

## **Mentoring of T2T Alternate Route Special Education Scholars in High-Needs Schools**

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### **Abstract**

The Teach Mississippi Institute (TMI) program at Mississippi State University (MSU) was implemented to assist in addressing the teaching shortage in the state of Mississippi. The TMI program at MSU focuses on preparing special needs teachers for high-needs school districts. The TMI program collaborated with the Transition to Teaching (T2T) Learning and Educating through Alternative Programs (LEAP) Scholarship funded by the United States Department of Education (USDE) to provide alternative certification (AC) for participants who have a four year degree in an area other than teacher education. The TMI certification-only option in special education was approved in January, 2011 by the USDE as an avenue to earn the LEAP Scholarship. In the state of Mississippi, special education is the subject-area with the highest shortage of teachers. Approximately 40% of the T2T LEAP Scholarship students chose special education as their field of study and the TMI program. In January of 2014, 151 teachers earned scholarships through the TMI/ LEAP Scholarship program and 63 of the 151 were in the TMI special education track. During the 2013-14 school year, the USDE advised the director of the program to begin focusing on the mentoring aspect of scaffolding best practices for T2T scholars. A Learning and Educating through Alternative Programs Mentoring survey was used to assess the needs and services provided for the TMI/LEAP scholarship recipients participating in the added aspect of mentoring by the university supervisor while teaching special education.

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Learning and Educating through Alternative Programs (LEAP) is a United States Department of Education (USDE) sponsored program that was created in 2009 to address the teaching shortage in the state of Mississippi through graduate certification or degree programs in secondary education. A second option in special education called the Teach Mississippi Institute (TMI) was approved by the USDE and initiated by the College of Education at Mississippi State University in January, 2011. Students seeking special education certification through the TMI program who earned the LEAP scholarship are designated as LEAP/TMI teacher/scholars. Aspiring teachers studying in the LEAP or LEAP/TMI special education programs earn scholarship funds from the USDE as with an obligation to teach in high-need school districts. After five years of awarding LEAP/TMI scholarships in special education or secondary education, efforts of LEAP/TMI staff and faculty shifted to mentoring of teacher scholars who were fulfilling their obligated years of teaching as a result of earning the LEAP/TMI Scholarship. This study's primary focus is to explore LEAP/TMI teacher/scholars vantage points of their assigned LEAP mentors as well as to review teacher/scholars overall view of the LEAP/TMI certification program in special education.

### **Literature Review**

The solution for many school districts' woes when it comes to finding quality teachers has been the advent of new alternative certification programs. These programs provide non-traditional students with the opportunity to quickly and efficiently learn the basics of becoming quality instructors. These programs, which first appeared in America in the 1980's, have grown in popularity so much, that approximately 1/3 of all graduates get licensed through an alternate route program (Feistritz, 2012). In 2008, the Mississippi Department of Education issued 2300 teacher licenses with 1300 or 57% being alternate route licenses (Meridian Star Wire Staff, 2008). 2008 was the first year that the issuing of alternate route licenses outpaced the issuing of traditional licenses in Mississippi. Despite the fact that hundreds of these programs now exist across the United States, the nature of these programs and how they recruit aspiring teachers can vary wildly.

Alternative certification (AC) for educators has been described in varying ways by many entities implementing it in programs for teacher certification. But, most AC programs have the following criteria for enrolled participants: (a) have at least a 4 year degree in a specific field, (b) make a pre-determined score on a basic skills and state specialized licensure exam and, (c) complete a state licensed approved program of pedagogical and content specific coursework. Because most coursework is completed as the program participants are placed in a classroom to teach, the new teacher needs a strong support system drawn from the administrative personnel, peer teachers, and the licensing agent (e.g. university) since most of the AC teachers are placed in high-needs school districts with elevated teacher attrition rates (Descamps & Klingstedt, 2001; O'Connor, Malow, & Bisland, 2011; Suell & Piotrowski 2007).

