

## A Tale of Two Studies: Using Self-Mentoring™ to Build Teacher-Leader Confidence

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### Abstract

*Self-mentoring™ is an achiever, such as a teacher, willing to initiate and accept responsibility for self-development by devoting time to navigate within the culture of the environment in order to make the most of opportunity to strength competencies needed to enhance job performance and career progression through four stages: self-awareness, self-development, self-reflection, and self-monitoring. Self-mentoring is a sustainable practice of building leaders that is different for each individual through the identification and development of individual skills using collaborations, observations, one-one-one interactions, discussion groups, networking activities, community clusters, and other identified measures through self-mentoring. Two separate exploratory studies were conducted in a public K-12 North Carolina school involving teacher volunteers. The two yearlong qualitative studies provided four training sessions and guidance throughout the school years. Results of the study suggest that self-mentoring is a means for participants to build 1) confidence, 2) willingness to support others, and, when desired, the 3) ability to assume leadership roles, which increases sustainability.*

### 1. Introduction

The idea of using self-study in teaching practice, defined as the ability to improve one's teaching and leadership with evidence-based practice, is paramount to growth and development [1]. Self-study involves the teacher, with the assistance of concerned colleagues, builds a template for self-examination of outcome-based and purpose-driven teaching [2]. And in the late twentieth century, new developments in teacher education led teacher to study their attempts to improve instructional practices [3]. While self-study appears to drive self-evaluation of direct classroom instructional practices in the last decade, enter more recently a new teacher-leader practice, self-mentoring.

Self-mentoring, trademarked, is the act of leading oneself in an unknown environments or even hostile settings if necessary. It is an achiever, such as a teacher, willing to initiate and accept responsibility for self-development by devoting time to navigate within the culture of the environment in order to

make the most of opportunity to strength competencies needed to enhance job performance and career progression [4, 5, 6, 7].

Self-mentors are given steps to lead while accepting responsibility for their personal and/or professional growth through the identification and development of individual skills and aligning internal and external resources to meet expectations using social and professional networking when necessary. Self-mentoring, while akin to some formal mentoring practices, is about developing relationships with others for networking and reflection to support the growth of the self-mentor even though independence is central to the self-mentor.

Jean Piaget, developmental psychologist, believed that everyone does think, but just not alike or use the same critical thinking skills. Piaget advocated that of the four stages of learning, the third level, concrete operational, might be considered the most difficult for individuals [8]. This stage requires individuals to think beyond what is right in front of them-what they feel, taste, see, or know from experience. Critical thinking was believed to develop in the final stage named formal operations. During this stage, the individual can accept ambiguity and contradictions-can perform abstract reasoning. Self-mentors must operate in the formal operations stage in order to be able to build relationships for peer reflection and feedback, use self-reflection, and apply data from various sources for self-improvement. Reflection is an important component of self-mentoring.

### Building Leaders

Self-mentoring focuses on leadership development and sustained leadership practice through acknowledging innate or embedding new behaviors. These processes engage the leader in the environment. Teachers aware of the process still need encouragement or a structured approach to reach full leadership potential. Self-mentoring includes four levels: Self-awareness, Self-development, Self-reflection, and Self-monitoring [7]. Each of the four levels builds on leadership development as depicted in Figure 1.

