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A Shared Passion: Cooperating Teacher and Professional Intern Relationships

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Abstract

With an increased focus on extended field experiences for preservice teachers, and the emphasis and importance placed on preparation for high-stakes assessments, many veteran teachers are reluctant to hand over their classrooms to novice preservice teachers. With these seemingly competing interests, it is critical to identify the ‘value added’ and benefits for cooperating teachers to host professional interns (student teachers) in their classrooms. The findings reported in this paper are part of a larger study designed to determine the processes and strategies employed by cooperating teachers in assisting professional interns (student teachers) in the development of professional competencies. Specifically, this paper elucidates key benefits of the mentoring process and describes how the mentoring relationship enhances the teaching and learning experience for students, veteran teachers, and teacher candidates.

A Shared Passion: Cooperating Teacher and Professional Intern Relationships

In the wake of a call put forth by the Blue Ribbon Panel commissioned by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE] (2010), to transform teacher education by moving towards a more clinically-based approach to teacher training, teacher education programs are being faced with the challenge of increasing the amount of time teacher candidates spend in field-based classroom experiences. In order to provide more clinical experiences, appropriate field placements must be secured, by establishing partnerships with local schools and faculty. In order for any relationship or partnership to be successful and satisfying for everyone involved, it must be mutually beneficial for all parties. The benefits of increased clinical experiences for teacher preparation programs and teacher candidates are clear. However, the benefits to the P-12 partners are less clear if they are not created in the context of a more formal professional development school (PDS) relationship where contributions by, and benefits to each party are predetermined and clearly delineated. When establishing relationships and partnerships, it is critical for university faculty to ensure that cooperating teachers derive some benefit for the time and effort they expend mentoring preservice teachers.

The purpose of this paper is to present the results of a qualitative pilot study that emerged as a collaborative engagement between teacher educators, cooperating teachers, and professional interns (student teachers) in inquiry that contributes to scholarship expanding the knowledge base related to teacher education. The terms, preservice, professional intern, and student teacher are all terms used by the profession to describe the preparation level of the teachers addressed in this study, but for consistency, the phrase ‘professional intern’ or simply ‘intern’ will be used throughout this paper.

Specifically, this paper presents findings from a research project identifying the perceived benefits of the mentoring process for mentors and describes how the mentoring relationship enhances the teaching and learning experience for students, veteran teachers, and teacher candidates.

Review of Literature

Since the 1980s, mentoring as part of a high profile induction program has become a much-valued practice for a variety of disciplines, such as in education, medical, and business contexts. Many different interpretations of the actual mentoring process can be attributed to the term ‘mentoring,’ one of which is described as the relationship between the mentor and mentee that contributes to the learning of the latter in lesson preparation, teaching strategies and classroom management (Cooper & Batteson, 1998; Ekiz, 2006; Gold, 1996; Monk & Dillon, 1995; 1998; Stephenson, 1997). Specifically for this study, mentoring refers to the one-to-one support of a pre-service teacher (mentee) by a more experienced teacher (mentor), designed to assist the development of the mentee’s expertise in teaching and to facilitate their induction into the culture of the teaching profession.

In the field of education, mentoring has emerged as a response to the needs of beginning teachers as well as a method for curbing their high rate of attrition, which is presently 14% after the first year and 50% after five years (Athanasios et al., 2008; Evans-Andris, Kyle, & Carini, 2006; Gareis & Nussbaum-Beach, 2008; Wiebke & Bardin, 2009). Teacher attrition affects all aspects of schools, including, most importantly, student performance (Leimann, Murdock, & Waller, 2008). During a time of standardized testing and accountability, addressing the issue of teacher attrition and

student achievement has become a national priority (Athanases et al., 2008).

Mentoring has been implemented and discussed internationally since the 1990s in the USA, UK, Australia, Turkey, and many other countries (Ballantyne & Handsford, 1995; Ekiz, 2006; Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009). Research on mentoring indicates that mentoring is an overwhelmingly positive learning process for mentors and mentees alike (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004). A mentoring relationship is valuable not only for the novice but also for the veteran educator, in that it positively affects teacher efficacy for both (Yost, 2002). Mentoring also benefits schools involved and educational systems in general in several ways. First, mentoring promotes increased retention and stability: teachers who are mentored have been found to be less likely to leave teaching and less likely to move between schools (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005). Second, mentoring results in more confident and capable beginning teachers, as well as more committed and enthusiastic mentors, who are more likely to produce significant gains for their students and schools, particularly in the area of student achievement (Moor et al., 2005). Third, mentoring leads to increased collaboration and an improved culture of professional development and support within schools (Moor et al., 2005).

