

Exploring the Experiences of First-Year Alternatively Certified Teacher Mentoring in North Texas

Ramiro Pesina

*Human Resources Development,
The University of Texas at Tyler, 75799 USA.*

Abstract

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of alternatively certified first-year teachers in North Texas engaged in a mentoring program, addressing the pressing challenges of teacher retention and professional development in the face of persistent shortages. I examined how mentoring supports teachers' transitions into classroom roles, using semi-structured interviews with three mentors and three mentees. I identified three themes: mentor support, emotional challenges, and challenges in classroom management. Mentoring was found to foster resilience and skill development, offering practical guidance and emotional support. However, barriers such as mentors' limited availability and mentees' heavy workloads hinder program effectiveness. Implications for human resource development (HRD) include restructuring mentoring frameworks, integrating technology for real-time feedback, and addressing institutional barriers. This qualitative study provides insights for designing effective mentoring programs to enhance teacher retention and educational outcomes, while future research should explore larger sample sizes and diverse perspectives to develop comprehensive strategies.

Keywords: mentoring, alternatively certified teachers, classroom management

1.) Introduction

Many certified teachers are underpaid, disrespected, and held accountable to political agendas. As teacher shortages persist, school districts must rely on teachers without traditional training to fill vacancies, which presents challenges in retention and skill development (Bullough, 2012; Pepke, 2024). As pay, benefits, and parental support dwindle, the growing teacher shortage has become a crisis, forcing school districts to seek out alternatively certified teachers. While these individuals bring valuable real-world experience, they are thrown into classrooms with limited formal training. This research topic is important to human resource development (HRD) interventions to support alternatively certified teachers who are left struggling with core teaching skills development such as classroom management, designing effective instructions, and engaging students (Bullough, 2012; Pepke, 2024).

My experiences as a consultant in public schools over the past twenty years emphasize the many differences in the quality and quantity of resources available compared to my experiences in corporate America. Resource constraints could be potentially mitigated with well-structured mentoring programs and strategies, magnifying gaps and allowing closure.

2.) **Problem Statement**

The challenges alternatively certified teachers face are immense, and the need for effective support systems, such as mentoring programs, has never been more critical. Mentoring programs have been recognized as critical interventions that support alternatively certified teachers' professional growth, increase teacher retention, and reduce early career burnout (Carter & Youssef-Morgan, 2019). Mentoring programs, while widely used to support teacher development, may not fully address the specific needs of alternatively certified teachers. Research on how mentoring contributes to the development of alternatively certified teachers is limited. In this context, this study aims to explore how team-based mentoring enhances the development of first-year, alternatively certified teachers, improving their teaching performance and retention rates, which will provide insights into a large-scale study.

3.) **Literature Review**

Mentoring is crucial in supporting early-career teachers, particularly in addressing the challenges that arise from systemic gaps, high-stress environments, and evolving educational demands. Mentoring research (Geeraerts et al., 2014; Ghosh, 2013; Niazy, 2021) provides valuable insights into the experiences of teachers and mentors, offering guidance on how to enhance mentoring programs. Niazy (2021), using a qualitative case study, examined the experiences of early-career teachers with mentoring programs during the COVID-19 pandemic and identified insights about the emotional and professional challenges faced by teachers, such as limited mentor-mentee interactions and the need for adaptable support. Ghosh (2013) explored mentoring relationships through the lens of challenges and support, focusing on how mentors balance their role to foster both professional and personal growth. Geeraerts et al. (2014) investigated peer-group mentoring as a tool for teacher development, emphasizing the collaborative and reflective practices that occur in group mentoring contexts. Together, these studies exemplify the core principles of a basic qualitative research design, focusing on understanding the lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of participants. By exploring the meanings embedded in mentoring relationships, they provide actionable insights for improving mentoring practices in diverse educational contexts.

4.) **Method**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of first year alternatively certified teachers in North Texas with a mentoring program, using a basic qualitative study design. A research question guiding this study was: How do first-year teachers with an alternative

certification experience a mentoring program?