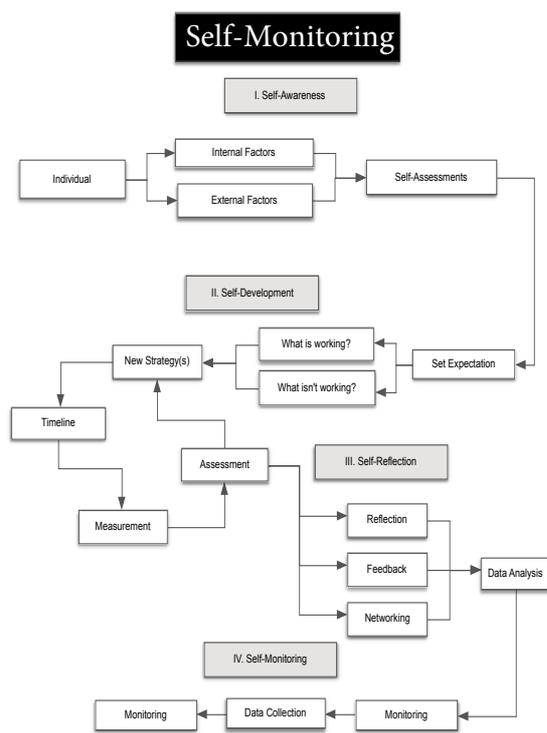


Figure 1. Self-Mentoring Model

Leadership is a process, not an innate or taught set of individual skills, but a process. This process, as defined by Lambert [9], a scholar in the field of leadership development, includes problem-solving and broad-based skillful participation, conversations and stories among colleagues, and task enactment processes. Teachers who aspire to become leaders still need a structured approach to reach their full leadership potential [7].

Integrating new teachers into the school is a critical aspect of leadership development and sustainability [9]. While leadership is also viewed as key to sustainability [10], commitment is viewed as equally important. Unless there is a commitment by those involved to change, prevailing behaviors will return. Self-mentors are more committed and passionate in sustaining their success. A sense of accomplishment is so motivational that they endeavor to sustain the personal empowerment and self-efficacy [7].

Self-mentoring strengthens the existing culture in a system. Barth [11] looks at leadership as everyone's work and that leaders grow when they engage with others to make sense of the world, reach out to new teachers, commit to shared outcomes and develop their identities as owners of their system - the school. Self-mentoring not only provides a structured process for inducing new teachers into the organization but provides leadership opportunity among seasoned teachers ready to move into leadership roles, teachers identified for future administrative roles, teachers serving as support to

new teachers, and teachers who are struggling but willing to take an initiative to alter their course.

An original study was conducted in a public school district in North Carolina. The same study was repeated the following year with a different group of volunteers and yielded similar results.

## 2. One District – Two Studies

### Study Group 1

A rural school district in eastern North Carolina was the setting for the first study. Nine teachers, one male and eight female, were selected or volunteered by the local school district to be participants in the study and will be referred to as Year 1 participants. The only male participant dropped out for unknown reason at the beginning of the pilot but is included in the following demographics. The teacher participants taught in grades 1-3 and 6-12 and prior to the pilot year, taught in grades K-1, 3, 5-12, which was representational of elementary, middle, and high schools. The average teaching experience for the participants was 4.3 years (3-5 years of experience). Age range of the participants was four 20-30 years old; three 31-40 years old; and one 51-60 year old. All participants lived in the county and had been teaching for approximately 22 to 39 years. None of the participants had acquired beyond a bachelors degree. In regard to mentoring experiences, seven of the participants had 3 years of prior mentoring and one participant had four years of mentoring.

### Study Group 2

The same rural school district in eastern North Carolina was the setting for the second year study and will be referred to as Year 2 participants. Three teachers, all female, volunteered to be participants during the second study that followed the same procedures as the initial study. One of the females dropped out after the first session due to unexpected obligations. That teacher is not reflected in the information that follows. The average teaching experience for the two participants was 4 years (3-5 years of experience). Age range of the participants was 20-30 years old and one lived in the county and one did not during beginning teaching. The teacher participants both taught second grade and one had only taught second grade for her four years of experience; the other teacher had only taught second grade for two of her four years. Only one of the participants had acquired a master's level degree. In regard to mentoring experiences, the teachers had a combined 6 years of mentoring that was characteristic of the county program that provided mentor for 1-3 Teacher. While one teacher was complimentary of her mentoring experience, the

other teacher did not have a good mentoring relationship. Table 1 is an overview of both Study Group 1 and Study Group 2 demographics.

