Developing Mentorship Skills in Clinical Faculty: A Best Practices Approach to Supporting Beginning Teachers[1]

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Abstract

Effective mentoring programs help to recruit new teachers and improve teacher retention rates (e.g. Ingersoll & Strong, 2011, Rideout & Windle, 2010). Many school districts require mentoring programs for new teachers; however, they do not always have the resources to prepare their teachers to mentor beginning teachers. Clinical faculty (CF), who are teachers trained to mentor student teachers, are a resource with existing expertise in mentorship. A curriculum for CF was designed, piloted, and implemented using a best practice utilization-focused approach (Patton, 2008). Its focus is on meeting school division needs to equip CF to better mentor beginning teachers, particularly in identified critical shortage areas. The curriculum deepens and expands CF capabilities to more effectively model, observe, and explore data collaboratively with first-year teachers, moving them from mentoring pre-service to in-service teachers. This paper describes the design of and findings from the implementation of a mentor training curriculum for supporting beginning teachers.

"While not the entire solution, carefully designed mentoring programs can help school divisions recruit new teachers, improve teacher retention rates and help expand the skills and knowledge of new and veteran teachers" (Virginia Department of Education, 2016).

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School-based mentoring programs are based on a vision and understanding of good teaching and learning in order to create opportunities to support meaningful experiences for novice teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). These meaningful experiences should help prepare novice teachers for the realities of school-wide instruction, curriculum, and behavior management (Carver, Margolis & Williams, 2013). Research shows that beginning teachers who participate in mentorships with other teachers are less likely to change schools or leave teaching early in their career (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Rideout & Windle, 2010). Feiman-Nemser (2001) noted "mentoring has the potential to foster powerful teaching and to develop the dispositions and skills of continuous improvement" (p. 28).

Student teachers in traditional pre-service teacher preparation programs receive mentor teacher support during student teaching. School boards also require their schools to provide any probationary teacher with a mentor teacher (Education Accountability and Quality Enhancement Act of 1999). Expectations from national higher-education accreditation organizations are to support the continuous improvement of candidates' performance after they have been hired as in-service teachers (CAEP, 2013). Unfortunately, a review of the literature on mentoring has shown that without well-developed mentoring programs and mentor training seeking to increase mentor effectiveness, mentorship alone will not necessarily support and provide new teachers with the benefits that are known to exist (Wong & Wong, 2012). Part of the issue is that school divisions may not have the resources to launch effective mentor programs to help beginning teachers make a successful transition into teaching, improve teacher retention, and ultimately improve student performance (VDOE, 2000). Therefore, our aim is to share the design and findings from a mentor training curriculum developed to support beginning teachers.

Considerations for Mentorship Programs

In many school settings, a principal or central office administrator usually assigns mentors based on content area or availability, but there are multiple configurations for mentor teachers working in school-based programs (Rowley, 2006). Many variables can affect the success of mentorship programs (mentor behaviors, mentor-mentee relationships, and the mentor's instructional expertise), and thus these factors should be considered in an effective program design. Because mentor teachers can have a profound influence on the development of beginning teachers, they should be carefully selected and thoroughly trained (Zimpher & Howey, 2005).

First, mentors participating in a formal mentorship program should be effective communicators, trustworthy, non-judgmental, empathetic, and respectful (Davies & Gibbs, 2011). Other important considerations include the mentor's ability to give meaningful feedback and challenge when appropriate, promote self-reflection, and be an exemplary role model (Cottingham, DiBartolo, Battistoni, & Brown, 2011; Davies & Gibbs, 2011). Successful mentors implement specific practices such as giving challenging and focused assignments, providing exemplary leadership, acting as a role model, and using encouragement and praise (Haliru & Kabir, 2011).

Mentor behavior is critical because mentee outcomes are likely to be a direct result of the mentorship relationship (Allen & Eby, 2003). Productive mentorship relationships occur when a new teacher's beliefs and understandings are perceived as being appreciated and considered by their mentor. Moreover, a mentor must understand that a mentee's needs may be different then his/her own, and he/she must be aware of and consider gender and cultural issues (Abell, Dillon, Hopkins, McInerney, & O'Brien, 1995; Ragins, 1997). Professional development programs need

to incorporate skills and activities that will prepare mentors to be successful and aligned to meet school divisions' expected mentorship outcomes.