Orland-Barak (2001) noted that mentoring has two parts: the position of the mentor's ability to assist the developing teacher with teaching practices and serving as a mentor during this milestone period of change in the mentee's life. Mentoring is a transitional process that includes teaching skills of mastery in communication, identity formation, and micro-political maneuvering which can help mentees adjust to teaching (Achinstein, 2006). Moir (2003) identified the unique impact that trained mentors can have on new teachers:

Mentors have an impact on new teachers in ways that no amount of training can. The real-life classroom represents questions that only real-life experience can answer.

Mentors help provide those answers...[ with] practical, concrete advice; pose important questions to prompt reflection; model teaching techniques in the classroom; observe and offer feedback; and offer another point of view at a time when it is easy to lose all perspective. (p.3)

Feistritzer (1999, p. 1) reported that effective alternative certification programs should include the following components:

- (a) A strong academic coursework component.
- (b) They are field-based programs, meaning that individuals get into classrooms early in their training.
- (c) Teacher candidates work with a ‘qualified mentor teacher’.
- (d) Candidates usually go through their program in cohorts, not as isolated individuals.
- (e) Most of these programs are collaborative efforts among state departments of education whose responsibility is to license teachers, colleges and universities that historically have had the responsibility for educating and training teachers, and school districts who actually hire teachers.

Recruitment and retention have a tremendous impact on where potential teachers will spend the majority of their careers. It is helpful to know that teachers prefer working in schools that are demographically and geographically similar to where they attended school (Boyd, Lankford, Leob, & Wyckoff, 2005). The importance of geographic location proved to be an important factor when LEAP/TMI teacher/scholars sought teaching positions. Most of the LEAP/TMI teacher/scholars taught in an area that were demographically or geographically similar to where they were raised. Research has shown that any professional who enjoys their job and the circumstances surrounding that job (ex: preferred geographic location) tends to stay in the field longer (Battersby Hemmings, Kermode, Sutherland, & Cox, 1990). One of the significant circumstances that has been observed at MSU is that LEAP/TMI scholars seem to get a lot of enjoyment of teaching as a result of their location. It appears that recruiting aspiring teachers locally for this program may be a beneficial strategy in addressing the teaching shortage. Regardless of geographic location, it is important to stress the importance of mentoring new teachers.

Providing a mentor for the novice teachers to assist in identifying and implementing successful instructional practices is a key to effective mentoring. Smith and Ingersoll (2004) stated that a mentoring process through a teacher induction program would benefit a teacher’s instructional practices. This type of mentoring process includes an experienced teacher working with a novice teacher. Many models of mentoring programs for first year teachers or novice teachers can be found in school systems across the United States. However, one specific model as being superior to other mentoring models has not been identified (Marable & Rainmondi, 2007; O’Brien & Christie 2005; Fletcher & Barrett, 2004).

Although one specific model for implementing a mentoring process has not been identified, many researchers have identified characteristics that are important in providing cognitive and emotional support. Characteristics shared by the mentors in the LEAP/TMI program include:

- mentee professional development,
- shared philosophy of teaching,
- use of common planning times,
- on-site mentoring support,

- time for interaction and observation,
- voluntary participation of mentors, and
- respect of one another's opinions. (Marable & Rainmondi, 2007; O'Brien & Christie, 2005; Gilbert, 2005; Dever, Jonnaon, & Hobbs, 2000)

Mentors also receive benefits from the mentor/mentee relationship. The mentors develop as leaders in education as they develop their own mentoring skills through coaching and feedback strategies they employ (Gilbert, 2005). The roles of the mentor teacher encompass the following areas: facilitator, collaborator; resource provider, and problem solver (Moir, 2009). These roles are developed as the mentor observes and interacts with the mentee. Stansbury (2001) reported that an important aspect of the mentor/mentee relationship is providing opportunities for the mentors to observe the mentees as they teach and assist them in analyzing their instructional teaching process.

Mentors are also provided invaluable experience in learning to work with adult personnel in schools (Moir, 2009). LEAP/TMI mentors connected with principals at each school to discuss ways to help LEAP/TMI teacher/scholars. It is important for mentors to have a professional working relationship with each principal of LEAP/TMI teacher scholars because of a principal's ability to foster workplace conditions and support teacher development (Brock & Grady, 1997).

