

# Mentor Partnerships

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**Abstract:** *This qualitative research study seeks to understand the newly developed partnership program between a Teacher Education Department at a public Hispanic Serving Institution and a rural public school district in the same area. It focused mainly on the school district mentor teachers' experiences and interexchange with preservice teachers from the university. This study explored the following questions; How can we improve preservice teachers mentoring experience? and How do mentor teachers' benefit from their interexchange with preservice teachers? The findings altered the day-to-day activities to strengthen the partnership design.*

**Key Words:** Mentor teachers, school partnerships, teacher education, preservice teachers, field experiences

This qualitative research took place in a southwest rural community of Colorado and consists of a partnership between a local public university and a neighboring public school district. The partnership was developed for mutually benefitting reasons. For the university, the school district provided rich experiences for teacher education candidates. The school district is located in an impoverished rural area that serves a disproportionately high number of Hispanic and English Language Learners. The school district benefited from this partnership by having first access to quality teachers and extra resources in their classrooms. To build this positive relationship with the university, the school district picked up the cost of transporting the preservice teachers from the university to their schools. This research focused mainly on the school district mentor teachers' experiences and interexchange with preservice teachers from the university. The main research questions explored are: How can we improve the preservice teachers mentoring experience? And How do mentor teachers' benefit from their interexchange with preservice teachers?

The theoretical frame consists of the importance of community based participatory experiences along with pedagogical practices that emphasize reflection and culturally relevant pedagogy. Ken Zeichner (2010) argues for the development of Hybrid Spaces that foster partnerships among teacher education programs at universities and local public school districts. Zeichner (2010) argues that these partnerships democratize teacher education. Another component of the theoretical frame are that reflective practices are the foundational tools for preservice teachers to grow (Dewey, 1933; Zeichner & Liston 1996) and advance democratic spaces (Zeichner, 2010; Zeichner, Payne, & Brayko, 2015). The main theoretical frame draws on High Impact Practices as defined by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (2020).

### ***HIGH IMPACT PRACTICES-COMMUNITY BASED PARTNERSHIPS***

The premise of this research is based on the importance of partnerships among teacher education faculty and public schools teachers. The “High Impact Practices” implemented or utilized are collaborative assignments and projects, service learning and community-based learning. The pre-service teachers engaged in collaborative assignments and projects that sought to help them “learn to work and solve problems in the company of others and sharpen their [individual] understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others, especially those with different backgrounds and life experiences” (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2020). The service learning and community-based learning provided “direct experience with issues they are studying in the curriculum and with ongoing efforts to analyze and solve problems in the community” (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2020). The foundational premise is that this partnership design provided the pre-service teachers an opportunity “to both apply what they are learning in real-world settings and reflect in a classroom setting on their service experiences” (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2020).

Another “High Impact Practice” that the preservice teachers engaged in for this research was creating learning Communities. Learning communities according to the Association of American Colleges & Universities (2020) refers to students and faculty working closely together linking theory to practice. On a weekly basis, the preservice teachers were engaged in the university classrooms with faculty exploring theories. On another full day immersed in the field site, they practiced and implemented the creative and engaging practices they had learned. In addition, the faculty members supervised the preservice teachers in the classroom and the field. They used oral communication, information literacy, and ethical inquiry (ensuring that content and pedagogy are culturally responsive to the needs of the community). These high impact practices are the essence of a strategic partnership. It is the beginning of a mutually benefitting community project.

## **METHODS**

This qualitative research study sought to check the progress of the partnership between the university and the school district. The research questions: How can we improve the preservice teachers mentoring experience?; and How do mentor teachers’ benefit from their interexchange with preservice teachers guided this study. The data collection in the form of a focus group discussions (Appendix A) took place at the end of the fall, 2019 semester. Thirteen of the fourteen mentor teachers who were paired with preservice teachers participated in responding to their experiences and interexchange with their pre-service teachers.

### ***RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS***

Eleven out of the fourteen mentor teachers from the partnering public school district participated in the focus group discussions. Two participants were unable to attend the focus group discussion and sent in detailed email responses. These thirteen mentor teacher participants ranged in subject area concentrations. There were 9 elementary, 1 K-12 physical education, 1 science (high school), 1 English (high school) and 1 math (middle school). For the entire fall 2019 semester, the preservice teachers traveled to the school district for field experience hours on Tuesdays. They were paired with their mentor teachers from September 10, 2019 through December 13 2019. These field experiences consisted of culturally relevant practices and reflections on their relevance.

## FINDINGS

This study examined mentor teachers' experiences and benefits from their interexchange with preservice teachers? It focused on determining how to make the mentors-preservice teachers' experiences more effective and beneficial to both parties. The key findings indicate that pre-service teachers need to be proactively involved from day one and should be exposed to diverse experiences.