Effective mentorship programs should be developed as a purposeful process through effective systems design. Allen, Eby, and Lentz (2006) found that training alone was not enough to determine mentorship effectiveness, but that the entire mentorship program had to be high quality. They recommended that the outcomes of the mentorship experience should be met through conceptual and theoretical work by examining the process that links a formal design with successful outcomes. Joyce and Showers (2003) advocated that training must allow the mentor to develop knowledge and understanding of concepts and strategies and to demonstrate and practice skills with their peers. Using these research-based practices in effective mentorship programs, the remainder of this paper describes the 6-step process of designing and implementing the mentor training curriculum, reflecting upon the outcomes, and setting follow-up goals for this professional development.

Step 1: Program Design – Partnership and Alignment

The mentor training curriculum was grounded in the work of a long-standing regional partnership of four higher education institutions (IHEs) and seven PreK-12 school divisions. Based on a growing focus on redesigning the connection between teacher education coursework in colleges and universities and PreK-12 field experiences where cooperating teachers assist pre-service teachers to successfully accomplish complex teaching practices (Zeichner, 2010), this partnership helps develop *clinical faculty* (CF) – teachers who are trained through comprehensive programs to mentor student teachers (Childre & Van Rie, 2015; Paulsen, DaFonte, & Barton-Arwood, 2015). CF develop knowledge and skills related to adult learners, observation, and conferencing so that they could better support student teachers in their

classrooms. Therefore, as mentors for pre-service teachers, CF have already been vetted through their schools and partner IHEs to be trained and work effectively with mentees. Based on the existing CF program, school divisions and IHEs identified the capacity to extend mentoring from supporting student teachers to supporting beginning teachers.

Because the intended audience was practitioners, the program design needed to align with school district outcomes. According to Patton (2008), programs will only be evaluated as effective if they are deemed to be useful by their intended users. Therefore, the end-users must be clearly identified and feel ownership for the process. Given that multiple stakeholder input is a best practices approach to determine the variables that need to be considered for planning, revising or evaluating curriculum outcomes (Engel, 2009), the curriculum used multiple stakeholder perspectives, including both PreK-12 and IHE developers, to strengthen the program. The curriculum development was based on the precept that it had to meet school division needs; therefore, a needs assessment completed by school divisions was analyzed. Self-efficacy and an increased sense of mentoring effectiveness as a result of the program were measured through a pre- and post-survey of participants. Finally, to assess the program, expected outcomes and outcome indicators were identified (Patton, 2008; Reisman, Gienapp, & Stachnowiak, 2007), including identifying differences between student teachers and beginning teachers, developing strong mentoring relationships, having effective mentoring conversations, and implementing instructional coaching.

Step 2: Program Development – Needs Assessment and Steering Committee

A qualitative, open-ended needs assessment was sent as an email to central office administrators at the seven partner school divisions. The needs assessment gathered responses to the following questions from the partnership schools:

a) What is the current mentor program for new teachers in your division?
b) What do you like about your current program?
c) What do you dislike about your current program?
d) What would you like to see happen in a new mentor teacher program to use in your division?
e) What are the critical shortage teaching areas for your division?

The partnership's central office contact from each division responded to the open-ended questions via email. Responses from all seven school divisions were compiled and evaluated for consistent themes, as well as for distinct differences. These themes and differences shaped the development of the mentor training curriculum so that it reflected the particular needs of the teachers who would be attending the workshop. Results of the needs assessment showed that all seven of the school divisions assigned an experienced or veteran teacher to mentor a new teacher. In four of the seven school divisions, assigned mentors attended orientation or training meetings annually at the beginning of the school year. In the other divisions, mentors were teachers chosen because they previously participated in a professional development program where listening or coaching skills were emphasized and/or because they were experienced teachers in the same content area as the new teacher. School division administrators indicated that reviewing data and feedback from mentors and mentees, as well as providing training and resources for the mentees, were successful components of their current mentor program. All divisions pointed out that due to limited staffing and budget, it was challenging to provide the supports and mentor training that would meet their goals for developing new teachers. Five of the seven school divisions indicated that additional mentor teacher training would be helpful for their division, and the other two divisions indicated that a follow-up program after the first year

would be helpful if they had the resources. There was agreement that a mentorship program should expand beyond the mentees' first year. The primary critical teaching shortage areas in all school divisions were special education, math, and science teachers.