Mentoring programs benefit mentees in a variety of ways. For example, mentees are exposed to a wealth of new information; provided access to resources, role modeling, and counseling; coached and encouraged to reflect; and assisted with career decisions and networking (Ballantyne & Handsford, 1995). Among the most often identified positive outcomes for mentees are career advancement and psychosocial support (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004). Emotional (e.g., reduced feeling of isolation) and

psychological support, (e.g., encouragement, friendship and feedback on performance) have shown to be helpful in boosting the confidence of beginning teachers, enabling them to put difficult experiences into perspective, and increasing their morale and job satisfaction with implications for retention (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009).

As mentoring is a two-way reciprocal process, research also points to the positive impact on professional and personal development of mentors (Hagger & McIntyre, 2006). As a result of this relationship, mentor teachers are empowered, revitalized, and their careers rejuvenated, and they become more confident and willing to better their schools (Yost, 2002). The mentor-mentee relationship introduces mentors to the recent research and development in teaching and learning in addition to fresh ideas about the curriculum and instruction (Bauer & LeBlanc, 2002; Ekiz, 2006; Ganser, 1999). Lopez-Real and Kwan (2005) report that 70% of mentors claimed to have benefited professionally from mentoring others. Mentors learn through critical reflection of their own practice (Lopez-Real & Kwan, 2005; Simpson, Hastings, & Hill, 2007), from their mentees, from participation in mentor training courses, from university supervisors, and from opportunities to talk about teaching and learning in general, or about their mentees and their own teaching in particular (Hagger & McIntyre, 2006; Lopez-Real & Kwan, 2005). Mentors learn new ideas and improve their teaching styles and strategies and become more knowledgeable about beginning teachers and their needs (Lopez-Real & Kwan, 2005).

Additionally, many mentors derive satisfaction and pride from undertaking the mentor role (Hagger & McIntyre, 2006). Ehrich, Hansford and Tennent (2004) echo the

above findings, and emphasize the benefits of collaborating, networking with colleagues, reflecting on their beliefs and practices, and gaining personal satisfaction, reward and growth. Moreover, this relationship also improves communication between research institutions and public schools (Capa & Loadman, 2004; McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996).

While the majority of discussions on mentoring document merits of this practice, some authors are more cautious. Examples of the drawbacks of mentoring include a lack of time for mentoring, poor planning of the mentoring process, unsuccessful matching of mentor and mentees, a lack of understanding about the mentoring process, and a lack of access to mentors from minority groups (Long, 1997).

Some studies (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009) identify a number of effective mentoring approaches, strategies and tactics, which include: providing emotional and psychological support, making mentees feel welcome and accepted, making time for mentees by holding regular meetings, allowing appropriate autonomy for mentees to develop their own teaching styles, and observing lessons and providing feedback. Several studies show that mentees develop their pedagogical skills through reciprocal reflection with their mentors (Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Grossmann, 1989; Grossmann & Richert, 1988; Shulman, 1987; Nilsen, 2003). According to Nilsen (2003), we learn by imitating even in informal situations where there is not any structured mentorship.

As the bulk of the studies reviewed focus on mentoring programs for beginning and first year teachers, most of them are based predominantly either on the mentor or mentees' perceptions and accounts (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009). Fewer studies focus on the perceived benefits for mentoring teachers in Appalachian

schools. This study contributes to the ongoing quest to gain a deeper understanding of the mentoring phenomenon by focusing on the mentoring of pre-service teachers in Appalachian schools, by providing voices from both mentors and mentees, and by exploring the benefits of mentoring programs for both mentors and mentees, and their respective institutions, (i.e., universities and school districts). This study supports the current movement to transform teacher education into a more clinically-based approach to teacher training.

Method

The research reported in this paper is part of a larger study designed to determine the processes and strategies employed by cooperating teachers in assisting professional interns (student teachers) in the development of professional competencies.

