

# Mentorship as a Strategy for the Professional Development of Novice Teachers: A Case Study of a Class of International Student Teachers in China

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## ABSTRACT

The study aimed to understand the role of mentorship in novice teacher development. It explored how international student teachers perceived and engaged with formal and informal mentorship. Using Bandura's Social Learning Theory as a framework, the research posited that mentorship supports skill acquisition through observational learning, modeling, and feedback. A qualitative approach involving questionnaires completed by 14 international student teachers and semi-structured interviews, with 10 of these student teachers, was employed. Participants were selected purposefully from diverse countries, providing insights into mentorship across different cultural perspectives. Data were analyzed thematically, identifying factors that facilitated or hindered mentoring relationships, with themes focused on the structure, personal connections, and professional growth opportunities provided by mentorship. Findings revealed that formal mentorship offered structured, often assessment-focused support, while informal mentorship developed more organically, centered on emotional support and collegiality. Personal connection and shared goals emerged as key facilitators of effective mentorship, whereas barriers included a lack of formal structures and time constraints. While most participants viewed mentorship as critical to their professional development, opinions varied on whether mentorship should include financial incentives, with concerns that incentives might alter the authenticity of mentor-mentee relationships. The study's significance lies in highlighting mentorship's role in teacher development, suggesting the need for flexible, culturally responsive mentorship programs that balance structure and personalization. This research contributes to the broader discourse on mentoring by suggesting practical and policy-level considerations for teacher mentorship programs, especially in diverse international contexts.

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Background of the Study**

In an era where the landscape of education is constantly evolving, the importance of teacher development cannot be overstated. The 21st century has brought about a myriad of challenges and opportunities for educators, making it imperative for novice teachers to receive adequate support and guidance (Chaney et al., 2020).

Mentorship is one means through which a collaborative relationship can be developed between a more experienced and knowledgeable teacher, the mentor, and the novice teacher, the mentee (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). The primary goal of mentorship is to facilitate the personal and professional development of the mentee by leveraging the mentor's expertise, wisdom, and networks (Sutcher et al., 2019). It involves a range of activities, such as modeling effective teaching practices, offering constructive feedback, providing emotional support, and facilitating opportunities for reflection and learning. Through regular interactions and open communication, mentors help mentees navigate the challenges they encounter in their early careers, fostering their confidence, skills, and commitment to the teaching profession.

This is a qualitative empirical study designed to explore the mentorship experiences of fourteen (14) international student teachers from various countries, currently studying in China. These students are all enrolled in the school of Education, pursuing Masters and Doctoral Degrees in Education. The participants are the members of the course Theory and Practice of Teacher Professionalism. The study presents an analysis of their experiences as they reflected on their journey as novice teachers.

The study aims to answer the following research question 1) How are the terms 'formal mentorship' and 'informal mentorship' understood by teachers from different countries? 2) What factors can facilitate or hinder the development of mentoring relationships? And 3) What is the overall perceived effectiveness of mentorship as a strategy for teacher professional development. 4) Is offering financial incentives to mentors viewed as an acceptable practice to ensure sustainability of mentoring relationships?

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on mentorship for novice teachers. By shedding light on the experiences of international student teachers in China, this research aims to inform policy and practice in educational settings, ultimately enhancing the support and development of novice teachers worldwide.

## **2. Literature Review**

Mentorship plays a crucial role in the professional development of novice teachers, providing them with guidance, support, and opportunities for growth. This literature review examines the mentorship experiences of novice teachers and its implications for their professional development. By exploring existing research on mentorship in diverse educational contexts, this literature review aims to identify key themes, challenges, and best practices in supporting the professional growth of novice teachers.

### **2.1. The Development of the Concept of Mentorship**

The idea of mentorship can be traced back to ancient Greek times, specifically in Homer's famous epic poem "The Odyssey". In this literary work, there is a character named Mentor

who is given the responsibility of educating and guiding Telemachus, the son of the protagonist Odysseus, while Odysseus is away on his long journey. This depiction of Mentor's role in shaping and supporting the young Telemachus is considered one of the earliest examples of mentorship in literature (Carr et al., 2017). The character of Mentor in "The Odyssey" serves as a foundational representation of what mentorship entails. Mentor's primary task was to impart wisdom, knowledge, and guidance to Telemachus, who was in need of a wise and experienced figure to help him navigate the challenges of growing up without his father's presence. Mentor's role was not just to teach Telemachus academic subjects but also to provide him with moral support, advice, and direction during a crucial phase of his life. This ancient portrayal of mentorship highlights its core essence – the transfer of knowledge, skills, and experience from an older, wiser individual to a younger, less experienced person. Mentor's relationship with Telemachus exemplifies the mentoring dynamic, where the mentor acts as a trusted advisor, role model, and source of support, helping the mentee develop personally and professionally.

The inclusion of this mentoring relationship in Homer's epic poem underscores the significance and longevity of the mentorship concept. It suggests that even in ancient times, societies recognized the value of having experienced individuals guide and nurture the growth and development of younger generations. The character of Mentor has become a symbolic representation of the mentoring role, and the term "mentor" itself is derived from this literary figure (Carr et al., 2017). Overtime, mentorship evolved to encompass various fields, including business and education.

In the corporate world, mentorship programs have been recognized as invaluable tools for employee development, knowledge transfer, and talent retention for several decades. Successful companies have long understood the benefits of pairing experienced professionals with newcomers or those seeking career advancement. These mentorship programs are designed to foster leadership skills, provide practical guidance, and facilitate career growth for mentees (Eby et al., 2008; Ragins & Kram, 2007). Within the business sector, mentorship programs have taken on various forms and approaches. One common model involves matching senior executives or seasoned professionals with junior employees or those identified as high-potential talent. Through regular meetings and interactions, mentors share their experiences, offer advice, and provide insights into navigating the complexities of the corporate world (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2005). This mentoring relationship not only benefits the mentee but also allows the mentor to develop their coaching and leadership skills.

Another approach to mentorship in the business sector is peer mentoring, where individuals at similar career stages or levels within the organization mentor each other. This type of mentoring fosters a collaborative environment, encourages knowledge sharing, and promotes professional growth among peers (Kram & Higgins, 2008). Furthermore, many companies have implemented formal mentorship programs as part of their talent management strategies. These programs are designed to identify and nurture high-potential employees, providing them with personalized guidance and support to prepare them for future leadership roles (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2005). By investing in mentorship, organizations aim to retain top talent, foster a culture of continuous learning, and ensure a pipeline of skilled leaders (Eby et al., 2008; Ragins & Kram, 2007).