A mentoring process is a vital element to an AC program's success for completers. It may consist of one or all of the following: (a) school-based peer teacher, (b) a district-wide expert in the related core area (e.g. a passionate retired teacher), or a (c) university/program supervisor (O'Connor, et al., 2011, p. 225). Site-based mentors (peer teachers) have been successful in schools where a strong leadership administration is evident. The AC teacher and subject-based peer teacher are provided set times to work together and implement quality lessons (Carter & Keiler, 2009; Childre, 2014). However, in other AC programs lack of time and knowledge for implementation of a quality mentoring experience hindered, instead of helped the AC teacher. The same has been found to be true with university mentors. LEAP/TMI faculty, staff and mentors have discussed the importance of avoiding ineffective mentoring methods. Some ineffective mentoring methods may include a lack of communication, lack of resource/teaching ideas, lack of sufficient time spent face-to-face, and lack of university mentor's knowledge in the AC teacher's subject area.

For the LEAP program, hiring full-time mentors to work with our T2T scholars has been very successful in retaining teachers in high-need LEA's. In order to become an effective mentor, it was important for LEAP/TMI mentors to understand Moir's phases of first-year teachers (Moir, 1990, p.2):

#### Anticipation Phase:

- New Teachers enter with commitment to make a difference
- Idealistic View of Teaching
  - Vantage Point: "I am ready to conquer the world"

#### Survival Phase:

- Overwhelmed and Struggling to keep their head above water
- Day to Day Planning
  - Vantage Point: "Can I do this?"

#### Disillusionment Phase:

- Beginning to question their own commitment and competence
- Classroom Management Challenges
  - Vantage Point: "Maybe I shouldn't have become a teacher"

**Rejuvenation Phase:**

- Slow Rise in Attitude Toward Teaching
- Beginning to Focus on Curriculum Development, Long Term Planning, Teaching Strategies, and Student Outcomes

- Vantage Point: “I am seeing how my teaching impacts my students”

**Reflection Phase:**

- Invigorating time for new teachers
- Reflecting on Successful Events and those that were not successful

- Vantage Point: “I made it. I did it.”

**Anticipation Phase:**

- Vision is emerging as to what next year will look like
  - New Feelings of Excitement: Planning for Next Year
- Vantage Point: “I have new tools and materials to use now!”

LEAP/TMI mentors established with each individual teacher/scholar that he/she was not there to criticize or evaluate personal actions observed in the teaching process, nor to be viewed as the “Evaluation Police.” Helping the teacher/scholars understand the purpose of mentoring was key in opening the lines of communication to allow for sharing and listening about different methods of instructional management as well as the value of teacher-student relationships and teacher-parent relationships.

The LEAP/TMI program at MSU offers individualized mentoring to teacher scholars who are fulfilling their obligations to MSU and the USDE. The LEAP/TMI program hired three mentors during the 2014-15 school year to assist scholarship recipients fulfilling their scholarship obligation in high-needs schools. These mentors assisted by observing LEAP/TMI scholarship recipients in their classrooms and giving feedback as needed. Specific areas of mentoring sessions focused on the four domains of teaching: (a) planning and preparation, (b) classroom environment, (c) instruction, and (d) professional responsibilities (Danielson, 2007, p. 26-92). The mentors also pieced together appropriate reading material for each scholarship recipient based on subject-areas and areas of improvement, provided onsite assistance in preparing for administrative assessment visits, established an open communication process through email and phone calls, observed instructional practices in order to provide assistance in management processes, and a review of new special education case laws. In addition, specialized workshops were designed to assist the TMI/LEAP teacher scholars in the areas of management, inclusion, case law, and teaching strategies.

## **Methods**

LEAP/TMI teacher scholars were given a *Learning and Educating through Alternative Programs Mentoring* survey to respond to level support received in the areas of planning, behavioral management, individualized learning strategies, individual education plans (IEP's), technology use, and instructional practices. In addition, common themes were identified with the reflective responses provided by the mentors.

### **Sample and Participants Selection**

Out of the one hundred fifty one teacher-scholarships awarded by the LEAP program, sixty three students were awarded the LEAP/TMI special education certification only scholarship. The sixty-three LEAP/TMI students were sent the survey and twenty-seven students completed the survey (43%).

