

# Peer Mentoring for Professional Growth and Sustainability: A Model for Support, Leadership, and Learning

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## Abstract

This study seeks to understand from the perspective of its participants the extent to which a year-long structured, state-level peer mentorship program for world language educators provides benefits, focusing on how involvement impacts their classroom practices and professional development. Research questions explore the specific advantages gained and the implications for future peer mentoring opportunities. Findings indicate perceived benefits range from reflective teaching, collaboration, and professional growth, suggesting that structured peer mentoring can enhance communicative language teaching and may also support teacher retention efforts. The study highlights that professional development in the form of structured peer support can be valuable for teachers to cultivate effective practices and engagement within their professional community. Opportunities for further research related to its impact on mentors and mentees alike are described.

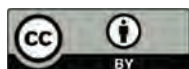
**Keywords:** peer mentoring; teacher leadership; teacher retention; teacher attrition

## Introduction

Many concerns have contributed to the call by some (e.g., Madel, 2020; Swanson, 2010) for the need for structured peer mentoring in the field of world language education. While formal mentoring experiences for language teachers exist in various forms (as described in detail by Delaney, 2012; Nguyen, 2017), they are traditionally concentrated during pre-service or teacher candidacy periods and, therefore, leave practicing teachers with little access to experienced con-

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tent-specific mentors. Chief among the concerns that have resulted in the aforementioned call are the current attrition trends for new language teachers, declining certification rates, and the ubiquity of non-communicative teaching practices. A failure to address these issues are likely to perpetuate a lack of confidence in the rightful place for world languages education in a holistic educational experience (e.g., Anderson, 2023; Lusin et al., 2023) and students' inability to attain functional proficiency before abandoning study (Commission on Language Learning, 2016, 2017; Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011; Wesely, 2010).

Language teacher retention in the field coupled with declining certification rates have resulted in a critical shortage of world language teachers in the United States (ACTFL, 2017; Sutcher, et al., 2016; Swanson & Mason, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Indeed, an analysis by Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) showed that language teachers have among the highest turnover rates of all subject areas. Other researchers (e.g., Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004) have indicated that nearly half of new teachers abandon the profession within just five years. This reality becomes especially concerning considering the national certification trends that show a 44% decrease of world language education degrees conferred from 2009 to 2019 (Rodriguez & King, 2020, as cited by Madel, 2022). Kearney et al. (2018) summarized the world language teacher shortage issue as three interplaying metaphors: (1) an arid desert in which not enough teachers enter the profession; (2) a revolving door showing how too many of those who enter the profession leave too rapidly; and (3) a leaky bucket struggling to recruit new teachers at a pace equal to or greater than the pace at which they leave.

Local to the context of this study, Madel (2022) also showed that world-language specific certifications in Pennsylvania were down 65% from 2010 to 2020. This significant decrease in certifications explains, in part, why the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (2024) documented over 30% of school districts were currently expressing a staffing need associated with a world language certification at the time of their report. Moreover, a separate Pennsylvania-focused analysis (Fuller, 2022) found that, while staffing challenges exist in all subject areas, world languages were prominent among other critical areas such as special education and English Language Learning.

While peer mentoring has been shown to support efforts to reduce teacher attrition (Delaney, 2012; Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004), there is also reason to believe that teacher leaders can play an important role in supporting the pedagogical development for new and experienced teachers alike. Madel (2020; 2022) attributed the omnipresence of underwhelmingly communicative language teaching practices (as illustrated by Burk, 2011; 2014) to a concert of influences on how a language teacher approaches the act of instruction. Namely, there is a common silo or isolated experience in many teachers' professional context (Dussault et al., 1997; Dodor et al., 2010; Ostovar-Nameghi & Sheikahmadi, 2016), especially for novice teachers (Kardos & Johnson, 2007). This sense of isolation is then coupled with one's own natural development of – and subsequent reliance on – pedagogical influences that have been shown to relate statistically with less-than-communicative teaching practices (Madel, 2020), including the reliance on textbooks, a perception of how the teacher learned languages themselves, and accuracy-focused assessments.

On the contrary, Madel (2020) also showed that there was a common thread throughout the influences on teaching practices that associated with an increase in a more communicative value: the experienced teacher leader. Indeed, according to the analysis of his findings, the teacher leader may be best poised to disrupt the

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cyclical transfer of non-communicative pedagogical language teaching beliefs and practices by actively demonstrating their leadership and expertise in a variety of fora. These teacher leadership efforts include interpreting and sharing SLA research for a teacher audience, participating in online professional learning networks, contributing to formal world language-focused professional learning events, and modeling how to view their classroom as a laboratory for continued growth and practice-oriented experimentation.