In contrast, the formalization of mentorship in education was a more recent development. While informal mentorship likely existed within educational settings for centuries, structured programs for novice teachers did not gain widespread traction until the 1980s and 1990s (Lindén et al., 2010). The late 20th century saw a surge in recognizing the value of structured

mentorship for new teachers, leading to its integration into educational systems (Lindén et al., 2010; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). This shift was prompted by the realization that the early years of teaching are pivotal for professional development and retention (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). As the challenges faced by novice teachers, such as classroom management, lesson planning, and pedagogical strategies, became more apparent, educators and policymakers recognized the need to implement mentorship programs to support and retain new teachers (Carr et al., 2017). By pairing experienced, veteran teachers with newcomers, these programs aimed to foster collaboration, provide professional development opportunities, and create a supportive environment for novice teachers to grow and thrive in their careers (Garvey, 2019).

The United Kingdom and the United States saw the emergence of mentoring in education around the early 1990s, marked by the establishment of journals like "Mentoring and Tutoring" in 1993 (Garvey, 2019). These initiatives aimed to foster collaboration and provide professional development opportunities for educators. In recent years, the importance of mentorship in supporting beginning teachers has led to the implementation of formal programs in many countries, aimed at enhancing teacher retention and student achievement (Crooks et al., 2022; Haydn et al., 2022).

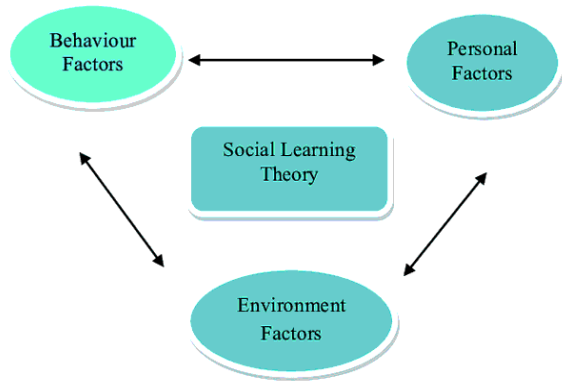
## **2.2. Modern Definition of Mentorship**

Mentorship is a collaborative relationship between two individuals, where one with more experience and knowledge (the mentor) provides guidance, support, and feedback to another (the mentee) who is less experienced (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). This relationship is based on mutual respect, trust, and a shared desire for growth and development. The primary goal of mentorship is to facilitate the personal and professional development of the mentee by leveraging the mentor's expertise, wisdom, and networks (Sutcher et al., 2019). It involves a range of activities, such as modeling effective teaching practices, offering constructive feedback, providing emotional support, and facilitating opportunities for reflection and learning. Through regular interactions and open communication, mentors help mentees navigate the challenges they encounter in their early careers, fostering their confidence, skills, and commitment to the teaching profession.

Furthermore, mentorship can take different forms, such as formal mentorship programs organized by educational institutions or informal mentorship relationships that develop naturally in the workplace. While formal mentorship programs offer structured support and guidance, informal mentorship allows for more flexibility and personalized assistance based on the individual needs of the mentee (Hammond et al., 2017).

## **2.3. Theoretical Framework: Bandura's Social Learning Theory**

Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), rooted in the broader field of social cognitive theory, provides a robust theoretical framework for understanding the mechanisms through which mentorship programs influence the professional development of novice teachers within educational institutions. At its core, Social Learning Theory posits that individuals learn through observation, imitation, and modeling of others' behaviors, attitudes, and outcomes. By emphasizing the interactive and reciprocal nature of learning, Bandura's theory recognizes the role of social context, interpersonal relationships, and cognitive processes in shaping human behavior and development.



*Figure 1. Social Learning Theory*

Source: Ghazali et al., (2018)

One of the key strengths of Bandura's Social Learning Theory is its emphasis on the importance of social modeling and vicarious learning in the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Within the context of mentorship programs for novice teachers, mentors serve as powerful role models who demonstrate effective teaching behaviors, values, and competencies that mentees can observe, internalize, and emulate. Through observing their mentors' actions and experiences, novice teachers can learn new instructional strategies, develop self-efficacy beliefs, and expand their repertoire of adaptive teaching practices, ultimately enhancing their professional competence and confidence.

Furthermore, Bandura's theory highlights the role of reinforcement and punishment in shaping behavior and motivation. In the context of mentorship programs, mentors provide feedback, encouragement, and support to novice teachers, reinforcing desired behaviors and outcomes while discouraging ineffective practices. Positive reinforcement, such as praise or recognition for successful teaching experiences or professional growth, can bolster mentees' self-esteem, motivation, and engagement in teaching activities. Conversely, constructive feedback and guidance from mentors can help novice teachers identify areas for improvement, set realistic goals, and overcome challenges they may encounter in their teaching journey.

Another key aspect of Bandura's Social Learning Theory is its emphasis on the role of self-efficacy beliefs in driving behavior and performance. Self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs in their ability to successfully perform specific tasks or achieve desired outcomes. Within mentorship programs for novice teachers, mentors play a critical role in fostering mentees' self-efficacy by providing opportunities for skill-building, mastery experiences, and social persuasion. By offering constructive feedback, setting achievable goals, and instilling confidence in their mentees' abilities, mentors empower novice teachers to take initiative, persevere in the face of obstacles, and pursue their teaching and career aspirations with greater confidence and resilience.

Moreover, Bandura's Social Learning Theory underscores the importance of cognitive processes, such as attention, memory, and motivation, in mediating the relationship between social influences and behavior. Within mentorship programs, novice teachers actively engage in cognitive processes, such as selective attention to relevant information, encoding of observed behaviors into memory, and motivation to imitate or apply new skills learned from their mentors. By fostering a supportive learning environment and providing mentees with opportunities for active participation, reflection, and feedback, mentors facilitate the cognitive processes necessary for meaningful learning and skill acquisition among novice teachers.

Additionally, Bandura's theory emphasizes the importance of reciprocal determinism, which posits that behavior, environment, and personal factors interact and influence each other bidirectionally. In the context of mentorship programs, this concept underscores the dynamic and reciprocal nature of the mentor-mentee relationship, wherein mentors and mentees mutually influence each other's attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes. Through collaborative goal-setting, shared experiences, and open communication, mentors and mentees co-create a supportive and empowering learning environment that fosters mutual respect, trust, and growth.

