. Next, we report on middle school conditions including organizational structures, effective professional learning, and the multigenerational nature of the teaching force. Subsequently, we focus on the key features of a community that enhances teachers' professional learning, reduces teacher isolation, and influences teacher retention. We end with our recommendations and a few concluding remarks about the importance of good talk and setting the conditions for teacher optimism.

Keywords: *mentoring, community of practice, dialogue and practice, middle school, reverse mentoring, mutually beneficial relationships*

The purpose of this article is to describe and explain a mentoring initiative for supporting and retaining middle school teachers. To begin, we explicate the pressing problem of teacher retention in U.S. schools, especially in middle schools where teacher turnover is higher. Then, we propose a promising mentoring initiative for supporting and retaining middle school teachers—a community practice mentoring model. After defining community of practice (Wenger, 1998), we delineate the nuances of how a community of practice (CoP) works in schools. We argue that a community of practice model is not only a powerful conceptual framework for mentoring teachers, but it is also a practical approach to supporting middle school teachers' practice. To further contextualize CoP mentoring, we underscore the various middle school organizational structures, effective professional learning, and the current multigenerational teaching force. Next, we highlight the key features of a community that enhance teachers' professional learning, reduce teacher isolation, and influence teacher retention. We end with our recommendations and concluding remarks about the importance of setting the conditions for teacher optimism to flourish (Squires, 2019).

The Problem: Teacher Retention

Teacher retention has been a persistent problem in the United States. Recent research reports have confirmed the pervasive nature of the problem. In a study of urban teacher retention, Papay et al. (2017) found that 19% of teacher left their schools within one year and 58% left within five years. In a nationwide survey of teachers, Marshall et al. (2022) found that more than 75% of the surveyed teachers considered leaving their teaching position during the 2021-22 school year.

Based on their statistical analyses of a nationally representative survey, Ingersoll and Tran (2023) determined that urban schools and rural schools are facing similar teacher shortages and staffing problems due to teacher turnover. School level also contributed to the teacher retention issue. Secondary schools including middle schools experienced higher levels of teacher turnover than elementary schools (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Tran et al., 2023). At the middle school level specifically, teacher retention has been an even greater cause for concern. Nguyen et al. (2020) found that “the odds of leaving are 51 percent higher for middle school teachers than for elementary school teachers” (p. 9). The loss of middle school teachers has had far-reaching consequences and costs. Castro (2023) determined that teacher turnover has forced middle school principals to shift their focus from supporting teachers so that they can thrive to continually training and enculturating teachers. In this case, the consequence has been the administrative time and resources needed to train new teachers in classroom management and basic teaching skills.

Research has shown the actual and hidden costs of failing to retain teachers. The actual costs of teacher turnover have included the financial expense of recruiting, hiring, and training new teachers (Learning Policy Institute, 2017). Whereas the hidden costs of teacher turnover have been the increased proportion of teachers with little teaching experience and the adverse effect on student achievement (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Thus, the steady influx of new and inexperienced teachers has impeded the development of a coherent school culture.

Complicating the teacher retention issue is the range of life and professional experiences of new teachers entering the classroom. The new middle school teacher does not always look like a 22-year-old, fresh out of student teaching and a newly minted college graduate. Some are prepared in graduate teacher preparation programs, while others are retooling to become teachers as a second career. To address the problem of retaining such a diverse cadre of middle school teachers, we need a fresh mentoring model—a CoP mentoring model—because effective mentoring practices contribute to teacher retention (Hudson, 2013; Sowell, 2017).

Mentoring Teachers in a Community of Practice

The Successful Middle School (Bishop & Harrison, 2021) expands on the Association of Middle Level Education’s call for intentional leadership that supports a developmentally responsive environment for students. It is within this call that middle level teachers can leverage a CoP model for professional development. According to Bishop and Harrison (2021), “As architects for change, courageous, collaborative leaders make a difference by putting their knowledge and beliefs into action” (p. 48). In this theory to practice process, a CoP enhances and strengthens the needs of the adult learner as well.