Participants

Participants were recruited from a pool of professional interns in the field during spring of the 2008-2009 and fall, winter, and spring quarters of the 2009-2010 academic years. Participants (mentor teachers and their professional interns) received information packets describing the specifics of the research project, participation requirements, and consent forms. Approximately two-thirds of the participating cooperating teachers elected to receive two graduate credit hours as compensation for their participation in the study, others chose to participate without compensation, because of a personal interest in the topic or a desire to give back to the education profession. Over the three years of the study, a total of twenty-one (21) pairs of professional interns and mentor teachers agreed to participate. The distribution of participant dyads were four (4) in spring quarter 2009,

one (1) in fall 2009, seven (7) in winter 2010, and six (6) in spring quarter 2010, and three (3) in the fall of 2011.

Instrument

Two instruments were used to collect data as part of the larger study addressing the processes and strategies employed by cooperating teachers in assisting professional interns (student teachers) in the development of professional competencies. Sources of data for this study included: (1) reflective dialog journals kept by the 21 pairs of interns and mentoring teachers, and (2) individual semi-structured interviews with each professional intern and cooperating teacher.

Procedures

Interns are typically assigned to a classroom full-time for 12 weeks to complete their professional internship. They begin the experience observing and slowly take over full teaching responsibilities in the classroom. Near the end of the experience, the teaching responsibilities are slowly returned to the cooperating teacher to ensure a smooth transition into and out of the classroom.

Each intern and mentor pair was asked to keep an interactive, on-going, reflective dialog journal throughout the quarter. Cooperating teachers were instructed to have their interns read, observe, reflect, and respond to each week's prompt. The journal was returned to the cooperating teacher who would respond to the intern's reflection. The journal could be passed back and forth more often during a week, allowing for an on-going 'dialog' between the pair regarding each week's topic.

For this study, the focus of the interviews with the professional interns and the cooperating teachers, along with the journal prompt for week 4 was about “Showing the Passion.” Specifically, the data for this research was derived from the following:

1) Dialog journal prompt: Week 4: 'Showing the Passion'

How does your CT demonstrate his/her enthusiasm for content?

2) CT Interview question: "What unique contribution does your PI bring to the classroom environment?"

3) PI Interview question: “What unique contribution do you bring to the classroom environment?” (Not asked prior to spring 2010.)

To ensure complete comfort in responding, the interview process entailed isolating the professional intern and the cooperating teacher and audio-taping the individual interviews. The interview questions and dialog journal prompts utilized in this research were co-created by a team of university teacher educators and in-service teachers with extensive experience mentoring professional interns.

Results

Data from interviews and dialog journals were coded and analyzed for themes. A major theme arising from the data indicated cooperating teachers gained several benefits from their participation in the mentoring process. Generally, the results indicate benefits cooperating teachers derive from the mentoring experience are related to the “value added” of another colleague sharing their students and classroom.

The data revealed that cooperating teachers benefit from the mentoring experience when the professional intern serves as a *reflective partner*, a *co-teacher/collaborator/co-planner*, or when the professional intern functions as a *resource*.

Intern as Reflective Partner

Interestingly, sharing a classroom with another person who spends time observing and reflecting on the instruction being modeled, the classroom management style, and the myriad of activities that encompass an educator's day, provides interesting insights. As the reflective observer, a pre-service teacher can provide the cooperating teacher with a valuable perspective of his/her daily practice. Many times, educators are not observed in a non-evaluative situation unless they are serving in a mentoring role for a new or preservice teacher. The use of dialog journals as a function of participation in this research, allowed cooperating teachers to see their practice through the eyes of a trusted other. It is this perspective from a *reflective partner* that several teachers perceived as a benefit to participation in the mentoring process. In a follow up interview, one teacher responded to reflections from her professional intern.

Reading some of the reflections that she's done, I'm like really? She got that from me? I do that? To me it's just something that you do and you don't realize you do it.

In an entry taken from a dialog journal, another teacher stated,

It's really interesting to see someone else's perspective of what I do. This reflection taught me that even when I feel like the day isn't going well, at least I can still make positive connections with my students! Thank you [professional intern]!

In response to one intern's reflection on the how the cooperating teacher modeled flexibility, the cooperating teacher responded, "*Wow! Do I do all that?*"

Additionally, professional interns were able to provide insights that enhanced their cooperating teachers' understanding of their students and what was happening in the

classroom. One teacher reported, “*She has so many insights with my students and it has been very eye opening.*” A second teacher explained,

...her insights into the students [are valuable]. I think it is just her personality like she picks up on things very quickly and I wish that I could take that and wish she could rub some of that on me. I just enjoyed hearing her perspective on things because often we’ll agree, but she just has that extra little aha.