Research Design

To answer the research question, I employed a basic qualitative research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) that seeks to understand how individuals interpret their experiences, construct their realities, and derive meaning from those experiences in their own words. I chose basic qualitative research design to explore the experiences of alternatively certified teachers with a mentoring program to understand how they navigate in their first year of teaching. In this qualitative study, I aimed to capture the experiences of alternatively certified teachers to identify potential areas for improvement of the mentoring program to better support teachers.

Participants

I used purposive sampling to select first-year alternatively certified teachers participating in a mentoring program and mentors from the same program. I selected participants based on the selection criteria: (a) mentees have to be in their first year of teaching, holding an alternative certification, and actively participating in the district's mentoring program; (b) mentors need at least three years of teaching experience who are assigned to a first-year teacher; and (c) both groups are required to participate in the school mentoring program and are willing to participate in a 45 to 60-minute semi-structured interview. To recruit participants, I used a referral from an acquaintance working in the school district who assisted me in connecting with teachers and also used a snowballing technique by asking interview participants to recommend others. I ended up with six participants: one mentee who was a first-year alternatively certified teacher, two mentees who were not first-year teachers, and three mentors (Table 1). Unfortunately, several first-year teachers declined to participate in the study, citing concerns about time commitments and additional stress, indicating new teachers' high demands and potential burden in their first year.

Table 1
Interview Participants

| Identifier | Role | Certification Type | Years of Experience | Cited in Theme |
|------------|--------|--------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|
| Mentee 1 | Mentee | Alternative | 1.5 | Mentoring Support Systems |
| Mentee 2 | Mentee | Alternative | 1.5 | Challenges in Classroom Management |
| Mentee 3 | Mentee | Traditional | .5 | Challenges in Classroom Management |
| Mentor 1 | Mentor | Traditional | 26 | Mentoring Support Systems |
| Mentor 2 | Mentor | Traditional | 20 | Challenges in Classroom Management |

| | | | | |
|----------|--------|-------------|----|----------------------|
| Mentor 3 | Mentor | Traditional | 15 | Emotional Challenges |
|----------|--------|-------------|----|----------------------|

Data Collection

I received the UT Tyler IRB approval to conduct this study. To ensure consistency and depth in responses, I developed an interview protocol developed (Appendix A). Sample interview questions include: What are the challenges you have faced in taking part in the mentoring program? Have you noticed any unique aspects regarding the way alternatively certified teachers respond to and act upon your mentoring? With participants' permission, I recorded all interviews via Microsoft Teams, with an Apple iPhone 13 as a backup recording device. To ensure validity, I utilized member-checking, allowing participants to verify the accuracy of their transcripts. Feedback received during this process, such as requests for clarifications or additions, was incorporated into the final transcripts and analysis to ensure their perspectives were accurately captured. To ensure participant privacy I used identifiers to designate participants in Findings.

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Instructions

The interview questions were designed to explore mentors' and mentees' experiences, perceptions, and challenges within the mentoring program. Each interview will last forty-five to sixty minutes. Permission to record will be requested at the beginning of each interview. All participants must provide the University of Tyler consent form to proceed with interviews. By addressing key areas such as classroom management, emotional support, time constraints, and professional growth, the questions aim to uncover recurring themes and actionable insights.

Interview Questions

For Mentees

- Tell me about yourself.
- Can you describe how you and your mentor exchange feedback and resources?
- How has this exchange shaped your teaching practice?
- What are the challenges you have faced in taking part in the mentoring program?
- What resources or support have you provided to your mentor or fellow mentees during the process?
- How have your lesson plans or classroom management strategies evolved as a result of the mentoring program?
- What would be the ways to improve the mentoring program to make it better?

For Mentors

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why did you choose to be a mentor?
- Have you had a mentor?
- Tell me about the impact of your mentor. If you didn't have one, do you believe it would have been helpful?
- How would you describe the reciprocal nature of your mentoring relationships with alternatively certified teachers?
- What types of feedback or support have you provided, and how have your mentees contributed to your professional development or perspective as a mentor?
- Have you noticed any unique aspects regarding the way alternatively certified teachers respond to and act upon your mentoring

For Both

- Can you walk me through a specific lesson plan or classroom management plan and tell me how mentoring shaped your class planning?
- Have you learned from this process?