Stakeholders from IHEs and school divisions worked together as a steering committee to design a workshop curriculum based on the needs assessment findings. It was determined that the purpose of the workshop was to augment the current division-wide mentoring programs, rather than replace them. Over a period of seven months, the committee met five times for a total of about 12 hours as a full group to plan the development of the curriculum. The group created a shared vision for the project including shared goals, learning objectives, and the outline for the curriculum. Decisions about the curriculum were made through discussion and group consensus. The IHE committee members recognized that the school-based members were both stakeholders and customers as defined by Douglas (2011) in that they are not only affected by the outcome of the product, but their teachers were also the recipients of the service.

Based on the needs findings and the current research on mentorship, steering committee members developed a framework for the curriculum. A two-day workshop was developed so that it aligned with the current partnership practice for CF training. The steering committee identified the topics to be covered: the new teacher experience, mentoring relationships, mentoring conversations, coaching strategies, developing data-driven conversations, feedback, video observation and coaching, and sustaining the relationship.

Step 3: Program Process – Participants and Evaluations

The curriculum of the workshop was designed to provide opportunities to enhance mentoring skills with active CF who were already deemed effective mentors in their school

divisions. Requests for nominations to participate in the initial workshop were sent out to school divisions where teachers with active CF status were currently teaching. Participants had to be approved by both their school principal and a central office designee. Criteria for selection included active CF status, a demonstrated desire to mentor colleagues, effective communication, strong human relationship skills, strong organizational skills, and skills in reflective practice. Additionally, we requested that some of the nominees' assignments reflect the critical shortage areas identified by the school divisions.

Based on nomination responses, 60 active CF members agreed to participate. These participants included 31 PreK-5th grade teachers, eight middle school math, science, language arts, and social studies teachers, 13 high school teachers in social studies, English, math, and Spanish, and seven K-12 specialty teachers including physical and health education, instrumental music, special education, and literacy intervention. Despite the school divisions' indications of critical shortage areas in the needs assessment, only one special education teacher was identified to attend the pilot, whereas nine of 60 participants (15%) were math and science teachers.

These participants completed a pre- and post-workshop survey on self-efficacy and mentor effectiveness and submitted evaluations of the workshop. The surveys were sent with a *Qualtrics* link via email, and the workshop evaluations were completed during days one and two of the workshop. The self-efficacy inventory used was the *Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale,* which had 24 items across three factors – efficacy in student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management. Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001) provided evidence of construct validity and reported a reliability coefficient of 0.94. The *Mentorship Effectiveness Scale* used 12 items based on characteristics exhibited by effective mentors.

All committee members facilitated the two-day workshop. At the end of each day, participants completed anonymous evaluations that separately assessed the morning and afternoon sessions. A final reflection provided information that summarized the participants' overall learning, their critique of the structure of the workshop, and goals and action planning, as well as questions for their administrators. The results of these evaluations were used to inform decisions for revising the curriculum.

Step 4: Program Results – Efficacy and Reflections

According to Darling-Hammond (2006), to make sense of findings when assessing program outcomes, multiple measures and aggregated data should be used to examine trends and allow a comprehensive view. Evaluative data from the initial workshop enabled the committee to make revisions and shape plans for the future of this project. The following section describes the results of data collected to inform curricular revision, as well as the reflection data that describes program outcomes.

Self-Efficacy and Mentor Survey

The curriculum was developed with the belief that mentors who attended the workshop would have increased teacher self-efficacy and/or an increased sense of mentoring effectiveness, which was measured through a pre- and post-survey. Participants completed a self-efficacy survey prior to and immediately after the workshop. Survey questions reflected their beliefs about their impact on children's learning and their beliefs about their ability to mentor a beginning teacher. The scale for each item ranged from 1 to 5. For all items reflecting participants' ability to impact children's learning, the average scores ranged from 3.8 (*How much can you assist families in helping their children do well in school?)* to 4.9 (*To what extent can*

you make your expectations clear about student behavior?). The average scores for items related to mentoring new teachers were slightly less, with a range from 3.5 (*I feel that I can challenge the teachers I mentor to extend their abilities.*) to 4.0 (*I feel that I can demonstrate professional integrity to the teachers I mentor.*)

Self-Efficacy (SE) scores were summed over the 24 items. Each item had a 1-5 scale so totals could range from 24-120. A *t*-test was used to determine significant changes from pre- to post-test. At pre-test, the SE average was 103.25 (*n*=51, actual range 84-119); the mean rose slightly at post-test to 106.47 (*n*=36, actual range 90-120). The changes were not significant. Items related to mentoring were then analyzed; the 12 mentor items were totaled with possible composite score ranges from 12-60. The mean rose slightly from pre-test to post-test, from 44.88 (*n*=51 with scores ranging from 34-48) to 46.08 (*n*=36, ranges of scores 38-48). A *t*-test indicated that the difference between groups was not significant.