Furthermore, Bandura's Social Learning Theory offers insights into the importance of observational learning and symbolic modeling in shaping behavior and cognition. Within mentorship programs, novice teachers not only observe and imitate their mentors' actions and behaviors but also internalize and adopt their mentors' attitudes, values, and beliefs through symbolic representation. By providing mentees with positive role models and opportunities for vicarious learning, mentorship programs can promote the development of professional attitudes, resilience, and self-regulation skills among novice teachers, thereby enhancing their capacity for adaptive behavior and decision-making in various educational contexts.

In summary, Bandura's Social Learning Theory provides a comprehensive and dynamic framework for understanding the processes through which mentorship programs influence the professional development of novice teachers within educational institutions. By emphasizing the role of social modeling, reinforcement, self-efficacy beliefs, cognitive processes, reciprocal determinism, and observational learning, Bandura's theory offers valuable insights into the mechanisms underlying effective mentorship interventions and informs the design, implementation, and evaluation of mentorship programs that empower novice teachers to thrive professionally and personally.

#### **2.4. Perceptions of Mentorship Across Different Countries and Cultures**

According to Schleicher (2020) in an analysis of the OECD TALIS Survey of 2018, the conceptualization, implementation, perceived value and prevalence of mentorship programs can vary across countries and cultural contexts around the world. Some education systems having widespread access and well -established mentorship programs while others report limited availability and a lack of emphasis on this form of professional support (OECD, 2019). This diversity in mentorship practices is shaped by a range of factors, including national policies, educational priorities, and societal norms, and the priorities of individual schools and districts. The OECD's TALIS survey highlighted that while a majority of school principals consider mentoring to be highly important for supporting less experienced teachers and improving student outcomes, the actual implementation of formal mentorship initiatives differs significantly, with only 22% of teachers with up to five years of experience having an assigned mentor on average across OECD countries (OECD, 2019).

#### **2.5. Mentorship as a Strategy for Teacher Professional Development**

The early career years are a critical period for novice teachers, as they navigate the transition into the profession and work to develop essential teaching skills. The OECD's TALIS survey has found that teachers in their first few years of teaching often feel less confident in their classroom management and instructional abilities (OECD, 2024).

Mentorship can play a vital role in supporting novice teachers during this crucial stage of their careers. Mentorship has long been recognized as a fundamental component of effective teacher development programs (Hammond et al., 2017). By pairing novice teachers with

experienced mentors, mentorship programs aim to facilitate the transition from pre-service to in-service teaching, enhance teaching effectiveness, and promote teacher retention (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004). Mentorship fosters personal and professional growth, provides valuable guidance, feedback, and emotional support, helping them and build professional networks and navigate the complexities of the teaching profession (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). The positive impact of mentorship programs on various outcomes for novice teachers, including improved job satisfaction, increased retention rates, and enhanced classroom effectiveness (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Novice teachers who participate in comprehensive mentorship initiatives report feeling better supported and more equipped to handle the demands of the profession (Rivera, 2020). Despite the known benefits of mentorship, the TALIS survey of 2018, found that, on average, 51% of novice teachers report not having participated in any formal or informal induction at their current school (OECD, 2019).

The lack of widespread implementation of mentorship programs represents a significant missed opportunity for supporting the professional development of new teachers. Research has consistently shown that teachers' participation in these initiatives can have a positive impact on student learning outcomes (Jackson, et al., 2014). As such, education systems should prioritize the development and expansion of comprehensive mentorship programs to better support novice teachers and improve the overall quality of teaching.

## **2.6. Most Effective Pathways for Mentorship: Formal or Informal Mentorship Programs**

Formal mentorship programs, where novice teachers are paired with experienced, veteran educators, have been widely implemented as a means of supporting new teachers (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). These structured initiatives provide novice teachers with access to guidance, feedback, and practical advice from more seasoned colleagues, helping them to navigate the challenges of the profession.

The OECD's TALIS survey has provided valuable insights into the prevalence and perceived importance of formal mentorship programs across different education systems. According to the survey, while a majority of school principals consider mentoring to be highly important for supporting less experienced teachers and improving student outcomes, only 22% of teachers with up to five years of teaching experience have an assigned mentor, on average across the OECD (OECD, 2019). This suggests that formal mentorship programs, despite their recognized benefits, are not yet widely implemented in many education systems.

In addition to formal mentorship programs, research has also highlighted the significance of informal mentorship relationships for the professional development of novice teachers (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015). These organic, unstructured mentorship connections can provide valuable support and guidance to new educators, complementing the benefits of formal programs. Informal mentorship relationships often develop naturally between novice and experienced teachers, fostering a sense of community and collaboration within the school environment (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2020). These connections can offer emotional support, practical advice, and opportunities for professional growth that may not be readily available through formal programs (Schwan et al., 2020).

The OECD's TALIS survey has also highlighted the importance of these informal mentorship relationships, noting that teachers are often important providers of continuous professional learning through both formal and informal mentorship activities (OECD, 2019). By engaging in these informal mentorship exchanges, experienced teachers can shape the content and delivery of continuous professional development, ensuring that it is responsive to the needs of novice educators.

Experienced teachers play a crucial role in fostering a culture of mentorship and professional development within their institutions. The OECD's TALIS survey found that school principals who consider mentoring to be highly important are more likely to have implemented formal mentorship programs in their schools (OECD, 2019). This suggests that school leaders who prioritize mentorship and recognize its benefits are more likely to create the necessary conditions for these programs to thrive.

Beyond implementing formal mentorship initiatives, school leaders can also support the development of informal mentorship relationships by encouraging collaboration, peer learning, and a culture of mutual support among teachers (OECD, 2019). In countries like Kazakhstan, for example, school leaders have been instrumental in fostering regular meetings and discussions among teachers, where they can provide peer feedback, share instructional practices, and identify solutions to individual student challenges (OECD, 2024).

## **2.7. Best Practices in the Mentorship of Novice Teachers**

The effectiveness of mentorship programs can vary significantly, underscoring the need to identify and implement best practices that optimize the mentoring experience for both mentors and mentees. One of the key best practices highlighted in the literature is the importance of carefully selecting and training mentors (Ambrosetti, 2014). Effective mentors should possess not only a deep understanding of teaching practices and the ability to model exemplary instruction, but also strong interpersonal skills and a genuine commitment to supporting the growth and development of their mentees. By providing comprehensive training to mentors, education systems can ensure that they are equipped with the necessary skills to foster meaningful, productive relationships with their novice teacher counterparts.

In addition to the careful selection and preparation of mentors, the literature emphasizes the value of establishing clear, structured mentorship programs with well-defined roles, responsibilities, and expectations (Eller et al., 2013). These programs should include regular, scheduled interactions between mentors and mentees, as well as opportunities for collaborative planning, peer observation, and reflective discussions. By creating a framework that supports ongoing, targeted support, mentorship programs can better address the unique needs and challenges faced by novice teachers.