## Research Topics and Questions

Twelve survey questions and/or topics guided this research study. It's important to note that the tables begin with Question/Topic 2 (Q2) and end with Question/Topic 13 (Q13). Question 1 is not listed below because Question 1 gave permission to the researchers to use the answers provided by the LEAP/TMI teacher/scholars. The survey questions are listed below:

- Q2: I have been provided professional development by my MSU mentor focused on personal needs in teaching and strategies and methods for the core subject I teach.
- Q3: I have been provided professional development by my MSU mentor focused on personal needs in using management strategies in the classroom.
- Q4: I have been provided professional development by my MSU mentor focused on meeting school district expectations on teaching my core subject.
- Q5: I have been provided professional development by my MSU mentor on teaching strategies to meet educational needs for individual learners.
- Q6: I have been provided professional development by my MSU mentor on using intervention strategies to meet individual learners' educational needs.
- Q7: I have been provided professional development by my MSU mentor on teaching strategies to use the technologies provided by my school district.
- Q8: I have been provided professional development by my MSU mentor on assessment strategies to use with my instructional practices.
- Q9: How has your Mississippi State University mentor met your educational teaching needs?
- Q10: Please describe ways that your Mississippi State University mentor met your educational teaching needs.
- Q11: What other topics or educational areas do you need professional development to help you become a more successful educator?
- Q12: Based on your experiences in the LEAP program, how likely are you to recommend this university to others?
- Q13: Overall, are you satisfied with your experience as a LEAP Scholar at this university, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with it, or dissatisfied with it?

## Results

Table 1 reviews LEAP/TMI teacher/scholars confidence in mentors based on professional needs that includes learning new teaching strategies and methods as tied to their core subjects, management strategies including classroom and behavioral management, teaching strategies for individual learners, technology integration and instructional practices.

Table 1

*LEAP/TMI Teacher/Scholars View of Mentors as Tied to Classroom Management and Instructional Development*

Professional Development Questions:	No Prof. Dev. and Support	Little Prof. Dev. and Support	Initial Prof. Dev. and Support	Prof. Dev., but only minimal follow-up Support	Full Prof. Dev. and Continued Follow-up Support
Q. 2 Personal needs in teaching strategies/ methods in core subjects taught	4.55%	4.55%	4.55%	9.09%	77.27%
Q. 3 Personal needs in using management strategies in my classroom	4.55%	4.55%	9.09%	18.18%	63.64%
Q. 4 Meeting school district expectations on teaching core subject	4.55%	13.64%	9.09%	4.55%	68.18%
Q. 5 Teaching strategies to meet educational needs for individual learners	4.55%	4.55%	9.09%	18.18%	63.64%
Q. 6 Using intervention strategies to meet individual learners' educational needs	9.09%	4.55%	9.09%	13.64%	63.64%
Q. 7 Teaching strategies to use the technologies provided by my school district	9.09%	13.64%	4.55%	9.09%	63.64%
Q. 8 Using assessment strategies with instructional practices	9.09%	13.64%	4.55%	9.09%	63.64%

*Note:* Between 72-86% of the LEAP/TMI Scholars felt supported with classroom management strategies or instructional support.

Table 2 reviews LEAP/TMI teacher/scholars confidence in mentors based on educational needs. This includes educational needs being met by their individual mentor and if the student would recommend the program to others interested in pursuing an alternate route certification.

Table 2

*Teacher/Scholars Views of Mentors Meeting Their Educational Needs and Recommendation of the LEAP/TMI alternate route program*

Meeting the Overall Needs of the Teacher/Scholar	Not at all	Slightly Helpful/Likely	Moderately Helpful/Likely	Quite Helpful/Likely	Extremely Helpful/Likely
Q. 9 How has your MSU mentor met your educational needs?	9.09%	13.64%	4.55%	13.64%	59.09%
Q. 12 Based on your experiences in the LEAP program, how likely are you to recommend this university to others?	0.00%	0.00%	13.64%	18.18%	68.18%

*Note:* More than 70% of the LEAP/TMI scholar/teachers felt that their assigned mentor met their educational needs.