A CoP framework is ideal for mentoring program middle school teachers. A CoP is a group of people (e.g., teachers) who share a passion for something (e.g., teaching middle school) and want to deepen their understanding and expertise by belonging to a community (e.g., mentoring pairs) in which they learn together over time. We suggest Wenger’s (1998) CoP framework because it serves as a scaffold for novice and practiced teachers alike to engage with the ebb and flow of growing as professional educators.

A CoP has three dimensions or characteristics: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). First, *mutual engagement* denotes how members of a community engage in a practice (i.e., actions) and negotiate what it means with each other. For

teachers, teaching students in educational settings is central to their practice. Being able to talk about teaching with other professionals who have different experiences and backgrounds helps to bring coherence to their teaching practice. The interpersonal relationships within a community are complex ranging from positive and agreeable to tense and disagreeable. Second, a *joint enterprise* describes how members negotiate the complexity of their mutual engagement. In the case of teachers, it is how they find ways to work together despite their individual differences, respond to conditions outside their sphere of influence, and are mutually accountable for students' education. Third, a CoP depends on a *shared repertoire*—a range and collection ways to mutually engage and negotiate meaning in a practice. For teachers, a shared repertoire includes words, concepts, shared histories, points of reference, routines, and actions that become resources for their teaching practice. We assert that these characteristics depend upon interactions among the CoP members.

Teachers entering a CoP mentorship find ways to improve their practice by talking about teaching, discussing challenges, solving problems, exploring instructional strategies, collaborating on curriculum initiatives, and so on. They also exchange ideas about how to engage with school personnel (e.g., principals, counselors, psychologists, specialists), interact effectively with parents and care givers, and address pressing issues impacting their classrooms or schools. Taking a reciprocal stance, teachers dialogue about practice in ways that benefit the entire community. Not only does teaching expand educators' specialized knowledge (Noddings, 2003), but it also builds professional relationships. Therefore, a CoP framework lends itself to a focused mentoring model in the middle grades.

Within a CoP mentoring model, traditional mentoring consists of a novice teacher (mentee) learning skills in an environment alongside an expert (mentor) through dialogue and experiential learning. This mentor-mentee relationship can be productive or unproductive. For example, a productive mentoring relationship is more likely to develop when the mentor and mentee teach the same content at a similar grade level in the same area of the school (Parker, 2010). The mentor-mentee relationship can either be formal (e.g., beginning or induction teacher program) or informal (e.g., hallway conversations). However, a CoP mentoring model also extends to the less traditional approach of the more experienced teacher learning skills from the novice teacher. In both scenarios, mentoring benefits teachers at multiple stages across their teaching career (Irby et al., 2020) including preservice, early career, and mid-to-later career (Caskey & Swanson, 2023).

CoP mentoring can begin in teacher preparation, continue through induction, and extend into mid-career. Education professors who prepare and guide the next generation of teachers often create opportunities for aspiring teachers to participate in a CoP within their teacher preparation programs. When teacher candidates and beginning teachers enter the teaching practice, they may struggle between thinking about middle school teaching and grasping it. We assert that CoP mentoring can support and shape the transition. In other words, from their very first experiences with the teaching profession, teachers can learn and grow from interactions with one another. They can build a sense of belonging and avoid isolation and disillusionment with the practice of teaching.

In middle schools, teachers typically belong to more than one CoP in their schools. For instance, they engage with many professional partners and diverse communities including professional learning groups (content planning) and interdisciplinary teams (English, social studies, math and science teacher collaboration). They are also responsible for building classroom community (100+ students) and fostering parent communication. In other words, middle school

teachers are adept at working in multiple communities of practice (CoPs). Thus, we assert the merit and practicality of CoP mentoring initiative in middle schools.