### *PROACTIVE*

Overall, the mentor teachers who participated in this study attest the need for preservice teachers to be proactively involved. According to the mentor teachers, some preservice teachers were timid and needed to be pushed to get involved, some jumped in and became actively involved in their classroom while some others sat back and watched. Some mentor teachers suggested that there is a need for a balance in the preservice teachers' involvement in their assigned classrooms; some on the contrary commented that some preservice teachers were not willing to jump in and get involved because they were being professional and respected the fact that the mentor teachers were in charge of their classrooms. One mentor teacher was quite blunt stating, "[Preservice teachers] need to have a personality". Another mentor teacher, described an ideal mentee stating, "He consistently jumped in to help students who were struggling with the day's lesson. The two lessons he taught were well planned, although I would have liked to have seen the plan in advance". This suggests that structure and time are issues of concern and challenge for both the preservice teachers and their mentors.

The topic of when preservice teachers should be proactive varied by subject and grade levels. For the only physical education mentor, there was an emphasis on students getting involved as soon as possible. The others could not reach a consensus about the appropriate time for preservice teachers' active involvement in their assigned classroom.

In general, all the mentors agreed that preservice teachers should just observe the first week, start to get involved in the second, and by the third week should be engaged with teaching. One mentor referred to this as, shining "more spotlight of the time" on the preservice teachers over time. Another mentor referred to it as, "More leeway in the beginning, then move into mini-lessons".

### *EXPOSURE TO DIVERSITY*

Every mentor teacher suggested that preservice teachers should gain diverse exposure during their field placement as much as possible. One mentor stated, "They should learn about language of area, monolingual students, Center statistics, more background on ELL, 'statistics, poverty rate-17,000 for a family of four and where the kids come from". Another mentor provided an example, "you wouldn't say why are you wearing that shirt-you wore it yesterday," which is an indication of the level of poverty in the area.

Another point of diversity suggested was for preservice teachers to see diverse styles of teaching different subjects (particularly for K-6 because they are departmentalized), for example, "if their mentor teacher is English, then they should observe a math". Exposure to different teaching styles was stressed, but the K-6 mentors were split on how to do this. For example, one mentor commented, "I think it is a good idea to expose preservice teachers] to different teachers, grade levels, and subjects, but this is also where the confusion/disjointedness is happening". The mentor went on to explain, "As a mentor teacher, it is confusing as to who our mentee is, what

their expectations are, and what we should expect of them when they are moving to different classrooms so often.” As we move ahead in this partnership these are areas to consider and learn how to balance.

### **MENTOR BENEFITS**

The second research question: How do mentor teachers’ benefit from their interexchange with preservice teachers delves into the benefits of the interexchange for the mentor teachers (question 7 in Appendix A)? Overall, the mentors enjoyed the experience and all thirteen stated that they would do it again. Their responses demonstrated how they benefitted from the experience. These responses included: “Learn more teaching someone else”, “re-evaluating yourself”, “Their questions help you rethink your own practices and reflect”, “enjoyed talking to young teachers...empowering”, “Nice to talk to them about education”, “Makes me reflect on myself”, “other people to encourage”, and “It’s great. It’s an experience [that] helps me look at [my] practice”. One mentor summarized the experience by stating, “It is helpful to explain, yes teaching is hard, but if you do this, that makes it easier”. Overall, the mentor teachers benefitted through reflecting deeper into their own practices and as one mentor commented, they “enjoyed talking about being a teacher [and] the realities of our profession”.

### **CONCLUSION**

The findings are clear that the partnership is effective and mutually benefitting to both the school district and the teacher education department, as perceived from the mentor teachers. That noted, it is also clear that it is essential to check in on partnership activities. All thirteen of the mentor teachers agreed to take on new preservice teachers and said they look forward to seeing a continued partnership.

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## **Appendix A**

### Focus Group Discussion Questions for Mentor Teachers

1. How was your overall experience mentoring the Adams senior block students?  
Specifically-Describe something that went well and/or that didn't go well
2. Are there certain skills/abilities you would want the preservice teacher to know before coming to Center? After being at Center?
3. Explain skills you think are important for your mentee's to develop during this field experience. Are there classroom tasks you would like them to take on? Specifically: Marking, walking kids in the hallway, lunch, ice-breakers...
4. How could this mentoring experience be improved? Specifically: Meeting times (pre-classes, after-classes, lunch time...), Additional meetings prior to observing, contact with ASU faculty, Additional resources
5. How can we better support you and/or prepare you for your mentee student?
6. Would you mentor the students again? Why? Why not?  
Specifically: Your time commitment v. compensation/rewards/benefit
7. How have you benefitted from this experience?
8. Any remaining thoughts/comments not addressed?