The workshop was evaluated on a 1-5 scale in terms of overall process and for each session. The average score for day one process was 4.53 (*n*=60) and day two process was 4.64 (*n*=55). The ratings were negatively skewed with no process ratings of "1" or "2" given by participants for either day. Qualitative comments from evaluations were reviewed by the steering committee to revise and implement the curriculum. The summative reflection data discussed in the next section was used to evaluate if outcomes were being met.

Curriculum Reflections

During the pilot workshop, participants were asked to evaluate each session and provide a summative final reflection. Comments were anonymous and aggregated across three categories –

elementary, middle, and high school. Participants responded to six prompts on the final reflection. Findings presented here will focus on the italicized prompts below:

- *Three important ideas I learned during the two days*
- Two things that facilitated my learning
- *One thing I plan to do with this information*
- Resources or support that would help me be an effective mentor
- *I would personally like to accomplish the following by the end of next school year*
- Questions I have for my administrator to become an effective mentor

The final reflection was completed by all 60 participants (36 elementary teachers, 11 middle teachers and 13 secondary teachers).

Important ideas learned. The workshop was designed to present a number of concepts pertinent to being an effective mentor. From the participants' perspectives, four concepts emerged as most important to them. These included types of feedback, approaches to mentoring, the role of personality in communicating with others, and the difference between coaching and mentoring.

Hattie's (2007) definition of four types of feedback was captured as one of the most important ideas learned from the workshop by 88.3% of respondents: 48% indicating it was the most important idea. Rich descriptions of why this was important were not evident in most responses; however, 22% of participants indicated feedback needs to be specific, timely, and constructive, and another 10% identified praise as an ineffective form of feedback, with one response acknowledging, "Praise by itself is pointless." Additionally, information on the approaches to mentoring, including the direct approach, collaborative approach, and reflective

approach, was identified as a top three topic of importance in 38% of responses. Although only two respondents listed it first, 14 comments had approaches to mentoring listed as the second item. No one provided additional information other than just listing it.

Personality was covered as a topic through a brief personality survey to create awareness of how people's personalities can impact relationships. Over 25% of the participants listed this exercise as important for their learning. One respondent wrote, "[I learned] my personality traits and how I can better build relationships being more aware, how to approach conversations with my mentee that may be difficult." Another stated, "[I learned to be] thinking about personality types when dealing with my peers." A third comment was, "[I learned] differences in personality types and how these can prove to be obstacles."

Goal-orientation. When participants responded to the prompt *I would personally like to accomplish the following by the end of next school year,* two themes emerged. Their comments could be grouped as either specific or global goal-orientation. About half of the participants (49%) identified specific actions that could be measured or observed, which fell into five categories:

- Giving good feedback
- Developing a survival guide for new teachers
- Observing their mentee's teaching
- Creating a school or division mentoring program
- Using video to capture teaching episodes

Global goals from 51% of participants were general statements of what they hoped to accomplish. Five mentors specifically included retention goals for their mentees to return to their

school division in Year 2. The following sample responses from the reflection suggested mentors wanted to be successful ("I would like to be a mentor/coach that anyone would approach regardless of 'new teacher' status") and to develop strong relationships with their mentees ("Have a successful relationship with a new teacher in a mentor role").

When given the prompt - *One thing I plan to do with this information* - participants identified concrete, specific actions they planned to take. Feedback continued to be a focus of many participants with responses such as "Improve types of feedback I give. Make sure it is meaningful and has the right purpose" and "Provide better feedback. Moving my feedback to the self-regulation stage but recognizing that sometimes it needs to be task-oriented." Five participants focused on the personality activity stating, "Use the animal personality survey to help me know how to approach my mentee and use their strengths." A large number of responses related to advocating for mentoring within participants' schools and school divisions. One participant wrote, "Go to county officials and ask them to put a structured Mentor-Mentee program in place. Help us make this happen."