Moreover, the research suggests that the most effective mentorship initiatives are those that are embedded within a broader system of induction and professional development (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). By integrating mentorship with other forms of support, such as targeted workshops, coaching, and opportunities for collaborative learning, education systems can provide novice teachers with a comprehensive suite of resources to aid in their professional growth and development.

Importantly, the literature also highlights the need to consider the diverse perspectives and experiences of both mentors and mentees when designing and implementing mentorship programs (Hobson et al, 2009). Recognizing that mentors and novice teachers may have differing expectations and priorities, education systems should foster open communication and a shared understanding of the mentoring process. This can help to ensure that the mentorship experience is tailored to the unique needs and goals of each participant, ultimately enhancing its effectiveness.

Finally, the research emphasizes the importance of ongoing evaluation and refinement of mentorship programs (Dubois, 2021). By regularly collecting feedback from both mentors and mentees, education systems can identify areas for improvement and make data-driven adjustments to better meet the evolving needs of novice teachers. This commitment to

continuous improvement can help to ensure that mentorship initiatives remain relevant, impactful, and responsive to the changing landscape of the teaching profession.

In summary, the literature on best practices for mentoring novice teachers highlights the multifaceted nature of effective mentorship programs. By carefully selecting and training mentors, establishing clear structures and expectations, integrating mentorship within a broader system of support, considering diverse perspectives, and engaging in ongoing evaluation and refinement, education systems can create mentorship initiatives that truly empower and enable the professional growth and development of new educators.

## **2.8. The Mentoring Needs of Novice Teachers - Content Material Support vs. Practical Teaching Skills**

As novice teachers embark on their careers, they are often faced with a steep learning curve, requiring support in a variety of areas to ensure their success and retention in the profession. It is important to address both content material support and practical teaching skills support. When mentors provide content material support, they offer guidance and assistance to novice teachers in developing a deep understanding of the subject matter they are tasked with teaching (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). This is particularly crucial for teachers who are assigned to teach subjects outside of their area of expertise or who are working with new curriculum materials. Mentors can help novice teachers strengthen their content knowledge, identify and address gaps, and develop effective strategies for presenting complex information to students.

In addition to content material support, the research also emphasizes the importance of practical teaching skills support for novice teachers (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Hobson et al., 2009). This includes guidance in areas such as classroom management, instructional planning, assessment practices, and the implementation of evidence-based teaching methods. Mentors can model effective techniques, provide constructive feedback, and help novice teachers troubleshoot challenges they encounter in the classroom.

The literature suggests that the relative importance of content material support versus practical teaching skills support may vary depending on the individual needs and prior experiences of the novice teacher (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). For example, teachers who have strong subject matter expertise but limited practical experience may require more support in developing their pedagogical skills, while those with a solid foundation in teaching methods may benefit more from content-focused mentoring. Moreover, the research indicates that the most effective mentoring programs are those that strike a balance between these two areas of support, providing novice teachers with a comprehensive suite of resources to address their diverse needs (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). By offering mentoring that encompasses both content knowledge and practical teaching skills, education systems can better equip new educators to navigate the complexities of the profession and positively impact student learning outcomes.

However, the literature also highlights the challenges that can arise in meeting the varied mentoring needs of novice teachers. Mentors may struggle to accurately assess the specific areas where their mentees require the most support, or they may lack the expertise or resources to provide the necessary guidance (Hobson et al., 2009). Addressing these challenges through comprehensive mentor training and the provision of targeted professional development opportunities can help to ensure that mentoring initiatives are responsive to the diverse needs of novice teachers.

In summary, the existing research on the mentoring needs of novice teachers underscores the importance of addressing both content material support and practical teaching skills support.

By providing a balanced and comprehensive approach to mentoring, education systems can better support the professional growth and development of new educators, ultimately enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in schools.

## **2.9. Challenges affecting the Effectiveness of the Mentorship Process**

There are a range of challenges that can arise within the mentorship process, as well as the potential opportunities for enhancing the effectiveness of these initiatives. One of the key challenges identified in the literature is the issue of "judgmental mentoring," where mentors take on an evaluative role rather than a supportive one (Ambrosetti, 2014; Izadinia 2015). This can create a power imbalance and inhibit the open communication and trust that are essential for a productive mentoring relationship. Mentors may also struggle to strike the right balance between providing guidance and allowing their mentees to develop autonomy, further complicating the dynamics of the mentorship (Hill et al., 2022). Moreover, the literature suggests that mentorship can and should be a mutually beneficial experience, with mentors themselves gaining opportunities for professional renewal, the sharing of expertise, and personal growth (Haddad & Oplatka, 2009). By fostering a culture of collaboration and continuous learning, mentorship programs can contribute to the overall strengthening of the teaching profession. The diverse perspectives and experiences of both mentors and mentees should be considered when designing and implementing mentorship initiatives (Hobson et al., 2009). Recognizing that individuals may have differing expectations and priorities can help to ensure that the mentorship process is tailored to the unique needs of each participant, ultimately enhancing its effectiveness.

Additionally, the literature suggests that the quality and preparedness of mentors can vary significantly, with some lacking the necessary skills and training to effectively support their mentees (Eller et al., 2013). This can lead to mentors being ill-equipped to provide the targeted feedback, modeling, and emotional support that novice teachers often require during their critical first years in the profession. Conversely, the research also highlights the potential opportunities that can arise from well-designed and implemented mentorship programs. When mentors are carefully selected and provided with comprehensive training, they can play a pivotal role in helping novice teachers develop essential teaching skills, navigate the complexities of the profession, and build confidence in their abilities (Richter et al., 2013).

By addressing the issues of judgmental mentoring, mentor preparedness, and the need for personalized approaches, education systems can work to create mentorship programs that truly empower and enable the growth and success of new educators, while also benefiting the mentors themselves and the teaching profession as a whole.

## **2.10. Factors Influencing Informal Mentoring**

Informal mentoring, a natural and organic relationship that develops between individuals based on mutual respect and shared interests, has been recognized as a significant form of professional development. By understanding the dynamics of informal mentoring, educators can better leverage these relationships to support their professional goals.

Firstly, for informal mentorship to be successful, there must be some degree of personal connections and trust. Establishing trust forms the bedrock of any mentoring relationship, and informal mentoring is no exception. A deep and authentic connection between the mentor and mentee, underpinned by trust and rapport, is pivotal for fostering a nurturing and productive mentoring bond (Rohatinsky et al., 2020). This trust facilitates open communication,

vulnerability, and mutual support, essential ingredients for a successful mentoring relationship.