For the reasons discussed above, the Pennsylvania State Modern Language Association (PSMLA) developed a peer mentoring program that welcomed an inaugural cohort of mentors and mentees during the 2022-23 school year. Given the relative lack of empirical explorations of structured, world-language specific peer mentorship experiences (as described in the review of literature below), participants also agreed to contribute to a corresponding study to better understand how – if at all – mentorship programs such as PSMLA’s can benefit new and experienced teachers. Specifically, this study sought to explore the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent, if any, did participation in the PSMLA Peer Mentoring Program benefit mentors and mentees?

RQ2: How could the experience of mentors and mentees participating in a structured, year-long peer mentorship program be improved?

These questions combine to provide the field generally, or interested associations and institutions more specifically, a potential guide that may be used to better inform the development of a structured support system that can best meet the needs of its participants.

## **Literature Review**

### **Mentoring in the World Languages Context**

Delaney (2012) and Nguyen (2017) described various approaches to mentoring in the context of language education in the United States and Asia respectively, most of which occur during the pre-service or teaching credentialing stages. While not directly related to the structure and format of the mentoring experience explored in this study, mentor perspectives during the student teacher experience can provide insight on the needs of novice practicing teachers for further practice-related guidance. For example, Moser et al. (2019) shared the frustrations and concerns of cooperating teachers as they related to teacher candidates’ inability to make the target language comprehensible during instruction, limited use of high leverage teaching practices (Glisan & Donato, 2017; 2021), and reliance on textbooks to provide an instructional script.

The approach to mentorship used to facilitate the focus of inquiry for this study, though, is a form of mentorship for practicing educators that Wegner (1998) referred to as “communities of practice.” In other words, “a group of educators who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to improve it through regular interaction” (Delaney, 2012, p. S191). While there is no shortage of scholarly attention focusing on this mentorship structure in the general education context, there have been considerably fewer inquiries within the teaching context of world languages in the United States. Two primary studies focusing on the experience of participants in mentorships for practicing language teachers differ on the structure and context of the relationship. That is, informal (Du & Wang, 2017) and formal (Kissau & King, 2015).

Du and Wang (2017) explored the experience of 15 new university-level language teachers in the context of informal mentoring, noting that other scholars

had found that this mentorship dynamic may be just as effective and satisfying for new teachers than its more structured counterpart (Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Desimone et al., 2014; James et al., 2015). The authors described this context for mentoring as one in which “new teachers interact informally and spontaneously with various school actors, providing them with exposure to a broad spectrum of learning experiences that may or may not align with institutional goals” (Du & Wang, 2017, p. 310). Their study yielded a variety of factors that facilitated the emergence of informal mentoring experiences. Namely, opportunities for organic social interactions, time, organizational contexts, and other individual characteristics. They further noted, however, that this mentoring dynamic primarily resulted in information seeking regarding topics of pedagogy, content knowledge, students, and organization and was limited in interaction and follow-up activities. Perhaps, for this reason, Madel (2020) found no statistically significant correlation between informal peer-to-peer collaboration and a value for communicative language teaching practices.

Since some (e.g., Du & Wang, 2017; Madel, 2020; Tourigny & Pulich, 2005) have reported that information seeking alone may be insufficient to induce real pedagogical development, other mentorship relationships (like the focus of the current study) are cultivated within a more structured environment, providing regular opportunities for collaboration and reflection in addition to information sharing. In the case of Kissau and King’s (2015) study, 27 pairs were created primarily in conjunction with a graduate program for practicing educators serving as mentors and the required second language methodology course for credentialization participating as mentees. The structure of interactions consisted of a pre-observation conference, one to two teaching observations of the mentee in practice, a post observation conference, and weekly communication throughout the semester. Their study confirmed characteristics of effective mentors (e.g., supportive, trustworthy, effective communicators, non-judgmental) and corroborated successful partnership dynamics. Namely, participants communicated that they especially benefited from sharing the same content area specialization. Lastly, while it came as little surprise that mentees benefit from such an experience, the researchers also reported that mentors also profited through gains expressed in pedagogical confidence and leadership skills, the latter believed by some (Grahn, 2018; Levin & Schrum, 2017) to also support retention efforts.

### **PSMLA Peer Mentoring Program**

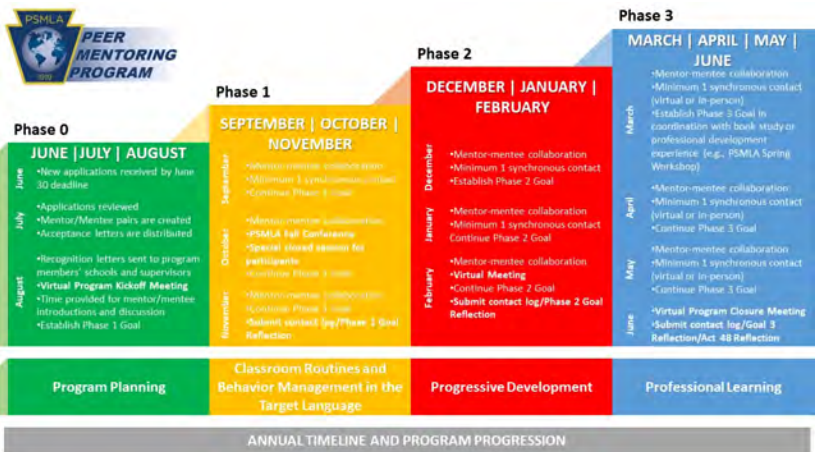
Given the distinction previously described between informal and formal mentoring structures, the current study’s participants describe their perspectives relative to a programmatic experience that more closely aligns with the latter description. The PSMLA Peer Mentoring Program was strategically designed during a two-year period that consisted of field research and development before its approval for implementation thereafter (see Madel, 2022). According to PSMLA (n.d.), the program communicates the following goals for participants: (1) support novice world language teachers in the development of successful communicative language teaching practices; (2) support teacher retention efforts; (3) recognize and elevate the presence of world language teacher leaders; and (4) introduce novice world language teachers to PSMLA and encourage a continued relationship with the organization, its leadership, and professional learning community.