The goal of CoP mentoring is to foster a dynamic flow of knowledge exchange in a reciprocal way so that both partners grow. In traditional mentoring, the veteran professional leads and exemplifies expected behavior and outcomes. According to Dominguez and Kochan (2020), in the teaching profession philosophical stances evolve and technological skills change rapidly, which may prompt the younger teacher to lead. We also find:

As with any new skill or relationship praxis starts slow, clumsily and requiring practice of multiple steps but over time repetition becomes muscle memory and habits of mind allowing for new challenges for the seasoned mentor and the maturing novice. Dialogue starts shallow and develops into deeper trusted conversation, ones that are risky, challenging assumptions. The protégé and mentor build unconditional respect for one another. (Swanson & Caskey, 2022, p. 15)

In other words, mentoring requires the commitment of time, trust, and deep respect from the mentor partners.

Mentoring can also address the various phases and transition points as teachers' assignments change and their individual needs shift (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). A mentor is one person within a network of numerous helping relationships who provides emotional and career support and can serve as a role model. We assert that a CoP mentoring model can lead to positive outcomes for teachers such as socializing them into the profession, discussing and designing a career plan, choosing appropriate career activities, and the developing collaborative relationships (Caskey & Swanson, 2023). Next, we emphasize some of the contextual distinctions associated with a CoP mentoring model including the teachers' professional learning in middle school, the nature of today's multigenerational teaching force, and mentoring across the career span.

Professional Learning in Middle Schools

Teacher identity is on an ever-changing spectrum that involves readiness to teach, personal preferences as well as personal and professional growth. For this reason, school leaders need to provide professional development that "...is customized and personalized to take these different needs into account It incorporates active, learning, integrates models of effective practice, and supports collaboration between and among educators" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 49). In other words, professional learning opportunities must be developed to address the demands and current realities of teaching.

In middle schools, principals assign teachers to multiple organizational structures intended for planning and creating developmentally appropriate experiences for young adolescents (Caskey & Carpenter, 2012) and professional learning. One group is the grade level team in which English, math, social studies, and science teachers usually share a group of 100+ students. The purpose of the team is to create a smaller community within a large school setting. In the team, teachers engage in collaborative activities such as meetings about Response to Intervention (RTI), planning team activities, and discussing the best use of advisory time. A second group is the content area professional learning community (PLC). For example, a grade level science PLC meets to co-plan curriculum and instruction. Effective professional learning for middle school teachers is most effective when its relevant, long term, and job embedded (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

Relevant Professional Learning

Middle school teachers need professional learning opportunities that are relevant to teaching young adolescents within their specific teaching context. Because most states certify teachers for either K-8 for elementary school or 6-12 for secondary school, many teachers new to the middle school setting may require mentoring about developmentally appropriate practices for teaching and reaching young adolescents. More experienced teachers also benefit from germane mentoring opportunities—ones that apply specifically to their job demands (e.g., school change agenda) and guard against fatigue (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

Long Term Professional Learning

Middle school teachers need continuing professional learning opportunities to grow and thrive in their careers. Statistically, middle grades teachers leave teaching at a higher rate than elementary and secondary teachers (Nyguen, 2020). To support and retain teachers, professional learning must address teachers' immediate and individual goals as well as the school's priorities (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). While working with young adolescents is remarkable and fun, it is also challenging work. Thus, middle school teachers benefit from mentoring well beyond their first three years of induction. Mid-career mentoring can not only advance teachers' professional growth, but it can also retain their expertise and experience.

Job Embedded Professional Learning

Job embedded professional learning is essential to the context of each teacher's experience. Teaching carries a high cognitive load with teachers making approximately 1500 decisions a day, teaching 100+ students (Jerrell, 2021), teaming with four content area teachers, and meeting with their content PLC. Mentoring can occur "on the job" because mentors can be from different professional circles (e.g., teams, PLCs). Mentoring provides an opportunity for teachers to dialogue about practice with others in similar situations—embedding reflective practice for both early and mid-career professionals. Reflection can range from classroom and parent management to career planning and work-life balance.