Secondly, research suggests that informal mentoring relationships often flourish between individuals who share similar backgrounds, experiences, and professional interests (Sarabipour et al., 2022). This alignment cultivates a profound understanding and empathy between the mentor and mentee, laying the groundwork for meaningful and impactful mentoring interactions. Common experiences foster a sense of camaraderie and solidarity, enhancing the quality and depth of the mentoring relationship.

A third factor is the availability of professional networks. Informal mentoring frequently occurs within the framework of professional networks, where like-minded individuals converge to pursue common objectives and aspirations (Scutelnicu- Todoran, 2023). These networks serve as fertile ground for potential mentors and mentees to connect and cultivate mentoring partnerships. The fluidity and inclusivity of professional networks facilitate organic mentorship connections, providing avenues for mentorship initiation and growth.

And finally, the organizational culture exerts a profound influence on the formation and sustenance of informal mentoring relationships. A nurturing and supportive organizational culture fosters an environment conducive to informal mentorship, encouraging mentorship initiatives and interactions (Liu, 2021). Conversely, a culture characterized by competitiveness or hierarchy may stifle the formation of informal mentoring connections, hindering mentorship opportunities and impeding professional development efforts.

## **2.11. Funding and Sustainability of Mentorship Programs**

Mentorship programs are indispensable for nurturing professional development across diverse fields. However, the challenge lies in ensuring their sustainability amidst limited resources and funding constraints. Various strategies can be employed to secure funding for mentorship programs. Firstly, organizations can seek grants and sponsorships from government agencies, foundations, and corporate entities, utilizing these funds for essential program expenses such as mentor training and administrative costs (Stoeger et al., 2021). Additionally, forming partnerships and collaborations with other entities within and beyond the education sector can facilitate resource-sharing and enhance program sustainability (Hieker & Rushby, 2020).

Moreover, some mentorship programs opt for fee-based services, offering training, consultancy, or coaching sessions to generate revenue and sustain operations (Fowler et al., 2021). Crowdfunding platforms and soliciting donations from individuals and community members also serve as effective fundraising avenues, fostering a sense of community involvement and support (Meltzer & Saunders, 2020). Furthermore, partnerships with local businesses and organizations can yield in-kind contributions such as meeting spaces and materials, thus reducing operational costs and bolstering program sustainability (Hieker & Rushby, 2020).

In tandem with funding strategies, sustainability strategies are vital for ensuring the longevity of mentorship programs. Crafting a long-term strategic plan encompassing financial projections, fundraising goals, and program evaluation is fundamental for program sustainability (Yukawa, 2020). Regular evaluation of program effectiveness and impact not only demonstrates its value to stakeholders but also aids in securing ongoing funding. Diversifying funding streams mitigates the risk associated with overreliance on a single source, thereby enhancing program resilience (Hieker & Rushby, 2020).

Additionally, investing in the capacity building of program staff and mentors fosters efficient resource utilization and contributes to program sustainability (Vargas et al., 2021). By combining these funding and sustainability strategies, organizations can fortify the sustainability of their mentorship initiatives.

### 3. Research Methodology

Informed by Social Learning Theory, the research design involves qualitative data collection methods. This study utilized purposive sampling to select participants with relevant knowledge or experience, ensuring rich, targeted data collection. Questionnaires were completed by fourteen (14) participants and interviews were conducted with a sample of ten (10) of these participants. The participants were from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities and nationalities including Russia, Lesotho, Indonesia, Guinea, Colombia, Mauritius, Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Nigeria. Each participant provided informed consent to participate in the study and agreed to be audio-recorded during the interview. Face-to-face interviews were conducted to foster direct interaction and allow for deeper exploration of responses, with customized, semi-structured questions designed to cover key themes while allowing flexibility. To ensure reliability and validity, the interview guide was piloted, and a reliability test was performed to refine questions and verify the consistency of participant responses. Ethical considerations were prioritized, with approval sought from the overseeing lecturer, and informed consent obtained from participants, who were assured that their private information would remain confidential. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, where transcripts were coded, and recurring themes were identified, providing a detailed understanding of the research topic. The iterative coding process ensured that the analysis was thorough and accurately reflected participants' perspectives.

### 4. Results and Main Findings

#### 4.1. Factors Facilitating and Hindering the Development of Mentoring Relationships

The development of mentoring relationships among novice teachers was found to be influenced by a variety of factors. In cases of formal mentoring, school arrangements were critical, with mentors typically teaching the same content area as the novice teachers. Informal mentorship relationships emerged from proximity and shared personalities, where novice teachers admired more experienced colleagues. However, three participants noted the absence of mentoring due to a lack of volunteer mentors and trained teachers in their areas, highlighting a significant barrier to establishing mentoring relationships.

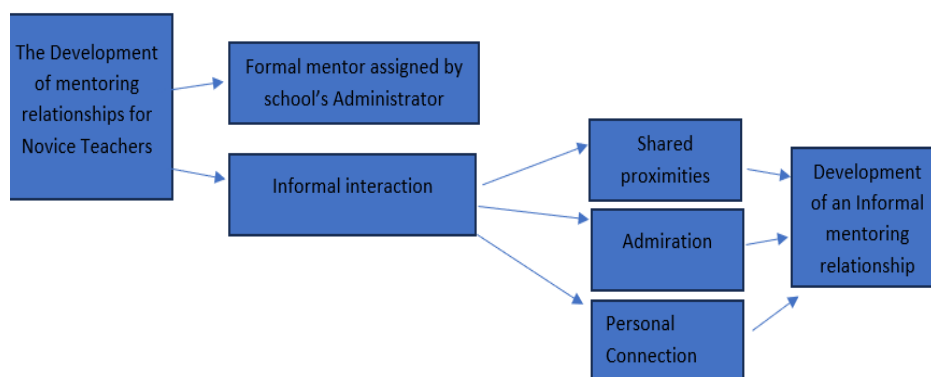


Figure 2. Types of mentorship

## 4.2. Understanding of Mentorship Types

**Formal Mentorship.** Interviewees generally described formal mentorship as structured and officially organized by schools or authorities. It often involved assigning mentors to new teachers with specific responsibilities, such as providing feedback, assessing teaching performance, and ensuring the mentee meets certain standards. For instance, Interviewee 2 explained that formal mentorship is more of an assessment, while Interviewee 3 emphasized the structured nature of formal programs.