Upon receiving applications for mentors and mentees, pairs for the year-long program are created that prioritize to the extent possible matching mentees’

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expressed needs with mentors expressed pedagogical styles and expertise, target languages, teaching contexts (i.e., suburban vs. urban, high school vs. middle school, etc.), and physical proximity. After communicating the acceptance into the program, mentors and mentees are encouraged to make an initial contact prior to the first virtual program meeting at the end of August. During this first meeting, participants are briefed on the program’s goals, the scholarly and theoretical foundations of the program that support its mission, and an overview of the program structure and expectations. The mentoring program is divided into three phases during which time participants are expected to maintain at least monthly synchronous contact (via phone, videoconference, in-person, etc.). See Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
*The Annual Timeline and Program Progression of the PSMLA Peer Mentoring Program (PSMLA, n.d.)*



**Phase 1**  
At the end of the initial program kickoff meeting, mentorship pairs breakout to co-construct their first SMART goals (see Brown et al., 2016). The first phase of the program encourages mentees to focus specifically on classroom routines and behavior management in the target language based on the expressed needs for such during the program research phase (Madel, 2022) and others (e.g., Ahnell, 2024; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017) that have acknowledged the relationship between classroom management efficacy and teacher attrition. The SMART goal template encourages mentees to identify observable and measurable progress targets and to anticipate challenges and realistic timeframes for success. Pairs then check in synchronously at least once during October and November regarding the stated goal and to address other needs as communicated by the mentee. During this first phase, PSMLA traditionally hosts its annual conference at which time participants are expected to attend being that it is the only instance built into the program for participants to gather in person.

**Phase 2**  
After reflecting on the first phase’s SMART goal, the second phase of the PSMLA Peer Mentoring Program begins in December. This phase encourages mentees to focus on progressive development. Progressive development is defined and communicated to participants as the opportunity to focus on any aspect

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of their practice that promotes professional growth as communicative language teachers. If a mentee determined that the first phase goal was not sufficiently successful, they would have the opportunity to rework or re-attempt the goal to the extent they found it attainable and/or valuable. In the case of mentees who successfully completed their first phase goal, they are encouraged to shift their focus to an area of their practice that they consider relevant and important to their growth. Again, participants complete a SMART goal to define their intention, success criteria, and deconstructed timelines among other ideas, and check in at least monthly with their mentors. In February, a virtual meeting is held to provide a shared community learning experience based on feedback and needs expressed during the program gathering at the Fall conference. This meeting also serves as an opportunity to describe the intention for the final program phase and to provide pairs time to reflect together on the Phase 2 goal and establish intentions for the last phase of the program.

### ***Phase 3***

After participants reflect on their attainment of the second phase's SMART Goal, pairs shift their attention in the final phase of the program toward an opportunity for professional learning with their partners. This phase is intended to ingratiate new teachers in the experience of participating in professional learning communities. As such, they are encouraged to engage in a shared learning experience such as attend a local conference or workshop together, listen and reflect together on a practice-oriented podcast, or conduct a small book study among other options. In fact, as an expressed benefit of the program, participants receive a copy of a text (Henshaw & Hawkins, 2022) that underscores the pedagogical foundations of the program and provides thoughtful and practical applications for new and experienced teachers alike with the intention of providing them the opportunity to read and learn together should they so choose in this final phase. Unique to this final phase, mentees develop a SMART goal after their learning experience that encourages them to experiment with a new idea, strategy, or approach that was explored in their community learning source. By June, mentees complete their final reflection, and all participants gather for a final virtual meeting to debrief the entire program experience and share takeaways and future intentions relative to professional growth.