AGE RANGE				
20-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70
4 (1); 1 (2)	3 (1)	1 (1)	NA	NA
GRADE LEVEL				
PRE-1	2-3	4-6	7-8	9-12
1 (1)	2 (2)	1 (2)	2 (1)	2 (1)
YEARS EXPERIENCE				
0-1	2-4	5-8	9-15	16 +
NA	2 (2)	NA	NA	6 (1)
MENTORING EXPERIENCE				
0-1	2-3	4-5	6-7	8-9
NA	5 (1); 2 (2)	1 (1)	NA	NA
HIGHEST DEGREE				
BACHELORS		MASTERS		TERMINAL
6 (1); 1 (2)		1 (2)		NA
LIVED IN COUNTY DURING CAREER				
YES			NO	
6 (1); 1 (2)			1 (2)	

Table 1. Overview of Study Group (1) and Study Group (2)

### 3. Methodology

The primary question driving both qualitative inquiries was, *In what ways does self-mentoring support individual prek-12 teachers growth as leaders in and out of the classroom?* Since self-mentoring is evolving; related studies were in mentoring so a grounded theory was applied to both to encourage discovery. Since both studies were open, they used a grounded theory that supports rich descriptive data that can be potentially captured during participant interviews. The benefit is the emergent theory is related to the participants' perceived reality rather than what the researcher, prior to conducting the research, assumes to be true. Grounded theory allows data to be collected in a variety of methods using editing strategies, which is less prefigured and permits searching for segment of text from interviews to generate and illustrate categories of meaning [12]

Both groups of teachers met for four formal sessions, over a period of nine months, approximately 2 or more hours in duration. Year 1 teachers met and Year 2 teachers followed the same schedule the following year. Each session focused on one of the four levels of self-mentoring with general overlap from the previous seminar. Data were collected during each meeting. Participating teachers in both studies were not isolated in their efforts to self-mentor. While study 1 participants were

assigned to different schools and grade levels, they were able to interact during and between the seminars or contact the school officials for additional guidance. Study 2 participants were at the same school. It was noted that this type of group internal support evidenced by Study 1 participants may have been beneficial but the impact of this potential support was not a consideration in the study. Self-mentoring advocates for internal and external resources – it does not limit the interactions to single contact but may be group contact if needed. In most cases; however, a self-mentor may be self-mentoring outside of a study group format. Each participant signed a contract to self-mentor as a testament of commitment.

#### Session 1: Self-Awareness

During the first formal session in both studies over the two-year period, the participating teachers used leadership inventories and tools to discuss leadership processes and traits. The culture of the school district and each school was determined. The Study 1 teachers were from different schools and while some differences in school climate were noted from school to school, there was an overarching supportive culture for the county. Study 2 teachers' perceptions of school climate were akin to the Study 1 teacher reports. At the close of the seminar, both groups of teachers compiled a list of individual expectations narrowing the list to one primary focus for the next seminar.

As a final process, teachers compiled a list of individual expectations and then narrowed the list to one primary focus that strategies could be developed prior to the next seminar. From the Study 1 teachers, two primary expectations emerged: to become a stronger leader in the school environment and/or to become a better teacher in the classroom. The Study 2 teachers were focused on becoming a better teacher in the classroom only. At the completion of the first session, each teacher signed a self-mentoring contract as a testament of personal commitment.

#### Session 2: Self-Development

During the second meeting held approximately thirty days later, each teacher articulated an expectation, established 'measurable' strategies, aligned classroom or school activities, developed an implementation timeline, and selected appropriate measurement methods to assess and evaluate the progress. Each teacher committed to a set amount of time each week to concentrate on meeting the expectation. This level of self-mentoring required organization, commitment, and dedication by the self-mentor. Challenging for the teachers was aligning measurement with strategies to determine if

they reached their expectations. Using journals to document struggles, breakthroughs, and processes is time proven age-old strategy [14]. Video-taping their classroom presence, mannerisms, and teaching style was equally challenging for many of the teachers. A mirrors reflection can be harsh since teachers observe students, not necessarily our own behaviors and patterns. Self-mentoring requires that we watch ourselves [6] and ask others for feedback. Powerful conversations begin to occur when reflection is peer [14].