**Informal Mentorship.** Informal mentorship was seen as more spontaneous and driven by personal relationships. Interviewees mentioned that it involved peer-to-peer support and often developed naturally through professional friendships. Interviewee 1 noted that while there was no formal system in her school, there were informal mechanisms where experienced teachers would offer advice or guidance without formal obligations.

**Perceptions on the Importance of Mentorship.** The majority of participants underscored the importance of mentorship for novice teachers, asserting that it enhances knowledge, skills, confidence, and professional development. However, two participants from Russia offered a contrasting perspective, suggesting that the significance of mentorship is contingent upon individual preferences for independence and self-development. This divergence in viewpoints underscores the nuanced nature of mentorship's impact on professional growth.

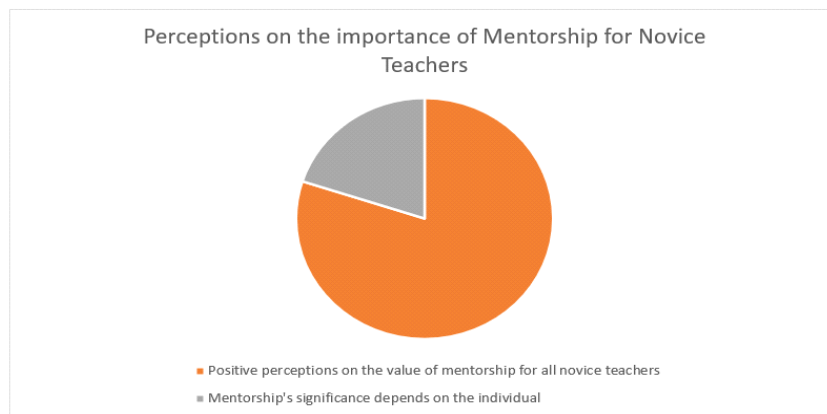


Figure 3. Perceptions on the importance of mentorship for novice teachers

## 4.3. Sustainability of Mentorship through Financial Incentives

**Mixed Opinions on Financial Incentives.** Opinions were divided on whether mentorship should be financed. Some interviewees, like Interviewee 3, argued that financial incentives were necessary to motivate mentors, particularly in formal systems. However, Interviewees 5 and 7 believed that mentorship should be voluntary, expressing concern that financial incentives might undermine the sincerity of the mentor-mentee relationship. Interviewee 8 suggested that funding should be allocated for developing mentorship programs and providing training for mentors.

## 4.4. Facilitators of Mentorship Relationships

**Shared Goals and Personal Connections.** Many interviewees stated that mentorship relationships were often facilitated by shared goals or natural affinity between mentor and mentee. Interviewee 5 highlighted that they chose their mentor based on the competence they observed in them, while Interviewee 6 mentioned that they gravitated toward someone they admired.

**Support Areas.** Most interviewees highlighted receiving support in various areas, including emotional guidance, knowledge transfer, skills development, and classroom management techniques. Interviewee 8 specifically discussed gaining knowledge in lesson planning and teaching strategies through formal training, while Interviewee 6 found informal emotional and teaching support from their mentor.

#### **4.5. Barriers to Mentorship Development**

**Lack of Formal Structures.** Several participants pointed out that formal mentorship systems were not in place in their schools. Interviewee 7 stated that none of the older teachers volunteered to mentor the younger ones, which hindered the development of a mentorship relationship. Similarly, Interviewee 1 indicated that in her school, there was no official mentorship assignment, and mentorship was informal and voluntary.

**Cultural or Personal Preferences.** A few interviewees, such as Interviewee 1, explained that they were not comfortable with the idea of formal mentorship because they preferred to develop their own teaching styles without being overly influenced by a mentor.

#### **4.6. Perceived Effectiveness of Mentorship**

**Mentorship as Professional Development.** Many interviewees emphasized the importance of mentorship in aiding professional development. For example, Interviewee 2 explained how both formal and informal mentorship helped boost confidence, enhance communication skills, and improve teaching strategies.

**Importance of Mentorship.** Interviewees generally agreed that mentorship is crucial for novice teachers, providing a support system and helping them navigate challenges. Interviewee 3 mentioned that mentorship improves classroom management and instructional strategies, which ultimately benefits students' learning outcomes.

#### **4.7. Willingness to Mentor**

**Varied Willingness to Mentor.** Interviewees differed in their willingness to mentor. Interviewee 1, for instance, stated that they did not want to mentor due to personal preferences and their desire to maintain their teaching style. On the other hand, Interviewees like 8 were open to becoming mentors in the future, seeing it as a means to contribute to the professional growth of others.

The findings provide valuable insights into the complexities of mentoring novice teachers, highlighting the interplay of formal and informal mentorship, the perceived importance of mentorship, and the contentious issue of financial incentives. These insights can inform the development of more effective mentorship programs and policies in educational settings.

### **5. Thematic Data Analysis**

Through thematic analysis, five key themes were identified from the interviews: understanding formal and informal mentorship, facilitating factors for mentorship, hindering factors, perceived effectiveness of mentorship for professional development, and the role of financial incentives.

### **5.1. Understanding Formal and Informal Mentorship**

Across the interviews, teachers from different countries provided insights into their experiences with both formal and informal mentorship. Formal mentorship was commonly understood as a structured and officially organized process where new teachers are paired with experienced educators, typically assigned by school leadership. This form of mentorship often included specific tasks, assessments, and objectives, such as those described by a teacher who had formal mentorship integrated into their university curriculum. In contrast, informal mentorship was more flexible and organically developed. Several participants reported developing mentorship relationships with colleagues they admired, without any official assignment or structure. One teacher explained that informal mentorship began naturally as they admired a colleague's teaching style and gradually formed a connection, evolving into a mentoring relationship. Informal mentorship was often described as a "professional friendship" that provided more emotional support and a comfortable learning environment.

### **5.2. Facilitating Factors for Mentorship**

Several factors were identified that contributed to the development of successful mentorship relationships. A key facilitator was the personal connection between mentors and mentees. Many participants emphasized that informal mentorship thrived when there was a natural bond between the teacher and the mentor, which fostered trust and open communication. Experience and expertise of the mentor also played a significant role, as novice teachers gravitated toward those with more years in the profession. One participant highlighted that experienced mentors were particularly helpful in guiding them through challenges such as classroom management and lesson planning. Role modeling emerged as another critical factor, with novice teachers looking up to mentors not only for their expertise but also as models for how to navigate the teaching profession effectively.