## **Methods**

This IRB-approved study leveraged a qualitative phenomenological design (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016) to explore the experiences of both mentors and mentees in the PSMLA Peer Mentoring Program. This research design aligns with the previously cited authors' description a phenomenological study, which "attempts to understand people's perceptions and perspectives relative to a particular situation" (p. 255) To gather data, the researched used semi-structured interviews, a method chosen for its balance of structure and flexibility. In line with Brinkmann and Kvale's (2015) description, the present study's semi-structured interviews provided

a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as some suggested questions. Yet at the same time there [was] openness to changes of sequence and forms of the questions in order to follow up on the specific answers given and the stories told by the subjects. (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2105, p. 150)

This adaptability allowed the researchers to explore participants' experience in depth while ensuring key themes were addressed. Indeed, consistent with



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Leedy and Ormrod' (2016) guidance, this study relied exclusively on interviews with a small, purposefully selected sample of participants who were best suited to illuminate the phenomenon in question.

### Participants

A total of five participants from the PSMLA Peer Mentoring Program during the 2022-23 school year contributed to the current study. This group consisted of three mentors and two mentees who fully engaged in every aspect of the program and the research procedures detailed below. The three mentors included in this study represent 60% of all mentors who initially agreed to participate in the program. The mentees account for 40% of all mentees that accepted invitations to participate. Of note, three mentees who chose initially to join the peer mentoring program did not participate in this study due to a decision to abandon their teaching positions at some point between the beginning of the school year and the initiation of data collection by the researchers. Therefore, this report reflects a 100% participation rate among those who completed the entire mentoring program with the intention of continuing in the profession thereafter. Biodemographic information of all program participants was collected as part of initial acceptance into the PSMLA Peer Mentoring Program and is shown summarized in Table 1. This information was then shared with researchers for the purpose of the current study upon written approval and consent to participate.

**Table 1**

#### *Participant biodemographic information*

Participant ID	Role	Gender	Years of exp	Level of instruction	Target language	Instructional context*
1	Mentor	Female	23	School	French	Semi-rural
2	Mentor	Female	11	High School	Spanish	Suburban
3	Mentor	Female	10	High School	French	Suburban
4	Mentee	Male	3	High School	French	Urban
5	Mentee	Female	3	High School	French	Suburban*

\* Description of instructional context self-reported by each participant.

\*\* Title I refers to a 100% Federally funded supplemental education program that provides financial assistance to districts to improve educational opportunities for those considered educationally deprived (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.)

Participants in this study engaged fully in each of the three active program phases detailed in the previous section above. That is to say that mentees, with the support and guidance of their respective mentors, developed targeted goals during each phase focusing first on classroom routines in the target language, followed by a flexible goal more aligned to each mentee's specific needs, and culminating with setting an intentional goal to learn and experiment with new ideas alongside their mentor. This study's participants logged monthly synchronous meetings in accordance with the expectations of the program to check in and reflect on the expressed goals and to discuss other relevant topics of concern.

As communicated by program expectations, all mentors and mentees met together on three occasions during their involvement. First, all participants met virtually in August to be introduced to the program's leadership, to explore foundational research supporting the need for such a program, to brainstorm characteris-

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tics of effective mentors and mentees, and to orient themselves with the expectations of the program. This first meeting also provided time for mentor and mentee pairs to meet individually and to begin the development of their first goal. Next, program participants met in person during the organizing Association's annual conference in October. During this time, pairs attended sessions together, shared reflections, and had time to brainstorm the subsequent phase's intention. Lastly, all participants gathered virtually in February to preempt the final phase that focused on community-based professional learning. During this virtual meeting, an invited presenter (Hawkins, 2023) facilitated a 45-minute session that focused on a need expressed by participants during the October conference to further support the development of communicative teaching practices. Time was also provided during this session for pairs to break out and reflect on the previous goal and/or co-plan the final goal.

Researchers attended and observed the full program meetings as they occurred at the previously described tripartite intervals (i.e., August, October, February). They also had access to observe each pair's contact log, the SMART goal documents, and the mentees' reflection at the end of each phase. Together, this access provided relevant holistic context to interpret the study's qualitative data set. Upon completion of the program, participants were invited to schedule an approximately 30-minute semi structured virtual exit interview with the researchers to explore (1) their experience participating in the program; (2) their perceived benefits, if any; (3) the supports they received or wished they received; (4) suggestions for improvement; (5) the impact, if any, their participation had on their understanding and practice of communicative language teaching; and (6) the impact, if any, their participation had on their willingness or desire to remain in the profession. The researchers employed a strategy of simultaneous note taking, and audio recordings were used to later transcribe the interviews in full. Afterward, the transcriptions were used in concert with the researchers' notes to identify overarching themes and subthemes throughout the participants' responses, a qualitative process known as coding (Saldaña, 2016).

### **Positionality of the Researchers**

Both researchers involved with this study have extensive experience as classroom-based language educators and, thus, are versed with the challenges faced by practicing teachers and the need for a program such as the one described in the current study. The authors share a commitment and value for language learning generally and communicative language teaching theoretically as evidenced by the lead author's integral role in the development of the program that this study's participants experienced and the co-author's service as a university-level language teaching methodology course and overseer of student teaching field placements. As such, the researchers' positionalities are naturally rooted throughout the purpose, process, and outcomes of the present study and undoubtedly shaped the research questions, the data they bore, and their subsequent interpretation.