LEAP/TMI teacher/scholars confidence in mentors based on specific comments tied to professional development can be found in Table 3. Each teacher/scholar surveyed had the opportunity to provide comments in the following themes: providing activities/strategies/instructional materials; available through phone/email to answer questions; and providing emotional and professional support. Student comments regarding their professional development experience are listed below.

Table 3

*Specific Comments Provided by LEAP/TMI Teacher/Scholars Regarding Mentor Influence on Educational Needs*

Written Feedback from Teacher/Scholars based on Themes:	Theme: Provides activities/strategies/instructional materials	Theme: Available through phone/email to answer questions	Theme: Provides emotional and professional support
Q. 10 Describe ways that your MSU mentor met your educational teaching needs.	<p>Helped find activities and strategies for teaching ...</p> <p>Assisting with MSTAR, lesson plans and providing instructional materials.</p> <p>...willing to help and always able to provide strategies ...</p> <p>... shares insightful views on instructional methods.</p> <p>... frequently emailed me information about new techniques and strategies.</p> <p>Given great information on differentiation.</p>	<p>Whenever I had a question through text or email it was always answered.</p> <p>Making sure all of my questions were answered ...</p> <p>Always readily available.</p> <p>Always being available when I needed them and providing any information ...</p> <p>Being available.</p> <p>Answered my emails regarding student behavior management.</p>	<p>Checked up on me to make sure I was okay at my school.</p> <p>Always there when I needed her, and always made sure I was helped.</p> <p>Provided immense support in finding a job.</p> <p>... instrumental in my transition to becoming a great teacher.</p> <p>Been in contact with me on a regular basis</p>
(Professional Development/Teaching Strategies)	Theme: IEP Assistance/Special Education Issues	Theme: Classroom Management	Theme: Instructional Materials/Resources, including Technology
Q. 11 What other topics or educational areas do you need professional development to help you become a more successful educator?	<p>How to write IEPs, ...</p> <p>Special Education procedures</p> <p>Writing effective objectives for the new IEP and completing the new IEP form.</p> <p>... educational law and rights.</p>	<p>Classroom management!</p> <p>Behavior management!</p> <p>Behavior techniques for children with extreme behavior issues ...</p> <p>Management</p>	<p>Technology and resources without technology.</p> <p>More online options, information.</p> <p>Using manipulatives to help students develop a broader understanding of the lesson.</p> <p>Common Core information</p>

*Note:* Comments provide feedback on how assigned mentors assisted with the various themes.

Table 4 reviews LEAP/TMI teacher/scholars confidence in mentors based on the overall experience of the program. Although similar to question twelve, students rate their overall experience with the LEAP/TMI program rather than recommending the program to others.

Table 4

*LEAP/TMI Teacher/Scholar Views of Mentors as Tied to the Overall Program Experience*

	Extremely Satisfied	Quite Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Quite Dissatisfied	Extremely Dissatisfied
Q. 13 Overall experience as a LEAP Scholar	54.55%	22.73%	4.55%	4.55%	0.00%	0.00%	13.64%

*Note:* Between 77-82% of student surveyed were satisfied with mentoring being part of the overall program experience.

**Discussion**

Questions 2 – 8 revealed information on the participants’ belief about the level of professional development support provided (see Table 1). Professional development in the area of meeting personal needs by providing materials and information on teaching strategies/methods received the highest rating of not only full professional development provided, but also continued follow-up support (question 1). Question 5 also relating to teaching strategies provided through professional development by the university mentor, received one of the highest ratings for satisfaction, *Teaching strategies to meet educational needs for individual learners*. Both of these questions correlated to one of the themes identified for question 10 relating to ways the university mentor has met the participants’ educational teaching needs (see Table 3). The theme *Provides activities/strategies/instructional materials* elicited several responses. Specifically, participants responded that their mentor provided activities and strategies for teaching, teacher evaluation purposes Mississippi Statewide Teacher Assessment Rubric (MSTAR), lesson planning, and differentiation. Another area receiving higher scores for professional development provided was question 3, *Personal needs in using management strategies in my classroom*. A combined score of 81.02% for professional development support with minimal and continued follow-up was recorded. This area corresponded to a theme identified for question 11, *What other topics or educational areas do you need professional development to help you become a more successful educator?* (see Table 4). Although many participants responded that they were receiving professional development for management issues, they were like many other new teachers in feeling inadequate in this area. This resulted in more focused attention from the mentors in providing video resources, research articles, and mentor/mentee discussions about classroom management strategies. Two areas with a higher response rate for little or no professional development were found in questions 7 and 8 (see Table 1). Participants were not as satisfied with the mentoring received in the areas of strategies to use district provided technologies and assessment strategies. Question 11 asked what was needed in future professional development mentoring sessions included several responses related to the