Teaching warrants relevant, long term, and job embedded professional learning opportunities for teachers to enhance their work with the multiple generations of teachers working in their schools. In the next section, we briefly describe the landscape of today's teaching force.

Multigenerational Teaching Force

As previously mentioned, teacher identity is key to effective professional and personal development. One factor that influences the approach a teacher takes can be their generational perspectives. Schools have a multigenerational staff with teachers' ages and experiences spanning four generations. According to Bacon (2023) intergenerational groups are born within a 15- to 20-year span and have shared life events and experiences that shape their belief system, priorities and values. This complexity challenges the school's priorities, teacher's longevity, and knowledge base.

These four generations share broad characteristics often described by their birth years and how they prefer to communicate at work. The first are the Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964. They hold most of the leadership positions in education. They prefer direct communication and are comfortable with technology. Boomers expect to have input into decision-making at school (Bacon, 2023). Next are Generation X, those born between 1965 and 1979. Members of this group seek out a life-work balance and resist being micro-managed. Their preference is a hands-off management approach. The Millennials or Generation Y are those born between 1980 and 1995.

They expect to have input and to get feedback on their jobs and their performance. They seek out constant feedback from leadership (Bacon, 2023). Lastly, Generation Z are those born after 1995. Given their experience and ongoing use of social media, they prefer an instant feedback model. A CoP mentoring model can accommodate intergenerational learning among the multiple generations of teachers. In this model, teachers engage in dialogue and practices to clarify their value sets, goals, and priorities; examine misunderstandings; and explore possibilities for new understandings. We argue that CoP mentoring builds teachers' capacity for embracing the numerous perspectives of the multigenerational teaching force and engaging in fundamental problem-solving. Strengthening this argument, in the next section, we assert why this approach is vital for mentoring across teachers' career spans.

Mentoring Across the Career Span

Mentoring practices support teachers across all stages of their career span. For example, preservice teachers (mentee) are working alongside a cooperating teacher (mentor). The cooperating teacher is modeling the practice of teaching and articulating the decision-making process through a continuous dialogue that exemplifies the art, science, and responsibilities of teaching (Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021). An early career teacher (mentee) can observe experienced teachers (mentor) both in their content area and in their building to develop relationships in a small CoP (Martin et al., 2016). Mid-career and veteran professionals (reciprocal mentors) can extend the dialogue about classroom practice to learn new skills and perspectives from incoming colleagues (Cordingley & Buckler, 2012). A mutually beneficial mentoring approach acknowledges all participants as they give and receive equally in the relationship. "Ideal mentor–mentee relationships are thus dynamic and synergistic, resulting in a mutually rewarding experience of personal development and learning" (Newsome, 2020, pp. 1166, 1168). Such a 'pay it forward' perspective is counter to the traditional hierarchical all-knowing mentor and the naive mentee.

Features of a CoP Mentoring Model

Our CoP mentoring model relies heavily on three distinct features: dialogue and practice, reverse mentoring, and mutually beneficial relationships.

Dialogue and Practice

A critical aspect of CoP mentoring is the productive dialogue for exchanging information and ideas about practice. *Dialogue* is an inclusive and intentional way for teachers to talk about their knowledge and experience. It prompts vital conversation between mentor and mentee that helps them to grapple with their assumptions—ones that underlie their teaching practice. We view dialogue as *good talk* which "happens between two people who share an affinity or attachment to one another not only to each other, but also to their shared world" (van Manen, 2014, p. 36). Not only is dialogue a valuable way to learn about practice, but it also helps teachers to consider one another's philosophies about teaching, learning, and mentoring (Talbot et al., 2018). Dialogue about practice can increase early-career teacher success (Sowell, 2017) and support the retention of mid-career teachers (Bressman et al., 2018).