### **Findings**

The results of this study's two guiding research questions are described below as a direct result of the interviews conducted by both researchers in June 2023 at the end of a full year of participation in the PSMLA Peer Mentoring Program as described above. Results are organized and reported by research question.

#### **RQ1: To What Extent, if any, Did Participation in The PSMLA Peer**



## Mentoring Program Benefit Mentors and Mentees?

Reviewing responses from both mentors and mentees, participants communicated specific and tangible benefits from participating in the type of structured mentorship provided by a program like the PSMLA Peer Mentoring Program. The benefits can be categorized according to three broad themes that are described and developed in detail below: 1) Classroom practices and reflective teaching; 2) Collaboration and professional development; and 3) Support and encouragement.

### *Classroom Practices and Reflective Teaching*

The most obvious benefit according to participants was how the experience impacted both their professional practices in pursuit of effective communicative language teaching as well as how they reflected and interpreted such an enterprise. Given the explicit emphasis on target language use embedded into program phases (e.g., Phase 1) and professional learning experiences (e.g., Phase 3), it follows that mentors and mentees alike recounted how the program supported ways to use the target language in the classroom. In the case of one mentor, this program reinforced the role of comprehensible input in effective classroom communication:

I felt like starting at a new district was a really great opportunity for me to reinvent myself. So, I really wanted to come in high with speaking comprehensibly, like doing all the things that I said [to my mentee] I was going to do.

Indeed, this is one example – among others – of how mentors held themselves accountable to bedrock teaching practices because of their role as mentor and model for their mentee.

For participants, reflecting on not just the how but also the why of their practice became standard procedure as mentees experimented with new ideas and mentors sought to gain deeper insight on tried-and-true rituals and routines. Some mentors even attempted to spare their mentees from making the same mistakes early in their own careers. Consider, for example, as one mentor described how her participation benefited her:

[H]aving to kind of reflect and reconsider my practices and look back at the way I've done things. The reflection part was really where I feel like I gained a lot of advantages from the program. I was able to look back and think about like, oh, well, I used to do this [strategy]. ... So, digging in and thinking about that, and then thinking, could that work in my classroom today? What things did I try in the past that flopped, and maybe I can share that with [my mentee]? And then she can learn from my mistakes. Thinking back to those first few years when you do things that you're, like, so embarrassed of now. I was happy to share that information with her, so she didn't have to go through that like I did.

It should also be noted that prompts for learning and reflection were not qualitatively unilateral and only initiating from mentor to mentee as one might expect. Instead, mentors credited their mentees for providing new and valuable insights based on, for example, their more recent experience with methods courses or contrasting teaching contexts. One mentor said as much when she shared:

But also, I took away things from them, you know? [The mentees] have gone to college [more recently] than I have. You know, I've been in in practice for 23 years now, and so, you know different things than what they're trying. And, oh, let me try that, too! ... Every time I had a

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conversation with my mentee - whether it was via text or, you know, monthly Zoom Meetings - I took away just as much as maybe I gave.

### ***Collaboration and Professional Development***

Given the intentional considerations in the development and implementation of the PSMLA Peer Mentoring Program (Madel, 2022) another key theme to emerge from the expressed benefits was the value of collaboration and access to professional development opportunities. Regarding collaboration, mentors and mentees alike shared that the collaborative environment yielded the exchange of ideas and opportunities to consider and experiment with approaches and resources in a supportive environment. “[I realized] that a lot of great ideas come through with collaboration,” said one mentee in response to a question about how the program impacted her willingness to participate in professional learning networks.

In terms of professional development, participants reflected positively on the various sources of professional development. One pair shared that they read blog posts by practicing world language teachers together as source of collaborative learning, while others commented on the extent to which the program’s shared text (Henshaw & Hawkins, 2022) and targeted Phase 2 workshop (Hawkins, 2023) supported their growth. For example, one mentee shared the following:

I do think the book that [the program Coordinator] sent out (Henshaw & Hawkins, 2022) and the Zoom that we had with Maris (Hawkins, 2023), I thought, was very helpful. I think that that book is really well written for someone like me, who already kind of has a foundation and, like, an idea of where they want to go with communicative language teaching but, like, needs a little more, like, grounded ideas. And that kind of became my main resource. I was constantly referring to the PowerPoint that she shared, and I was constantly referring back to the book when I was looking for, like, how I wanted to plan things out. I feel like, I had a lot of success with that because our district has someone who is responsible for creating a curriculum that is rooted in [comprehensible input].

The other form of notable professional learning came in the attendance of formal conferences like the annual PSMLA Fall Conference, registration for which was included in the invitation to participate in the program. While one mentor commented about the experience overall (“the conference is definitely the number one highlight for me. The conference itself was fantastic.”), others shared how incorporating attendance into the structure of the program facilitated them to experience a state-wide conference for the first time. A mentee recounted:

I thought the conference was beneficial as well. I don't know if I would have ever gone to the PSMLA Conference had I not been a part of the program, just because, like, the professional organization is not something that I'm familiar with, and maybe wouldn't have taken the financial leap to have done it.