### Session 3: Self-Reflection

The third meeting complimented previous efforts using reflection. The teachers allotted time for self and peer-reflection with personally chosen internal and sometimes external peers. Internal and external networking was integral in planning. Conversations provided opportunity to meet peers in the school and build relationships [15] Faculty and staff were identified as future resources.

### Session 4: Self-Monitoring

During the final meeting, the emphasis turned to conversations on self-mentoring in the absence of any formalized structure or external support from the researchers. Teachers in both groups were provided time to reflect in groups by sharing results from reviewing recommendations and data, resulting in future modifications. Each teacher developed a plan for continual monitoring. New expectations can be developed for each year or continual work in one designated area is equally feasible as well as practical.

## 4. Two Studies: Data Analysis

Over two years of data were collected from observations, journal entries, teacher interactions, open-ended questions during seminars, individual and group interviews, video tapings, emails, student assignments, and related documents from the two studies as evidenced in Table 2.

Table 2. Data Instruments and Schedule

Instrument	Data	Collection
Questionnaire	Systems Assessment	Session 1, 4
Questionnaire	Mentoring Experience	Session 1, 4
Journals	Self-mentoring activity	Session 1-4
Observations	Self-mentoring activity	Session 1-4
Videos	Self-mentoring activity	Session 1-4
Documents	Student Work	Session 3-4

Emails	Communications	Session 1-4
Interviews (individual/group)	Self-mentoring	Post Sessions

It was then sorted using manual coding and then cross referenced with interviews by the two researchers. The first cycle coding was In Vivo and a second cycle of coding utilized pattern coding [16]. Two categories were identified from the teacher interviews: instructional leadership and teacher leadership. In both of these categories, there were classroom (interior) and school wide (external) indicators. Increased confidence emerged as the most prominent theme. Second cycle coding yielded similar patterns during data comparison and served the support initial reviews. Reflective and interactive positioning were dynamics at work with participants and among participants and their peers. Positioning theory explains that learners make decisions and as information becomes available, reflects on data to alter decisions hence becoming more confidence through practice [17].

## 5. Findings

### Study 1 Findings

*In what ways does self-mentoring support individual prek-12 teachers growth as leaders in and out of the classroom?* From participation in self-mentoring, each of the teachers believed they experienced increased strength in two aspects of teacher leadership. As teachers, they became stronger at classroom management. They were more inclined to assist other teachers and share ideas. Some indicated they felt more knowledgeable. As leaders, they experienced courage to speak up in meetings and be more assertive when opinions were sought. They gained confidence to take leadership roles and to reach out as leader to assist others when necessary. The study suggested teachers engaged in self-mentoring gained confidence as instructional leaders in the classroom and teacher leaders school wide. There were two primary leadership areas: Instructional Leadership (in the classroom) and Teacher Leadership (out of the classroom), also referred to as School Leadership.

**Instructional Leadership:** The teachers reported feeling more confident in classroom management. They were more inclined to assist other teachers and share ideas. *"I was more comfortable in my subject area – always comfortable but now more comfortable."* shared a teacher. Another teacher, in reply to a question about how instructional practice was improved, explained, *"During a Math lesson, I*

*realized sooner that manipulatives needed to be supplied.”*

**Teacher Leadership:** The teachers all shared they were empowered to make decisions and determine strategies or methods to meet their expectations. As teachers began working through strategies, an elementary teacher who struggled with assuming a school-wide leadership role as chair of a professional learning community (PLC) team meeting excitedly typed, in an email exchange (2013), between sessions, *“I made a decision about our PLC at [school]. Three of the four ED teachers can meet together. Number 4 cannot because of students, lunch, or homebound responsibilities. So, I decided to meet with the majority. The last meeting was in Number 4’s room because she could not leave her students. So, we met in there.”*

The confidence was noted by those not involved in the study. District officials reported observable increased confidence of the teachers throughout the year. The teachers reported the sense of control over their destiny from their own selected endeavors was empowering. They believed this sense of accomplishment was motivational and would be sustainable. With the knowledge of how to self-mentor and meet expectations, each teacher perceived sustainability would become a norm of operation.