technology strategies and use (see Table 3). Many of the schools where the teacher participants are teaching, have a teacher computer/Promethean Board for instructional use. Although the LEAP/TMI participants have a higher proficiency level in using technology for a personal or business use, they have not had experience on using it for instructional purposes. Mentors are able to meet this need in a one-on-one modeling process. In addition, more resources focused on specific activities used by the participants for teaching content are being provided by the university mentors.

Questions 9 and 12 addressed how helpful or likely the assigned university mentor or the MSU LEAP/TMI program met the participants' needs and would affect their willingness to recommend the program for others (see Table 2). Question 9 addressed how the mentor has met the educational needs of the LEAP/TMI participant. A total of 72.73% responded that the mentor was quite helpful or extremely helpful. Additionally, 86.36% of the participants responded that they would likely recommend the program at MSU to others. The high percentages in these two areas could be related to two themes identified on question 10 (see Table 3). Many of the LEAP/TMI scholarship recipients responded that the mentor was always available through telephone calls and email to answer any questions. Participants reported that the mentors provided emotional and professional support. This support was especially important as the LEAP/TMI scholarship recipients moved through the survival and disillusionment stages reported by Moir (1990).

Seventeen LEAP/TMI participants reported that their overall experience as a LEAP scholar was quite or extremely satisfied. One reported somewhat satisfied and one was neither satisfied or dissatisfied. Three of the participants responded that they were extremely dissatisfied. Again, this dissatisfaction was not necessarily with the assigned university mentor, but with the program. This dissatisfaction could have been from class experience, school location or school administration factors.

One other area that was identified as an important theme that emerged from other topics or educational needs on question 11, was IEP assistance and issues related to special education laws (see Table 3). The reported needs ranged from how to write an IEP, especially with new IEP forms required to special education procedures. One LEAP/TMI scholarship recipient believed that a class on educational law and rights should be included in the program. One way that the mentors addressed the need identified from this question was to provide a specialized workshop for all LEAP/TMI teacher/scholars focused on specific issues related to new requirements with writing objectives for the new IEP forms and related educational laws and rights associated with many of the students they were teaching.

## Conclusion

Overall, of the 151 scholarships awarded, 125 students are still working in high-need LEA's. 83% of our scholars are still employed in LEAP Local Education Agencies (LEA's) and 96% of the students who earned the LEAP/TMI scholarship are still in the teaching field. This very high-retention rate is believed to be a result of the support by the mentors as well as support for LEAP support staff. The LEAP/TMI mentors provided many opportunities to assure the scholarship recipients that they were there to help and assist them in becoming better teachers. Just providing reading materials on planning, teaching and management alone were not sufficient, but having a trusted colleague who could coach new teachers around classroom obstacles helped the new teachers grow toward becoming superior teachers. The results of this study supports the belief that teacher support through mentoring can increase retention levels, improve instructional methods and classroom management, and increase awareness of current research in education. The different types of support methods through

mentoring resulted in LEAP/TMI teacher scholars having positive experiences in the LEAP/TMI program. These positive experiences are believed to be directly related to the high retention rate for this program. Teacher-scholar suggestions for this survey will be used to improve the TMI and other alternate route programs at Mississippi State University. What is clear is that a systematic and comprehensive mentoring process to scaffold AC teachers provides an avenue of active university-scholar support while developing a stronger passion for the love of teaching through positive experiences and professional guidance.

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