The quote above was indicative of other participants sharing that the program facilitated access to the annual Conference that they otherwise would not have had. Importantly, though, are the participants who also communicated a desire to continue attending formal professional learning events like the annual conference as a result of the valuable and energizing initial experience.

Reiterating the overwhelmingly positive experience shared by all participants regarding attending the annual conference in person during the program’s initial phase, one mentor said “I think it was great going to the conference and meeting

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people. ... I wish we had another get together, you know, something like at the end of the year, or something else to get us all together.” To that end, others took it upon themselves to coordinate learning opportunities in person with their partners. One pair, for example, focused their Phase 3 shared professional learning experience on the sessions based on communicative language teaching presented in a local conference that they had both attended. Another pair coordinated for the mentor to observe the mentee teaching, an experience that both shared as being exceedingly meaningful.

While access to professional development and collaboration opportunities provided participants with valuable strategies and insights, another crucial aspect of the program was the emotional and professional support it fostered, which is explored in the following section.

### *Support and Encouragement*

Lastly, interview responses revealed the substantial emotional and professional support both mentor and mentee participants received through the program which, in their views, played a crucial role in their development and reinvigoration as language teachers. Many mentors and mentees described the program as a safe space for open and non-judgmental communication, which fostered a nurturing environment (akin to the findings of Kissau and King, 2015). One mentor reflected on the impact of the tenor of exchanges by stating:

I was able to find my joy again... I could share all the things I know, because sometimes when you're just teaching, you're just you're just doing it. You're not so sure [if you are making a difference.] Do I have anything valuable to share with people? But once I started having these conversations with my mentee, and she was like hanging on every word. And she was like, Wow! That's really good! I was like, Oh, no, I actually have something to share!

Indeed, as seen in the preceding quote, the deeply personal nature of the relationships formed between mentor and mentee interactions underscore how the program allowed her to rediscover her passion for teaching by providing an outlet to share her experiences and knowledge while receiving the encouragement of her partner.

Moreover, the program's emphasis on networking and collaboration with inspiring professionals was a recurring theme. Participants frequently expressed how interactions with peers who were passionate about world languages rejuvenated their enthusiasm for teaching. One participant shared, "Knowing that we have really cool people in the profession that are doing amazing things that get me excited to actually teach and get back in the classroom," highlighting the motivational impact of witnessing innovative teaching practices and the positive influence of a supportive community.

The peer mentoring program also reinforced participants' dedication to their profession, particularly through the validation of their and others' enthusiasm for teaching languages and, in one case, allowing a mentor to model the passion and perseverance needed to remain in the profession successfully. Consider the following quote from a mentee:

I also recognize how important it is to like, not give up on the profession. ... A lot of people are giving up on the profession, and I don't want to be a part of that, just to like potentially to make my life easier. Because I do see educators further along in their careers that have lives that I would like to emulate, or that I want to strive for.

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This candid and vulnerable reflection offers a strong example of how a program such as the present study's target can provide novice teachers with meaningful models of successful professional educators can not only provide practical support but also reaffirmed their commitment to their career.

Another participant also commented on the influence of a cultivated professional network in her desire to remain committed to teaching languages. In her respective circumstance, she shared how being certified in various subject areas made her susceptible to a broad array of teaching assignments. However, she insisted on remaining within the department of languages when other subject area assignments were possible:

They wanted me to go entirely social studies. ... and I asked to keep the French, because I said, you know, I've spent a long time developing my networks and doing all this stuff that I wanted to do. I wanted to stay in the language department.

In sum, interview responses indicated that participants did, in fact, experience benefit from participation in this study's structured peer mentoring experience specifically as it relates to enhancing reflective classroom practices, encouraging and facilitating collaboration and continued professional development, and providing interpersonal support and encouragement. As shown in the insights shared above, the combination of emotional support, professional inspiration, and the opportunity to engage with a community of like-minded educators clearly played a pivotal role in enhancing participants' teaching experiences in addition to encouraging indications to remain committed to the profession.

### **RQ2: How Could the Experience of Mentors and Mentees Participating in a Structured, Year-Long Peer Mentorship Program Be Improved?**

Suggestions and critical feedback were sought from each participant to identify and analyze programmatic and/or structural gaps in an effort to understand how dynamic formal mentoring programs like the PSMLA Peer Mentoring Program could be modified to best meet the needs of future mentors and mentees. Upon analysis, responses aligned with two broad themes: (1) Enhanced communication and (2) proximity-minded pairing. Each theme is described below.