Dialogue depends on open communication and intention. Intentional conversations focus on a topic with a beginning and ending framework. By this we mean that a predetermined structure guides the conversations to facilitate depth and flexibility. For example, a mentoring pair may meet for 30 minutes once a week to discuss their immediate needs and meet at a different time to delve

into philosophical topics such as approaches to addressing student behavior, managing time, and planning career moves. In a CoP mentoring model for middle school teachers, dialogue also needs to specifically center on meeting the needs of young adolescent learners.

Conversation alone only partly supports teachers; it is collaborative practice that builds the ability to learn and grow from one another. The *practice* or art of teaching is nuanced and ever-changing. We view practice as specific teaching skills or competencies. Practice includes the procedures, routines, and understandings related to teaching in a school culture. In mentoring, practice extend beyond the classroom and serves as mirrors for challenging one another's assumptions (Weller Swanson & Caskey, 2021). In a multigenerational setting, learning the nuances applies to everyone engaged in becoming a better teacher. In other words, through dialogue and practice, the mentor and mentee grow and learn by playing with novel approaches, attempting alternative strategies, and working collaboratively to make sense of their practice (Swanson & Caskey, 2022).

Reverse Mentoring

One practice that harnesses the expertise of younger teachers is reverse mentoring (Murphy, 2012), which levels perceived hierarchical structures and creates a space to share skills. Traditionally in schools, principals assign new teachers a mentor who is a veteran teacher. This can be formal or informal in structure. It assumes that the veteran has the experience and skills needed to be successful and shares them with the new teacher. However, reverse mentoring elevates the skills of the younger generation of teachers. One example of skill sharing is Millennials sharing their technology skills with veteran teachers. This creates a reciprocal relationship in which the mentee feels respected thus increasing a sense of belonging which could lead to less turnover. The Boomers, GenXers, and Millennials have access to a range of communicative and professional skills. They are valued in reverse mentoring because of their experience which can improve morale, lower turnover, increase access to school-level information, and achieve work-life balance (Leon, 2023). Reverse mentoring intentionally amplifies the voice and skills of new teachers within a traditional school culture.

Reverse mentoring can create a safer workspace where everyone can share their ideas and concerns (Robinson, 2018). For new teachers, the advantage of reverse mentoring is the inclusion of their voices in school spaces. For mentor teachers, the advantage is learning from new colleagues that can counteract burnout. Reverse mentoring can keep Boomers engaged in learning technology skills and Millennials committed to learning leadership skills (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2011). Fortunately, experienced teachers are recognizing new teachers' skills much earlier than in previous decades—especially considering teacher retention issues. Plus, adding reverse mentoring to traditional mentoring can prompt the development of a thriving and equitable space for professional learning.

Mutually Beneficial Relationships

For mentoring relationships to become mutually beneficial, we focus on the following components: the relationship, participation, belonging, and community. While it may seem obvious, developing a supportive and collaborative *relationship* is at the heart of mutually beneficial mentoring relationship. By placing an emphasis on the relationship, the overall mentoring experience improves (Weimer, 2019). This relationship needs to be honest and positive for learning and optimism to flourish (Squires, 2019). It also needs to be an equal and empowering partnership (Weimer, 2019). According to Ragins (2016), “high-quality mentoring relationships

are a ‘two-way street’ where both mentors and protégés actively learn and grow from each other” (p. 232). The relationship depends on trust and respect for mentoring processes and practices (Hudson, 2016; Sowell, 2017). As partners in the mentoring relationship, both teachers engage in purposeful work about their teaching practice.

Active *participation* is inherent to mutually beneficial mentoring. Mentors and mentees work closely together and engage in an ongoing dialogue about their teaching practice. Given their range of teaching and generational experiences, they may hold distinct and perhaps dissimilar preferences and perspectives about teaching and learning. So, the mentor and mentee must feel safe and empowered to pose questions, offer suggestions, discuss challenges, disclose uncertainties, reveal biases, and celebrate successes. Together they build their practice through “open communication within a supportive, friendly and personally non-judgmental environment” based on mutual respect and trust (Hudson, 2016, p. 39).