Step 5: Program Reflection – Explanation of Findings

The mentor curriculum was designed to enhance the knowledge and skills of CF as they move into the role of mentor for new teachers. Overall, outcomes for the curriculum including understanding beginning teacher needs, developing strong mentoring relationships, having effective mentoring conversations, and instructional coaching were met based on reflection data. Whereas the efficacy survey results indicated that the participants did not have an increase in either their self-efficacy or mentorship efficacy, it made sense that efficacy would not necessarily increase. The participants were already identified by their school division as expert teachers and

experienced mentors. They came to the training with strong skills and two days of content and practice would likely not change their sense of efficacy.

Interestingly, feedback was identified as a powerful learning idea and a plan of action. This was a surprising finding from effective, veteran teachers; feedback has undoubtedly been part of their skill set for years. While research on feedback in terms of amount, timing, and mode has been available to teachers since the mid-1980s (Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001), the research on types of feedback (task, process, self-regulation, and self) included in the curriculum is relatively new to education (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This was likely new information for participants and therefore salient.

The topic of mentoring approaches was clearly a strong learning point for participants. Marzano et al. (1992) describes the differences between declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge, and Knight (2013) makes the case that procedural knowledge is powerful because it is what we *do*, not what we *know*. Perhaps, the mentoring approaches were identified as important learning ideas because a scenario activity tied to mentoring approaches required participants to actually use/*do* the various approaches. One could argue that this strategy moved the participants into more complex cognitive thinking, using either Bloom's taxonomy or the SOLO taxonomy.

Participants appreciated the purpose of a personality survey in the workshop to illuminate how communication affects the relationship that develops between mentor and mentee. Business has long acknowledged the importance of mentoring new hires, and research in that field supports the idea that personality and communication are important factors in establishing productive relationships (Dougherty, Cheung, & Florea, 2008; Gibson, 2005; Rock & Garavan,

2006). Purposeful explicitness in the workshop might have helped participants understand how important it is to be aware of one's style of communication.

Mentors reflected on what they hoped to accomplish next school year and how they planned to use the information from the workshop. Given the current focus on developing SMART goals in education, it was surprising that over half of the participants wrote global goals for the next school year. However, some research supports our finding that teachers write global rather than specific goals for themselves (Erffmeyer & Martray, 1990; Hughes, 1995). It may also be explained by the timing of the workshop over the summer; therefore, considering accomplishments for the end of the next school year seemed too distant. However, when asked how they planned to use the information, immediacy was more tangible.

Step 6: Program Review and Future Goals

Members of the steering committee met to debrief about the workshop experience. When not presenting or facilitating, we had been tasked with keeping personal notes about the content and processes used during each day. We shared our observations and comments, noting similarities among the committee members' perspectives. These insights were used to modify the curriculum. In some cases, the recommended allotted time was adjusted, either increasing or decreasing the amount of time for a topic. It was evident from the steering committee's notes that deeper explanations of and practice with the types of feedback would be necessary the next time the curriculum was used. Decisions to use hands-on activities and participant interaction were validated from observations the steering committee members made during the workshop. Even comments about the physical space being inadequate were noted so that they could be incorporated in the curriculum for use at future times.

The workshop was well received by the participants and local school divisions. The school divisions were given a copy of the curriculum, which included the two-day structure, activities, and supporting materials. They can adapt the curriculum to fit their specific needs as they offer support to beginning teachers through mentoring. In addition, the partnership among the IHEs and school divisions decided that one clinical faculty training each year would use the pre-service curriculum and one training would use the mentor training curriculum. School divisions will have a consistent mechanism to develop both pre-service mentoring and beginning teachers mentoring. Both are necessary. The four IHEs routinely have a large number of student teachers each year who need to be placed in the area. Mentors for beginning teachers are also necessary as a significant number of current teachers approach retirement. Each time the curriculum is used, ongoing evaluations will be performed as part of the utilization-focused evaluation process (Patton, 2008). A primary future goal is to share the curriculum with other school divisions to adopt and adapt it to meet their needs. Furthermore, based on the steering committee's feedback, a new training for supporting beginning teachers into their second year was designed and implemented through another VDOE grant. It is hoped that in the future, the trainings can come full circle by developing a curriculum to build the skills of teachers working with pre-service teachers in early field experiences prior to student teaching.

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