

The Identification and Selection of Mentor Teachers within a Professional Development School Partnership

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ABSTRACT: This case study examines how two Professional Development School partners, J.D. Lever Elementary School and the University of South Carolina Aiken, identify and ultimately select mentor teachers to work with teacher candidates. This article traces the evolution of this process, starting with selections premised mainly on established personal relationships. Realizing that shortcomings existed with this informal and unstructured selection, a more purposeful, targeted and collaborative model was designed to ensure constructive and sustained outcomes for both mentor teachers and teacher candidates.

Nine Essentials Addressed: Essential 2: A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community; Essential 4: A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants.

There presently exists a body of research that examines the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of Professional Development Schools (PDS) (Kolpin et al., 2015; Polly et al., 2015) as well as disparate configurations of PDS models (Bebas, 2016; Young et al., 2018). From classroom space to various forms of collaboration, a subset of this literature highlights select strategies that make PDS partnerships both unique and effective (Jones et al., 2016; Mark, 2017). Yet missing from the literature is a pivotal piece to any successful school-university PDS partnership: how mentor teachers are identified and subsequently selected. Simply, what is the criteria used to identify and select school-based mentor teachers? This brief article will showcase the decade-long PDS partnership between J. D. Lever Elementary School and the School of Education at the University of South Carolina Aiken by highlighting the evolution of how mentor teachers were—and currently are—identified and selected to work with our teacher candidates for practicum-based, pre-internship field experiences.

The Identification and Selection of Mentor Teachers

The identification and selection of a quality mentor teacher is the most critical component in ensuring a successful clinical experience for our teacher candidates. This importance is reflected in the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) indicator 2.2 which emphasizes the importance of quality mentor teachers:

Partners co-select, prepare, evaluate, support, and retain high-quality clinical educators, both provider- and school-based, who demonstrate a positive impact on candidates' development and P-12 student learning and development. In collaboration with their partners, providers use multiple indicators and appropriate technology-based applications to establish, maintain, and refine criteria for selection, professional development, performance evaluation, continuous improvement, and retention of clinical educators in all clinical placement settings. (CAEP, 2013)

Since the inception of our PDS partnership with J. D. Lever Elementary School over a decade ago, we have sought two levels or tiers of assistance from our mentor teachers. Mentor teachers working with freshman and sophomore-level teacher candidates are asked to provide structured access to their classrooms. Mentoring is informal, consisting mainly of providing insight and context when warranted. Mentor teachers working with junior and senior-level teacher candidates assume a larger, more structured and concerted role. They are expected to actively mentor and coach their assigned teacher candidate, provide guidance and support in lesson planning, facilitate whole instruction opportunities, provide substantive verbal and written feedback on a regular basis, and allow university-based teacher educators access to their classrooms to evaluate the assigned teacher candidate's instructional ability.

During the first year or two of our partnership with J. D. Lever Elementary, we identified and selected mentor teachers, not premised on the CAEP standards outlined above. We simply

sought assistance from teachers we personally knew who possessed high quality reputations and positive working relationships with students, teachers, and administrators. There was no established process to systematically identify possible mentor teachers. This casual, collegial, and admittedly unstructured process initially “worked” as virtually everyone we approached agreed to serve as a mentor teacher. We soon realized that although we personally knew our mentor teachers, we had limited knowledge of their teaching styles and mentoring skills.

To provide a much-needed measure of assurance in identifying and selecting possible mentor teachers, we progressed to implementing two structures of support: one professional, the other philosophical. Before we personally reached out to potential mentor teachers, we contacted the building principal to provide a list of whom he/she thought would be exemplary (and willing). This gave us an additional reference point in identifying possible mentor teachers. We also worked to identify desirable personal and professional characteristics that defined an effective mentor and, (hopefully) concomitantly, effective mentoring. We invested significant time building and maintaining positive, collegial relationships with our partnering teachers, knowing that there were varying levels of mentoring experience. With the principal’s suggested list of potential mentor teachers in hand, we sought to identify and ultimately select mentor teachers who possessed and demonstrated the following traits: strong interpersonal and communication skills; exceptional organizational and time management acumen; sound pedagogical and content knowledge; ability to inspire, support, and motivate others, and, lastly, an unwavering commitment to excellence in teaching.

Premised on instructional observations by university faculty coupled with the feedback provided by the first few cohorts of teacher candidates, it became clear early on that many, but not all, in our mentor teacher pool exhibited the pedagogical and/or structural tools needed to support teacher candidate success. A few struggled with effective mentoring. Over time, some mentor teachers who initially struggled were able to gain the requisite skills and dispositions to indeed become effective mentors. Others realized this was not their area of strength and opted not to continue in this role. Though personally uncomfortable, we have periodically had to “release” a handful of mentor teachers. In doing so, we put our personal relationships aside while remaining steadfast in our commitment to placing our teacher candidates with the most caring and capable mentor teachers. In our quest to provide optimal experiences, we often returned to the same mentor teachers each semester.

Through the years, we have admittedly had to compromise when making select teacher candidate placements. Ideally, we strive to make one-to-one placements, with one mentor teacher working with one teacher candidate. When the number of teacher candidates in each semester exceeded the number of identified and selected mentor teachers, we reached out to teachers who were accessible and had potential for mentorship,

but were not necessarily exemplary at the time. In such situations, we often placed our most capable teacher candidates (e.g., mature, confident, excellent written and communication skills, sound lesson design and delivery) with these aspiring mentor teachers. In some cases, however, we believed a structural change was best and opted to place two teacher candidates with a single exemplar mentor teacher. Both scenarios are admittedly not ideal. Yet we continually weighed the needs of the university with the dynamics of our PDS partner.

Our selection process has also progressed to incorporate formal feedback from our teacher candidates. At the end of each semester, teacher candidates are asked to complete a brief survey assessing the quality of the field experience provided by their mentor teacher. This survey allows our teacher candidates an opportunity to reflect upon their own mentored experiences as well as providing pivotal data in determining whether or not to continue partnering with select mentor teachers.

Conclusion

A cornerstone to providing teacher candidates with rich and rewarding field-based experiences is the identification and selection of mentor teachers. The Professional Development School partnership between J. D. Lever Elementary School and the University of South Carolina Aiken has strategically worked to implement concrete steps to assure that the most caring and competent mentor teachers are identified and ultimately selected to work with our teacher candidates. We continue to work with our J. D. Lever Elementary School partners to refine in-place processes that encourage, structure and sustain the professional growth of both our mentor teachers and teacher candidates alike. ^{SUP}

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