#### ***Enhanced Communication***

Suggestions pertaining to enhanced communication stem naturally from the overly positive experience of attending the annual conference during Phase 1 as described in the section above. To that end, participants suggested organizing more opportunities for face-to-face meetings as a whole group as opposed to the meetings via videoconferencing platforms. For example, one mentor shared:

I know it's really hard with schedules. I would have loved to have met once or twice more as a whole group. I thought that those conversations were always really useful. And it was so much fun sitting with everyone at [the PSMLA Fall Conference] at the table we had for all the mentors and mentees.

This response is indicative of others who shared how valuable the in-person interactions were during the only time dedicated to do so as a whole group. It reinforced and validated the previously described value for community building and networks of support that this peer mentoring program sought to facilitate.

The previously quoted suggestion also alludes, however, to a certain obstacle that was recognized by other participants when suggesting improvements. Exem-

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plified in the case of the mentor quoted above, there was an acknowledgement that coordinating schedules among equally active and overwhelmed educators complicates opportunities for additional synchronous meetings, regardless of face-to-face or virtual modes.

An additional opportunity for enhancing the quality of communication and, by extension, more tailored support came from one mentee who described the challenges presented by being paired with a mentor from a dissimilar teaching context. In this instance, the mentee, who was teaching in an urban context, found it difficult to resonate with certain shared resources and strategies that were deemed successful in the mentor's more suburban context. He explained:

[My mentor] shared a lot of good resources that I definitely used throughout school year. I think the one thing that I'm still like maybe looking for is, like, foreign language teaching in an urban school environment. I definitely think it's different. I know there are a lot of resources out there, but I don't think I'd necessarily end up being successful because I don't think it speaks to my population of students in the right way, or it's not doable, because I don't have like the resources, or my classrooms not set up in the way that I need it to be. So, I have been thinking about, like, how I can expand my network to find other educators who are in a similar urban environment to myself.

This obstacle shared by a participating mentee lends itself to the other theme that emerged among all suggestions: proximity-minded pairing.

### *Proximity-minded Pairing*

Mentor and mentee participants alike communicated a suggestion based on forming pairs recognizing the inherent advantage of geographic proximity. On one hand, some participants made this suggestion as a means of facilitating additional face-to-face interactions among either pairs or small regional groups. For example, a mentor said:

We were fine communicating via Zoom or communicating via text. ... But I do think if the whole group could or like, ... regional groups could get together in some way. There's just so much value in those [in-person] conversations between mentors, between mentees.

Indeed, during the year-long program it was observed that mentorship pairs within relative vicinity leveraged their proximity to, in one case, conduct classroom observations and, in another case, attend a regional conference together. This suggestion underscores the value of these more organic interactions during the mentoring experience.

The other advantage of proximity-minded pairing would be to decrease the likelihood of the previously described misalignment of teaching contexts. As the quoted mentee shared, he found it particularly challenging to apply the suggestions and resources shared by his mentor in some instances due to the difference between urban and suburban teaching environments. This example demonstrates that operationalizing the concept of proximity may be more nuanced than strictly a quantitative measurement of distance, but rather also include a qualitative assessment of the impact of any socio-economic differences between contexts as well.

## Discussion

In addition to the nuanced perspectives of the participants shared above, it is clear that the yearlong, structured peer mentoring program described in this study

served as a positive vehicle for professional growth, as evidenced by the affirmative praise statements shared during the data collection like “Wonderful!” “A positive experience!” “Overall positive!” “Eye opening!” and “Really positive and uplifting experience!” In fact, the participants’ expressed support for how this study’s target phenomenon (i.e., participating in the yearlong, structured mentorship program like that of the PSMLA Peer Mentoring Program) benefits its participants has since been corroborated by subsequent mentors and mentees who have shared their insights and experiences with the hosting association’s community (see Dwyer et al., 2024; Madel, 2023; Starr et al., 2024). However, combining the preceding accolades with other perspectives that were shared in the present study’s semi-structured interviews tell a story with more subtlety connecting the practical intentions of an extensive structured mentorship experience to the field’s scholarship and broader concerns.

First, as Madel (2020) and others (e.g., Swanson, 2010) concluded the need for more structured peer mentoring to support novice world language teachers, the results of this study confirm that both mentors and mentees found the program beneficial for improving their classroom practices and encouraging more reflective teaching, especially as it pertains to communicative language pedagogy. Indeed, as Wegner (1998) and Delaney (2012) described the phenomenon of communities of practice in their scholarship as effective agents for professional growth, the participants of this mentorship-based community confirmed as much. In as far as others had specifically reported on pedagogical development through mentorship, the fact that both mentors and mentees documented thoughtful and tangible reflections on their teaching practices facilitates a reasonable corroboration of work by scholars such as Kissau and King (2015) who highlighted how structured mentoring relationships can support pedagogical change. That said, Du and Wang’s (2017) assessment of the difference between informal and more formal mentoring contexts concluded that informal mentoring tends to be centered on “information seeking” (p. 325) regarding topics like pedagogy and content knowledge, a practice that appears to be evident in the study’s target program. As the authors and others (e.g., Madel, 2020) cautioned, the practice of information seeking alone may be unlikely to yield significant change in instructional practices of new teachers and, as such, further analysis of new teachers practices and pedagogical beliefs would be necessary to evaluate more fully the effectiveness of the formalized mentorship programs like that of the PSMLA Peer Mentoring Program.