Intern as Co-teacher/Collaborator/Co-planner

Professional interns contributed to the mentoring process when they were able to function in the role of co-teacher, collaborator, or co-planner.

We’ve done a lot of co-teaching together, too, which I think that really works out well. I had an actual mentee that was a first year teacher here ... we got to co-teach a class. And she has told me so many times how invaluable that was for a first-year teacher to have a veteran teacher side-by-side. And I think that would be the perfect, perfect scenario.

A second teacher explained:

And I found ... they have amazing ideas and maybe they are getting more now at [the university] through the teacher education. I don’t know. But I know both [interns] have had some wonderful ideas that I haven’t even thought of, which is great for me. You know, that’s what I love with the mentor thing cause I really try to teach, [and] treat them as a professional and just bounce ideas back and forth with them.

Intern as Resource

Finally, the most frequently cited benefit of mentoring professional interns was that interns served as resources for their cooperating teachers. Cooperating teachers recognized the contributions of their interns in terms of bringing *new strategies*, the *latest research*, and ideas for how to *integrate technology* into classroom instruction.

Source of new strategies. Several cooperating teachers mentioned that interns brought with them ideas for innovative new ways or strategies to introduce content that enhanced the mentoring experience for mentors. One teacher admitted:

One of my short comings is calendar. And I told her that upfront. So she took calendar over first. And I've actually watched her do calendar. It's just boring to me. So repetitive! And she has included the kids in the calendar which I like. And I will use. Like just now, I was participating trying to get her to open the door and one of my low functioning students being tested now [for learning disabilities] was the one that came up and pointed to the days of the week as they sang the song. And I was like, 'that is a great job you did a great job.' So I can tell that the participation has really helped. So yeah, she has definitely helped me with calendar.

Another teacher reported:

You know, I really like the idea of her greetings. I like the idea of the greetings because even the songs. We do the songs. The greetings I can tell you, I think forms a community within the classroom. And there is a lot of teaching that goes on because it's like this is how you greet and this is how you respond to people. It is teaching them skills that they are going to need, especially long down the road, that they have learned in kindergarten--very basic skills that you just don't

think about teaching. So yes, I will probably use that the greeting. I just think the building of the community, it just makes them feel like they are a group.

A music teacher explained:

I really like the key signature tools that she's been using with music theory and I really like her persistence with ear training because it has made the music theory class, again non-musicians, attuned with what it is they're writing that their original compositions actually sound better because they hear something that they like in their head, and they're able to figure out what intervals those are and re-create it on the computer. So, that's really cool. The fact that she has taken so much time to do that, to work ear training with them on a daily basis has really made a difference in the quality of their work.

Another reflected,

I think that Ms. B. [intern] has developed a lot of strategies that I can borrow in my own teaching. Her strategies have given the students a chance to reflect on their learning and expand their thinking.

However, not all strategies were related to teaching or content. One teacher reported:

Well, I think her organization, first of all, that I admire. The way she organizes her lesson plans. I am actually going to adopt from her strangely. She has a binder, and I know that she was saying that is a requirement, but I have my lesson plan book that I just stuffed full and have stapled my typed up lesson plans to it. It just looks so neat. And she has all those extra places in a special place. So, I am definitely learning about organization.

Finally, one cooperating teacher summarized the openness to new ideas when commenting, “*She [intern] may use my lesson planning format and ideas, but I would like for her to be able to use her own ideas so that I can learn from her as well.*” This openness to learn from professional interns was also made explicit by some cooperating teachers. When asked what added value a particular intern brought to the classroom, one individual remarked,

My cooperating teacher expects that I practice classroom management strategies that allow for flexibility, while still maintaining control. She expects that I may use some of her tactics for management, but can also come up with my own methods or strategies. I know this because we have talked about the idea that she can learn from me, as well as I can learn from her.

Sources of the latest research. Cooperating teachers perceived their interns as sources of information regarding the latest research in the field. One teacher confessed, “*Maybe because she’s fresh out of school, she knows the [new] material way better than me.*” Another replied, “*I think that they probably know more what research has shown as the most effective way to do than I do. So I get that from them.*”

Expertise in technology use for instruction. By far, the most frequently mentioned benefit or value added by an intern was in the area of technology use and integration into instruction. The following quotes illustrate mentor teachers’ reflection on their interns’ technological abilities and the contribution of their skills and abilities.