### **5.3. Hindering Factors**

While several factors contributed to successful mentorship, participants also reported a number of barriers that hindered the development of these relationships. The most common hindrance was the lack of formal mentorship systems in schools, especially for teachers from countries where structured mentorship programs were not part of the educational system. In these cases, novice teachers were left to seek out guidance on their own. Additionally, personality conflicts and differences in teaching styles between mentors and mentees could inhibit the relationship, as described by a participant who felt that their mentor did not offer much practical advice and was primarily focused on evaluation. Time constraints were another significant hindrance, with some teachers reluctant to take on mentorship roles due to the demands on their time and energy, which they found exhausting.

### **5.4. Perceived Effectiveness of Mentorship for Professional Development**

The interviews revealed that mentorship, particularly informal mentorship, was largely perceived as effective in promoting professional development for novice teachers. Many participants reported that their mentors helped them develop essential skills such as lesson planning, classroom management, and teaching strategies.

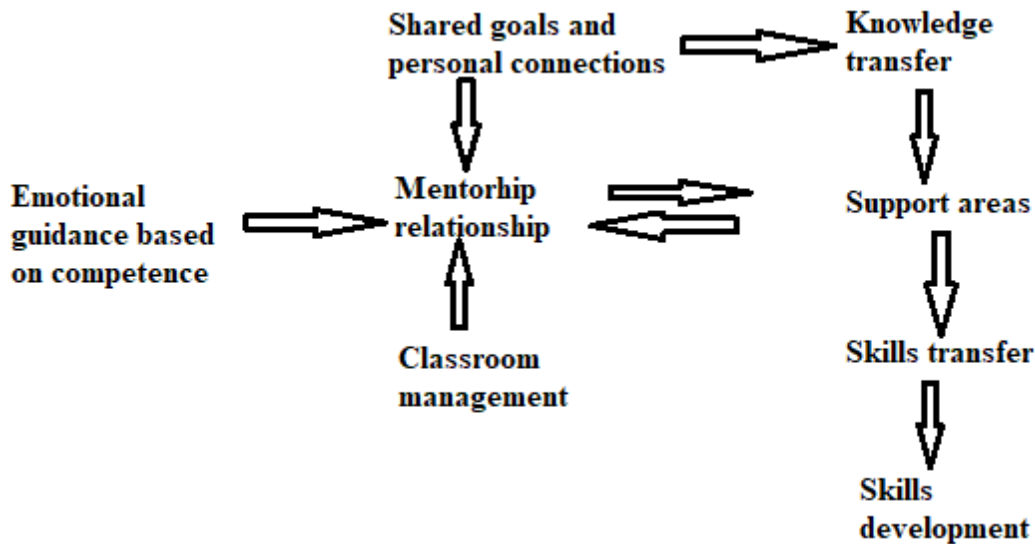


Figure 4. Mentorship relationships

Emotional support provided by informal mentors was also a recurring theme, with several interviewees noting that their mentors not only guided them through professional challenges but also offered encouragement and support during stressful periods. For instance, one participant described how their informal mentor provided not only practical teaching tips but also reassured them when they faced difficulties with challenging students. Teachers often felt that informal mentorship was more effective than formal mentorship because of the personalized attention and the freedom to address individual needs rather than adhering to rigid, predefined structures.

### 5.5. The Role of Financial Incentives in Sustaining Mentorship

The question of whether financial incentives should be introduced to sustain mentorship programs elicited mixed responses from the participants. Some interviewees argued that mentorship should be voluntary, emphasizing that financial incentives could shift the focus of the mentorship from genuine care and support to a monetary-driven task. One participant expressed concern that paying mentors might lead to a decline in the quality of mentorship, as mentors might participate only for financial gain rather than a genuine desire to help their colleagues. On the other hand, a few participants believed that offering financial incentives could be a way to acknowledge the time and effort that experienced teachers invest in mentoring. They suggested that financial compensation might motivate mentors to engage more fully in the process, particularly in formal mentorship programs, where mentorship responsibilities are added to an already demanding workload. Despite these differing opinions, there was a consensus that financial incentives could be helpful if implemented in a way that ensured the sustainability of the mentorship without compromising its quality.

The thematic analysis of the interviews revealed important insights into how formal and informal mentorships are understood and experienced by novice teachers in different countries. While informal mentorship emerged as a more effective and emotionally supportive practice, the absence of formal systems and time constraints often hindered its development. The effectiveness of mentorship in contributing to professional development was widely recognized, though the role of financial incentives remains a topic of debate. This

analysis underscores the importance of personal connection, experience, and voluntary participation in fostering successful mentoring relationships.

## **6. Discussion**

The study highlights the complex and nuanced nature of mentorship in the professional development of novice teachers. The findings suggest that both formal and informal mentorships significantly contribute to the professional growth of novice teachers, but each is influenced by distinct contextual factors (Ben et al., 2024).

### **6.1. Understanding of Formal and Informal Mentorship**

The interview data indicates a general consensus that formal mentorship is typically structured and officially organized by schools or educational authorities, often involving assigned mentors with specific responsibilities, such as assessing teaching performance and providing structured feedback (Interviewees 2 and 3). In contrast, Informal mentorship, which developed through personal affinities and proximity, offered a more flexible and personalized form of support (Hammond et al., 2017). This form of mentorship was described as peer-to-peer support without formal obligations, driven by mutual respect and personal connection (Interviewees 1 and 6).

### **6.2. Facilitators and Barriers to Mentorship Development**

The study identified several facilitators for effective mentorship, including shared professional goals, personal connections, and the perceived competence of mentors. Interviewees expressed that these factors were critical in establishing a trust-based mentoring relationship that supported both emotional and professional development (Interviewees 5 and 6). Conversely, the lack of formal mentorship structures and cultural or personal preferences not to engage in formal mentoring posed significant barriers. Some interviewees felt that formal mentorship could stifle their independence, preferring instead to develop their own teaching styles (Interviewees 1 and 7).

### **6.3. Perceived Effectiveness of Mentorship**

Most participants affirmed the effectiveness of mentorship in enhancing their teaching skills, confidence, and overall professional growth. Formal mentorships were valued for their structured support in specific areas like lesson planning and teaching strategies (Interviewee 8), while informal mentorships provided a more adaptable and personalized form of support, which was especially beneficial for emotional guidance and peer learning. However, the preference for different forms of mentorship varied among participants, suggesting that mentorship programs should be designed with flexibility to accommodate diverse professional needs and personalities (Hill et al., 2022).