## Study 2 Findings

*In what ways does self-mentoring support individual prek-12 teachers growth as leaders in and out of the classroom?* The teachers in Study 2 had one expectation – to become a better teacher in the classroom by increasing student engagement. From participation in self-mentoring, the teachers were able to document and support increased student engagement through the implementation and measurement of different strategies incorporated in the classroom. As teachers, they became more confident in classroom instruction. As classroom leaders, they felt more knowledgeable.

Classroom instruction was enhanced through teacher admission, *“Yeah, I would do it more now than I would have before. I can’t say I would do it everyday like I did when I was doing the two weeks [during self-mentoring data collection], but I do try and bring those in more often.”* When asked if the experience was worthwhile, both teachers agreed in concert, *“Yes, it is extremely effective.”* Each of the second grade teachers used different instructional strategies with similar assignment to monitor student effort and progress through work products. Student work samples were submitted as evidence of the student progress by simply changing classroom instructional practice and monitoring student work over a two-week period.

Self and peer reflections were acknowledged as the most effective tool in self-mentoring by the teachers in Study 2. They were able to bounce ideas off each other as well as get feedback from observations and classroom work reviews. They maximized accessibility to each other and were able to augment reflection time for each other.

## Study 1 and Study 2 Summations

The studies suggest teachers involved in self-mentoring gain confidence as leaders through a chosen plan by the participant and guided through their own efforts of self-mentoring. The participants were empowered to make decisions and determine the method to meet expectations.

Self and peer reflections were acknowledged as the most effective tool in self-mentoring by the majority of teachers in both studies. Self-reflection is not a new strategy and has been advocated for decades. Mem Fox, an Australian children’s writer, explains in her book, *Radical Reflections*, about the importance of self-reflection in all endeavors of self-actualization in 1993 [18]. *“Reflection makes you more aware of what you are doing so you can correct it,”* explained one teacher. *“Reflection provided confidence to be able to support other colleagues,”* shared another teacher as she continued to explain, *“And I believe I will continue to gain confidence as a leader.”*

Classroom instruction was enhanced through admission as evidenced by some teacher testimony. Another teacher, in reply to a question about how instructional practice was improved, explained, *“During a Math lesson, I realized sooner that manipulatives needed to be supplied.”* Each teacher was able to provide evidentiary support of the progress whether instructional or professional. School Culture

An interesting revelation resulted in the final review of the system evaluation data in Study 1. During the first session, teachers were asked to talk about the culture of the system they work in regard to supporting and empowering teachers among other questions. Each teacher completed an evaluation of the school district prior to and post of the self-mentoring program. The teachers viewed the system as a stronger organization prior to self-mentoring. Teachers were more critical of the system and ranked it lower after self-mentoring. Assumptions were drawn that as the teachers became more confident in leadership roles, they also became more critical of the organization. The study was completed and there was not opportunity to interview participants to gain insight. In Study 2, the results were similar in both pre and post-cultural assessment.

## 6. Conclusion

There is no limit to the self-mentor's ability to grow as a professional. Self-mentors are motivated and passionate in sustaining the success achieved and expended to meet expectations. They maintain control over their own destiny and any achievements are from their efforts. This sense of accomplishment is motivational so that self-mentors™ strive to sustain these skills for empowerment and self-efficacy. Self-mentoring is not a cure all, but it can become a practice to promote leaders in professional settings. It is only through practice and continued study in the area of self-mentoring we will learn the importance of advocating for continued practice. Kimberly Horn [19] writes, "...there will always be times in one's career when the right mentor-mentee fit simply doesn't happen. This is when the concept of self-mentoring™ becomes particularly important." As self-mentoring grows nationwide, continued efforts to gather data through additional studies will yield more about how self-mentoring and how it can become a more useful tool. Avil Beckford [5] agrees that self-mentoring "puts you in the position of power. You take control of your life and journey on the path that is right for you". Self-mentoring is the act of accepting responsibility for your own growth and success – you are the best leader in your own life.

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