Yeah, she actually knows a little bit more than I do. So she was able to help me a little bit. And she’s doing all of her plans and everything on the computer and she plugs her little chip into mine and I’m working with the mimeo system and it’s

been really nice. And the kids are able to work interactively with that and it's been a very nice tool for us. It's been wonderful.

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I fall very short on that [technology]. I will say that right up front. She is way above where I am in technology. Any professional intern that I've ever had has been. So that is a deficit of mine that I just need to continue [to develop]. She knows all the resources we have in the classroom. This is a new building. We are very fortunate. I can pull up something on my computer and we've got a little screen and the kids can see it. But as far as telling her anything about where to find things, how to use the internet to help with her lesson planning, she is leaps and bounds ahead of me. That's just me being honest. I will come up with an idea and she'll say, "oh but if you also go here..." They're just so far above where I am here. She's making a game today that's off the internet and I totally encouraged her to do that but that wasn't something I needed to tell her. She came in with that and so that's just the way--that's not something I had to model. She came in using way more internet and technology than I did.

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As far as working from the computer and feeling comfortable with that, she is way more confident and comfortable with that and that's fine. She's helping me and that's a good thing because I learn things from the kids and the student teacher. I think that's the way it should be.

One teacher expressed an additional benefit that did not fit within the themes or categories above, but was still worth mentioning. The cooperating teacher reported that

having another individual in the classroom gave her the added benefit of time. She honestly reported, *“It’s nice to have a student teacher because you get to sit back and see what’s not working, too and you get time to work on it because you’re not teaching every day.”*

Finally, one teacher expressed a less tangible benefit that was mentioned by many educators when asked why they chose to participate in the mentoring of preservice teachers. In fact, our data indicated that many teachers participate in mentoring as a way to give back to the profession and to support and develop new teachers. One teacher summarized it nicely when reflecting, *“I pledged to myself that anybody that’s coming into the profession, I want to be there to advocate for them because I love new blood. I love the new ideas.”*

Discussion

The findings reported above, regarding benefits mentoring teachers derive from the mentoring of preservice teachers (i.e., professional interns) add to the vast body of existing knowledge regarding the overall benefits of the mentoring process and experience. More importantly, the findings make a significant contribution to the more limited body of literature focusing on specific benefits gained by mentors in a mentoring dyad.

As reported in the literature, our findings confirm that mentors learn through critical reflection on their own practice (Lopez-Real & Kwan, 2005; Simpson, Hastings, & Hill, 2007) and from opportunities to talk about their own teaching (Hagger & McIntyre, 2006). Participants valued the unique insights provided by their interns who frequently served as reflective partners.

Findings in the present study echo those of Ehrich, Hansford and Tennent (2004) who indicate mentors perceive increases in collaboration, networks with colleagues, and reflection on their beliefs and practices resulting from the mentoring experience.

Our data also affirmed previous findings (Bauer & LeBlank, 2002; Ekiz, 2006; Ganser, 1999) that interns serve as sources of information regarding the most recent research and development in teaching and learning, in addition to fresh ideas about curriculum and instruction. Participants in our study provided specific instances of new strategies that ranged from content specific ones to those of general classroom and instructional management.

By far, participants in the present study indicated the greatest degree of personal benefit in the area of technology integration, both for instruction and planning. These findings are in line with Lopez-Real and Kwan (2005) who report that mentors gain new ideas and improve their teaching styles and strategies, as many of our participants indicated that not only did they like the new strategies their interns brought to the classroom, they planned to integrate these new strategies or approaches into their own practice.

Finally, mentors in our study reported their desire to mentor is associated with the personal satisfaction they gain from mentoring new faculty members as a way to 'give back' to the profession. This perspective is supported by Hagger and McIntyre (2006) who indicate that many mentors derive satisfaction and pride from undertaking the mentor role. In light of the extensive investment of time, personal resources, and risk of 'giving up' control over one's classroom, not to mention sharing the responsibility for P-

12 student learning, it is important that the mentoring experience truly be a two-way street, where benefits are realized by all participants.

As teacher education moves towards a more clinically-based model of teacher preparation, it is the responsibility of those in higher education to ensure that the mentoring experience is a win-win for all involved. Studies that identify the benefits for cooperating teachers, as well as the costs are critical, to make certain that the benefits outweigh the costs in the equation, laying the foundation for a true and equitable partnership between P-12 schools and universities.

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