Regarding issues pertaining to the critical language teacher shortage, a matter explicitly mentioned among the impetus for development (see Madel, 2022), this investigation adds elements of depth to the conversation. On one hand, from these interviews, there is evidence to indicate that participants reflected on their experience as mentors and mentees with a renewed or strengthened commitment to their craft. One of the mentors had this insightful response: “I am passionate about world language education, and teaching future teachers to be world language educators ... and being an advocate for the necessity of more language...not just saving teachers’ jobs but adding fever!” And while another mentee disclosed far less optimistic view, “teaching in general is in...a dire state – world language in particular,” this new language teacher, knowing that burnout is a real threat to many world language practitioners and having a mentor successfully model balance and efficiency strategies, continued: “I also recognize how important it is to ... not give up on the profession because I still see how important it is.” So, as mentors reported gaining confidence and rediscovering their passion for teaching, this study can support the finding by some (e.g., Grahn, 2018; Levin & Schrum,



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2017) that mentoring boosts professional confidence and, therefore, may contribute to professional retention. This relationship, though, would benefit from more targeted exploration in future research. On the other hand, in the context of teacher retention, it must not go unnoticed that three of the five mentees that set out to participate in the PSMLA Peer Mentoring Program left the profession by the end of the school year, a stark reminder of earlier findings of new teacher attrition (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Unfortunately, it is beyond the purview of this study to understand the nuances of each decision and the extent to which such a mentorship experience influenced each outcome.

Relative to how a structured mentoring program such as this study's target phenomenon may better serve its participants, several useful suggestions to improve emerged from these interviews. More than one participant stated that face-to-face observations would have been very helpful, especially when dealing with one of the program's explicit areas of support: classroom management. This suggestion comes as little surprise considering how Wegner (1998) and Delaney (2012) described the importance of regular interaction within the context of communities of practice. As previously noted above, such face-to-face observations are logistically challenging in a state as vast as Pennsylvania and both mentees and mentors feel the need to work with professionals close to their district. One of these pairs was able to coordinate a mentor-mentee observation into their schedule. The mentee felt this observation was very important even though "it was a horrible class the day she came." Unfortunately, he was not afforded the same release time to observe her classes. Additionally, a very sound suggestion was given by this novice year teacher working in an urban context that harkened to the suggestion by Kissau and King (2015) regarding the importance of pairing mentors and mentees with shared content areas and, by logical extension, teaching contexts: "It would be helpful if you were able to ... be partnered with someone that gets it - that understands the realities of working in an urban environment."

Another area in which improvement is needed but unfortunately beyond of the jurisdiction of third-party intermediary programs is release time and other financial and professional support provided – or not – by the participants' school districts. Some of the participants communicated an inability or inflexibility to leave their classroom to observe a colleague or attend a professional, content-based conference, and financial assistance was often out of the question. This mentoring program enabled those mentees with or without the financial assistance of their district to attend their state's fall conference free of charge, but it is clear that such an investment from individual districts would be a welcomed as a sign of support for both the educator's professional craft of language teaching and the need for their students to have access to quality education in languages other than English. As one of the participating mentees stated:

PSMLA gives me the opportunity to network with other teachers that are doing cool things and innovative things in the classroom, that gives me the inspiration that I need to keep trying new things, even though they're challenging and they can be complicated. But [I like] having that support where I might not necessarily get that in the school that I'm in.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the perspectives offered by the mentor and mentee participants in this study underscore the value and need for continued mentoring programs that

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leverage the experience and expertise of seasoned, successful communicative language teachers with willing and dedicated novice language teachers. As data demonstrated in the current study, such mentoring will benefit both the mentor and the mentee relative to networking and ongoing professional development. Furthermore, this investigation sheds promising light and invites additional research on how such programs encourage retention – for both mentors and mentees alike – and foster more communicative instruction among the field’s novice teaching class. Among other opportunities for additional research, it would be worthwhile to better understand the changes of activity, enthusiasm, commitment, etc. of participants throughout a structured mentorship experience of this considerable length so as to promote maximal benefit. Tangentially, the goals developed by mentee participants provide valuable qualitative insight on the needs of novice language educators and how the field can best support them. A more longitudinal study would be a welcomed follow up with these same language instructors to determine the extent to which their commitment to the profession endures. As previously described relative to this study’s participants, the target mentoring program also experienced novice teachers abandoning their roles mid- or immediately post-year, highlighting a highly relevant opportunity to learn more about the field’s attrition crisis (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017) from language teachers who opt out of the profession. Overall, the participant experience within a structured mentorship program, such as the PSMLA Mentoring Program, has been communicated as a markedly successful endeavor and one worth enhancing, continuing, and replicating.

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