### **6.4. Sustainability of Mentorship through Financial Incentives**

The study revealed divided opinions regarding the sustainability of mentorship through financial incentives. Some participants viewed financial rewards as necessary to acknowledge the time and effort invested by mentors, potentially motivating more experienced teachers to participate in mentorship programs (Interviewee 3). Support for financial incentives underscored the recognition of the time and effort mentors invest, suggesting that such incentives could encourage more experienced teachers to participate as mentors (Stoeger et

al., 2021). However, others were concerned that financial incentives might undermine the authenticity of the mentor-mentee relationship, advocating instead for non-monetary forms of recognition, such as professional development opportunities or public acknowledgment of mentors' contributions (Interviewees 5 and 7). This finding suggests the need for a balanced approach that compensates mentors without compromising the sincerity and quality of the mentorship experience.

### **6.5. Application of Bandura's Social Learning Theory**

The findings of this study can be interpreted through the lens of Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes the importance of observational learning, imitation, and modeling in behavior acquisition. The effectiveness of mentorship, as highlighted in this study, aligns with Bandura's principles, where novice teachers learn not only through direct instruction but also by observing their mentors' behaviors, teaching styles, and problem-solving approaches. This observational learning is evident in both formal and informal mentorship contexts, where novice teachers gain valuable insights by modeling the practices of their mentors, thereby enhancing their own professional competence and confidence (Bandura, 1977).

## **7. Limitations of the Study**

While this research provides valuable insights into the mentorship experiences of novice teachers, several limitations should be acknowledged:

### **7.1. Sample Size and Generalizability**

The study employed a qualitative case study design with a small sample size of 14 participants. While purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of diverse perspectives, the findings may not be representative of the global novice teacher population. Further research with larger and more diverse samples is needed to generalize the findings to broader populations.

### **7.2. Self-Reported Data**

The data collected relied heavily on self-reported experiences and perceptions of the participants. While the interviews aimed to delve deep into individual experiences, self-reported data is susceptible to response bias and subjective interpretation. The potential for social desirability bias should also be considered, as participants may have been inclined to present their experiences in a positive light.

### **7.3. International Student Teacher Context**

The study focused specifically on international student teachers studying in China. While this context provided unique insights into mentorship experiences in a diverse and cross-cultural setting, the findings may not be directly applicable to other educational contexts. The unique challenges and opportunities faced by international student teachers, such as language barriers and cultural adaptation, could influence the generalizability of the results.

### **7.4. Potential for Confounding Variables**

The study did not control for various potential confounding variables that could influence the mentorship experiences and outcomes, such as the specific school context, the duration and quality of the mentorship relationships, and the individual characteristics of the participants.

This could impact the interpretation of the findings and limit the ability to establish causal relationships.

### **7.5. Qualitative Nature of the Research**

The qualitative nature of the research limits the ability to make statistically significant claims. The findings provide rich, detailed descriptions of participants' experiences and perspectives, but they are not generalizable to the broader population.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes valuable insights into the complexities of mentorship for novice teachers. The findings can inform future research by highlighting areas for further investigation and exploration. For example, larger-scale quantitative studies could be conducted to investigate the prevalence and effectiveness of mentorship programs across different educational contexts. Additionally, mixed-methods approaches could be employed to triangulate data from qualitative and quantitative sources, providing a more comprehensive understanding of mentorship experiences.

By acknowledging and addressing these limitations, the study's findings can be used to inform the development and implementation of more effective mentorship programs that support the professional growth and development of novice teachers worldwide.

## **8. Practical Strategies and Implications**

The findings of this study underscore the importance of developing structured mentorship programs tailored to the needs of novice teachers. Formal mentorship programs should prioritize pairing mentors and mentees within the same content areas, supported by clear guidelines and well-defined roles. Providing mentor training is essential to ensure they can offer effective feedback, emotional guidance, and support in areas such as classroom management and instructional strategies. Informal mentorship, on the other hand, should be fostered through collaborative environments, such as professional learning communities and shared planning periods, where natural relationships between colleagues can develop. A dual approach, combining formal and informal mentorship, allows institutions to cater to diverse teacher preferences, balancing structured support with opportunities for organic, peer-driven collaboration.

Addressing barriers to mentorship development is also crucial. To overcome the lack of volunteer mentors, schools can implement incentives, such as professional development credits, public recognition, or reduced workloads, while allocating resources to mentorship training and administration. Additionally, mentorship programs should emphasize shared goals and alignment between mentors and mentees to strengthen their professional relationships. Financial considerations, though debated, can play a significant role in ensuring sustainability, with funding directed toward program development and mentor training. By embedding mentorship into teacher induction programs and recognizing mentorship as a leadership role, educational institutions can enhance professional development pathways, benefiting both novice teachers and their students. These practical measures provide actionable strategies for policymakers and school leaders to improve mentorship outcomes and support novice teachers in their early careers.

The findings also highlight that cultural and personal preferences significantly influence the development and effectiveness of mentorship relationships. In contexts where independence and self-development are highly valued, such as in certain Russian settings, formal mentorship may be less effective or even resisted by novice teachers. This suggests the need for culturally sensitive mentorship programs that respect individual autonomy and adapt to

the prevailing cultural norms. For example, in cultures emphasizing self-reliance, mentorship can take a facilitative rather than directive approach, empowering mentees to maintain their teaching styles while receiving guidance when needed. Moreover, the informal nature of mentorship in many settings indicates that professional relationships often thrive on shared cultural values, personal connections, and mutual respect. Schools and institutions can leverage these cultural dynamics by creating opportunities for informal mentorship through collaborative activities, social interactions, and peer-driven initiatives. Understanding and incorporating cultural nuances into mentorship programs can lead to more inclusive and effective approaches, ensuring that novice teachers receive the support they need while respecting their cultural and individual preferences. This adaptability is particularly crucial in diverse educational environments where mentorship practices must align with varying cultural expectations.

## 9. Conclusion

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the mentorship experiences of novice teachers from various countries currently studying in China. By analyzing the factors that facilitate and hinder mentoring relationships, as well as participants' perceptions of formal and informal mentorship, the research aimed to understand how these experiences impact professional development.

The findings revealed that structured formal mentorships facilitated by school arrangements and flexible informal mentorships arising from personal connections both play vital roles in supporting novice teachers. While most participants emphasized the importance of mentorship in enhancing teaching skills, confidence, and professional growth, some highlighted the need for independence, indicating that mentorship programs should be adaptable to individual needs. The controversy over financial incentives for mentors suggested a balanced approach that recognizes mentor contributions without compromising the authenticity of mentoring relationships.

These insights can inform future educational policies by emphasizing the need for flexible and culturally sensitive mentorship programs. By addressing barriers to mentoring, providing adequate support and recognition for mentors, and tailoring mentorship to diverse professional needs, educational institutions can better support novice teachers in their professional development, ultimately improving the quality of education (Dubois, 2021).

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