5.) Data Analysis

To analyze the interview data, I followed the steps guided by Miles et al. (2014) and used Atlas.ti 24, qualitative research software, to manage the analysis process. Following Miles et al. (2014), I completed coding, identifying significant codes, and refined codes and categories iteratively into broader themes. I used memoing to capture reflective insights, enriching the analysis and interpretation. I ensured reliability by adhering to a consistent analytical process, documenting coding decisions, and ensuring transparency in the process. In the iterative process, I ended up with three major themes (Table 2).

Table 2

Sample Coding of Interviews with Participants

| Theme | Sub-Theme | Coding Category | Definition | Total |
|---|--------------------|--|--|--------------|
| Mentoring First Year Alternatively Certified Teachers | Support Systems | Failure, need help, coach, away from the profession. | Mentors offer essential guidance and emotional support. | 6 |

| | | | |
|----------------------|---|---|----|
| Emotional Challenges | Stress, failure, concern. | Mentors aid teachers' emotional resilience and motivation. | 7 |
| Classroom Management | Student behavior is the foundation of learning. | Mentors advise on handling student behavior and classroom dynamics. | 13 |

6.) Findings

Using the data analysis approach guided by Miles et al. (2014), I identified three primary themes: mentor support, emotional challenges, and challenges in classroom management. Additionally, the absence of first-year teacher participation in the mentoring program provided critical insights, revealing systemic barriers to engaging this pivotal group. Appendix B shows three themes and verbatim statements. I explain three themes one by one below.

Appendix B

A Summary of Findings

| Theme | Description | Sample Verbatim Statement |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Mentoring Support | Mentor as a resource for guidance and emotional support. | Mentoring has been one of the most rewarding yet emotionally taxing experiences of my career. It's challenging to balance my responsibilities while being fully present for someone else. Still, watching them grow, gain confidence, and thrive makes every effort worthwhile (Mentor 2) |
| Emotional Challenges | Stress and challenges faced by mentees and mentors. | I didn't have classroom management skills or the support I needed to succeed. The emotional toll of managing students without enough preparation is overwhelming, leaving me feeling frustrated, isolated, and unsure of how to create a productive learning environment. (Mentee 1) |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|--|---|
| Challenges in Classroom Management | Technique and strategies to manage classroom dynamics. | That kid does not need to be sitting by that kid. You need to change your whole seating chart. What's your bell ringer here? What skill is it going after? Providing practical, immediate advice like this helped mentees feel more confident in managing classroom dynamics and creating a productive learning environment (Mentor 2). |
|------------------------------------|--|---|

Mentor Support

The theme of mentoring support systems means the critical role mentors play in assisting alternatively certified first-year teachers in teaching. Mentees spoke of mentors as vital allies who provided both immediate feedback and emotional reassurance:

Just having her be a sounding board...having a direct mentor teacher coming in and giving immediate feedback made me so much better. She would take notes almost like they do for evaluations, then provide feedback: "This is what you did good. This is what you can improve on." For being a newer teacher, it was so good for me to have feedback that immediately made me better (Mentee 2).

Having someone who genuinely cared about my progress made all the difference. My mentor wasn't just offering advice; she was in the trenches with me, observing my classes and giving me detailed feedback right after. She would say, 'This worked really well; let's build on that,' or 'Here's a strategy to handle this better next time.' It felt like I wasn't alone in figuring things out, and that gave me so much confidence (Mentee 1)

This theme emphasizes the need for structured mentoring programs prioritizing timely feedback and fostering mentorship relationships.

Emotional Challenges

All six participants spoke of the emotional toll of teaching and mentoring. This emotional burden often manifests as stress, fatigue, and moments of self-doubt. Yet, it is frequently balanced by the feelings of fulfillment and purpose derived from making a meaningful impact on others' lives. Mentees and mentors reported feelings of mentees being overwhelmed due to the dual challenges of classroom management and adapting to new roles:

I wish I could be there for them a little more...that's the biggest challenge. I see how overwhelmed they are, and I want to be able to help more. Balancing my own responsibilities with mentoring is tough, but I care deeply about their success. You can feel their emotional burden (Mentor 4).