A sense of *belonging* flourishes in mutually beneficial relationships. According to Wenger (1998), a CoP establishes norms and collaborative relationships that create a sense of solidarity within the group. When new teachers—mentees—enter these existing CoPs, they typically adopt the norms, practices, and beliefs of the group about teaching (Surette, 2020). As members of the community, they share a group identity and find themselves belonging to the group. Not only do new teachers experience a sense of belonging to the community, but mentor teachers also benefit from belonging to the group because it reduces their professional isolation (Holland, 2018) and fosters teacher well-being (Cherkowski & Walker, 2013, 2019). Moreover, mentoring can create a sense of belonging that is essential for professional learning and teacher retention.

Community membership is the center of mutually beneficial relationships. Being in a community helps new teachers and experienced teachers to learn about their practice. A community not only socializes new teachers into the profession, but it also serves to sustain mentor teachers as they share their advice, support, and expertise with their colleagues (Surette, 2020). According to Surette (2020), the process of teachers’ mutual engagement leads to mutual relationships with members of diverse CoPs in their schools. As we assert, teachers participate in and belong to multiple CoPs. To build community within a CoP mentoring model requires intentionality, commitment, and time.

Recommendations

We recommend a CoP mentoring model for supporting and retaining middle school teachers. We propose this initiative because it can (a) support and shape teachers’ professional growth, (b) create the conditions to disrupt teacher isolation, and (c) influence teachers’ decision to stay in the profession. Our CoP mentoring model incorporates thoughtful conversations and interpersonal interactions about current and future practice that transpire within a middle school learning environment.

We argue that a CoP mentoring model focuses on relational support that can be effective for retaining new teachers and re-engaging veteran teachers. While many factors contribute to the teacher shortage, a robust and intentional mentoring culture in middle schools can respond to teachers’ concerns and improve teachers’ professional lives. In a CoP mentoring model, the focus shifts from surviving the job to designing a working environment in which teachers thrive.

We contend that a CoP mentoring model is ideal for middle school teachers. Not only do these teachers have a special talent for connecting to and making relationships with students, but

they also engage with other teachers on a regular basis. Today's middle school teachers hold unique views and strengths given their varied generational and experiential backgrounds. They also belong to multiple CoPs within their schools (e.g., PLCs, interdisciplinary teams), so a CoP mentoring model can facilitate and blend teachers' professional development and personal growth.

We suggest dialogue and practice, reverse mentoring, and mutually beneficial relationships as critical features of a CoP mentoring model. First, we find dialogue is not only an inclusive and intentional way for teachers to talk about their teaching practice, but it can also spur teachers' overall well-being. Second, we note how reverse mentoring can capture younger teachers' experiences and create a safe space for sharing skills. Adding reverse mentoring to a traditional mentoring approach sets the stage for tapping the expertise of younger and veteran teachers. Third, we reason that mutually beneficial relationships are at the heart of a CoP mentoring model. Mutually beneficial relationships foster an empowering partnership where mentors and mentees learn and grow together.

We recognize that mentoring is messy, uneven, bumpy, funny, and frustrating, yet necessary to grow professionally. Teachers in one middle school can span four generations which all have unique priorities, preferred ways to communicate, and collaborate. We view mentoring as a rich opportunity for learning and sharing skills and experiences. We also value *good talk* (van Manen, 2014) because it implies an edifying and relational experience with intention. Similarly, we embrace the idea of *optimism to flourish* (Squires, 2019) in which mentoring pairs can experience fulfillment related to the gift of teaching, the development of teaching skills, and the enjoyment of teaching young people. In a CoP mentoring model, all these components work in harmony so that middle school teachers feel empowered and experience the optimism necessary to flourish and remain in their teaching careers.

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