It's hard watching them struggle because you can see they want to do well, but the stress is written all over their faces. I do my best to offer guidance, but sometimes it feels like there's never enough time to address everything they're dealing with. Teaching is overwhelming, especially in those early years, and I wish I could do more to ease that burden for them" (Mentor 3)

Challenges in Classroom Management

Five of the six participants stated that classroom management was a significant challenge for mentees. A mentor stated that mentees expressed a lack of formal training in discipline strategies:

That kid does not need to be sitting by that kid. You need to change your whole seating chart. What's your bell ringer here? What skill is it going after? Providing practical, immediate advice like this helped mentees feel more confident in managing classroom dynamics and creating a productive learning environment (Mentor 2).

I observed my mentor during her class, and the way she redirected a student by calmly bringing him to sit next to her and guiding him through the lesson was eye-opening. It was a simple but effective way to manage behavior. Watching her handle situations like that gave me practical strategies I could use immediately in my own classroom. (Mentee 1)"

The sharing of Classroom management techniques from mentor to mentee, such as changing classroom dynamics through seating charts, helps demonstrate the critical role mentors can play in equipping teachers with classroom management strategies.

Discussion

Based on the study findings, I highlight the study findings, provide implications for HRD research and practice, and discuss the study limitations.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study emphasize the dual realities of mentoring programs for alternatively certified teachers, offering both critical strengths and evident limitations. Mentors are vital resources for their mentees, equipping them with practical classroom management tools, such as seating arrangements and behavioral interventions, which were instrumental in promoting professional growth. These findings emphasize the pivotal role of mentoring in bolstering teacher retention through timely feedback and emotional support. Additionally, mentees found data-driven feedback particularly effective in refining their teaching practices, highlighting its relevance as a cornerstone of professional development. Some first-year teachers chose not to participate in the study, a decision reflective of the immense demands and potential burnout experienced during their induction years. This reality suggests a critical need for mentoring programs to be reimagined to address the specific pressures of classroom management and time constraints, particularly for first-year teachers navigating steep learning curves.

Implications for HRD Research and Practice

When it comes to implications for research and practice in the field of Human Resource Development (HRD), mentoring programs must adapt to effectively address the structural barriers that often undermine their success. Central to this adaptation is the integration of feedback as a transformative element. Mentees consistently emphasized the instrumental role of feedback in refining their teaching practices and managing classroom challenges. This insight highlights the value of mentoring frameworks that prioritize structured, actionable feedback to promote professional growth.

For HRD professionals, these findings present a strategic opportunity to design mentoring

systems that are not only practical but also sustainable. Addressing the critical themes identified of mentor support, emotional resilience, and classroom management requires an intentional focus on developing mentoring structures that balance the needs of mentees and set mentors up for successful interactions. Such systems must provide comprehensive support, including targeted mentor training, strategies for managing emotional demands, and practical classroom management tools.

Future research must remain focused on addressing these challenges through innovative and scalable solutions. By concentrating on mentor support, alleviating emotional burdens, and enhancing classroom management strategies, HRD scholars and practitioners can refine mentoring practices to ensure long-term success. These efforts offer a roadmap for advancing mentoring frameworks, both within educational contexts and across other industries, creating a lasting impact on professional development and organizational effectiveness. (Geeraerts et al., 2014)

Study Limitations

While this qualitative study provides valuable insights, its limitations must also be acknowledged. First, the absence of first-year teacher participation, only capturing mentee teachers who have already completed 1 year of teaching working on year two, restricts the scope of understanding regarding how mentoring impacts this critical group. Non-participation of first-year teachers highlights the challenges of engaging those who are already overwhelmed by the demands of their roles. Future research must prioritize strategies to involve first-year teachers actively, recognizing and addressing the systemic barriers they face.

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