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The Examination of a Mentoring Relationship During a Metadiscrete Physical Education Field Experience

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Universities strive to graduate well-rounded individuals with opportunities to gain knowledge in the classroom and experience in the "real world". Therefore, many colleges focus their attention to offering discrete field experiences. However, few universities offer metadiscrete field experiences, with students majoring in exercise science or kinesiology, where the faculty member acts as a mentor playing a dual role of professor in the academic setting and a practitioner in the field. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the mentoring relationship within a physical education (exercise science or kinesiology majors) metadiscrete field experience.

University faculty members are constantly searching for new ideas that may spark student learning at the undergraduate and graduate level. The challenge for the physical education professorate is how to best foster student learning and provide the industry with superior entry-level employees. Methods of learning are numerous and some of the most important lessons are often learned outside the classroom or experiential learning experiences. University academicians and practitioners have identified the importance of combining theory with practice through experiential learning experiences. These experiences are critical precursors for a future career within physical education (Pitts, 2001). Experiential learning allows a student to learn by doing and is associated with being in touch or actively engaged (Garvin & Ramsier, 2003). The student applies knowledge from the classroom, allowing the student to directly experience the reality being studied.

Experiential learning experiences may be nondiscrete, discrete, or metadiscrete (Southall, Nagel, LeGrande, & Han, 2003). Nondiscrete experiences involve academic professors assigning learning activities (field projects, site visits, role play activities, interviews) as components of a specific course. This experience provides the student with professional development tools early in his/her academic program. Discrete experiences involve an academic faculty member acting as a facilitator of self-contained activities (practica, internships, service-learning programs, cooperative education, and field study or research) which is separate from the on-campus educational setting (Parkhouse, 2001). This experience allows the student to work under the supervision of an on-site mentor in a physical activity setting or alongside a faculty member acting as the facilitator in an academic setting.

Finally, the metadiscrete experience is similar to the discrete experience but allows the student to gain more theoretical and practical knowledge. The metadiscrete experience allows the academic faculty member to present both practical and theoretical learning by playing the dual role of practitioner in the field and academic faculty member as a teacher and adviser in the academic setting (Figure 1). Thus, the role of the academic faculty member becomes one of a mentor who assumes a more involved relationship with the student as opposed to the traditional discrete experience of the academic faculty member acting as a facilitator between the student and the practitioner (Southall, Nagel, LeGrande, & Han, 2003). Optimally, there is more than one mentor associated with the metadiscrete field experience providing learning activities to ensure both practical and theoretical learning situations occur.

This study focused on the metadiscrete field experience. The metadiscrete experience may provide the physical education field with entry-level employee who are better equipped to use theoretical concepts to answer practical questions within the work setting. One important aspect of all the metadiscrete field experience is the mentoring relationship between the student and the academic faculty member.

Mentoring

The classic understanding of the term "mentor" was first predicated in the classical vision of Odysseus in Homer's epic story *The Odyssey* (Wright & Smith, 2000). Mentor was the faithful friend of the Greek hero Odysseus. Mentor served as a tutor to Odysessus' son, Telemachus, when he left for war. Mentor served in this role, earning a reputation of being wise, sober, and loyal. This myth embodied many of the positive attributes associated with the mentoring relationship (Wilson & Elman, 1990). If one was to define mentoring as it relates to academia the definition may go as follows, "the practice of mentoring is to advise and guide another, providing wisdom and inspiration as a result of the experience" (Miller & Noland, 2003, p. 84).

Mentoring has been a vital component for students completing field experiences within academia including teacher education (Trepanier-Street, 2007; Woullard & Coats, 2004), nursing (Rankin, 1991), and counseling (Lazovsky & Shimoni, 2007).

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The specific academic discipline of interest to the researchers was exercise science and kinesiology majors within a physical education department. Unfortunately, there is limited research in the area of mentoring students majoring in exercise science or kinesiology (Clark, 2003; Hochstetler, 2008; Watson, Clement, Blom, & Grindley, 2009; Wright & Smith, 2000) and even less related to the metadiscrete field experience (Southall, Nagel, LeGrande, & Han, 2003). However, the dearth of studies that have been conducted support the value of mentoring to the student (protégé), faculty member (mentor) and the organization (physical education department).

Mentoring provides the student with a relationship built on discernment, responsibility and trust while providing a means of setting goals, assessing progress, influencing perceived abilities, developing networks and motivation, and helping the protégé to adapt more quickly to the field experience environment (Hochstetler, 2009). The benefits to the faculty member include a link between mentor status and greater internal satisfaction, creativity and energy received from the protégé, a sense of rejuvenation, the loyal support base from the protégé, and the organizational recognition given to the mentor for his or her capabilities as a teacher and advisor (Weaver & Chelladurai, 1999). Finally, the student's performance and/or knowledge base can be a direct reflection on the department as a whole. Finding jobs in exercise science or kinesiology is competitive and students need to have all the opportunities to apply their classroom knowledge to a "real world" experience. The metadiscrete field experience "provides a mentoring relationship that is crucial in developing leaders for any profession" (Kovar, 2004, p. 268).

Theoretical Mentoring Models

In the current study, the researchers focused on two theoretical mentoring models developed by Tentoni and Kram to describe the behavior or function of the mentor during a metadiscrete field experience. First, Tentoni's Mentoring Model was chosen to represent the metadiscrete field experience from the teaching perspective (Tentoni, 1995). Since one of the roles of the mentor is being a faculty member in an academic setting, Tentoni's Mentoring Model was considered relevant. Tentoni (1995) developed the model from teacher training and suggested the model represents a set of behaviors important for on-site mentoring and the practical implementations of the field experience. The five roles of the model include teaching (informing, defining), sponsoring (protecting, promoting, supporting), encouraging (affirming and inspiring), counseling (listening, clarifying), and befriending (treating trainees as equals). The background of the model was in "opening ourselves, leading by increment, and expressing care and concern" (Lazovsky & Shimoni, 2008, p. 305). The foundation for the mentoring role includes two variables consisting of "the mentoring relationship, which emphasizes that the mentor should model for students and nurture them, and mentoring activities, which should include demonstrations, observations, and feedback" (Lazosky& Shimoni, 2008, p. 305).

Many of the domains within Tetoni's Mentoring Model are similar to those of Kram's (1985) mentoring model focused specifically on the psychosocial domains. The psychosocial functions identified by Kram (1985) may also be used by faculty members in providing role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship. The protégé may observe the behaviors, attitudes, and values of the mentor while he or she is performing organizational tasks. For example, the student may observe the teaching style during a Methods of Group Exercise Instructions class. The student may decide to take on a similar teaching style the role model has provided throughout the course.

During acceptance and confirmation the mentor reaffirms the protégé's confidence, creates mutual trust, and confirms individual abilities. For example, students may apply for multiple field experiences. Due to the competitive nature of field experience the student may not receive his or her top choice. The mentor can remind the student to stay positive and lend encouragement to continue pursuing the other field experiences.

Students often have personal conflicts that may detract from their ability to perform effectively. The mentor provides the protégé with the opportunity to help solve the conflict (counseling) before it is too late. Finally, the mentor may become friends with the protégé following the field experience and/or graduation. The student may want to interact with the academic faculty member by stopping by his or her office to escape the pressures of school and/or work.

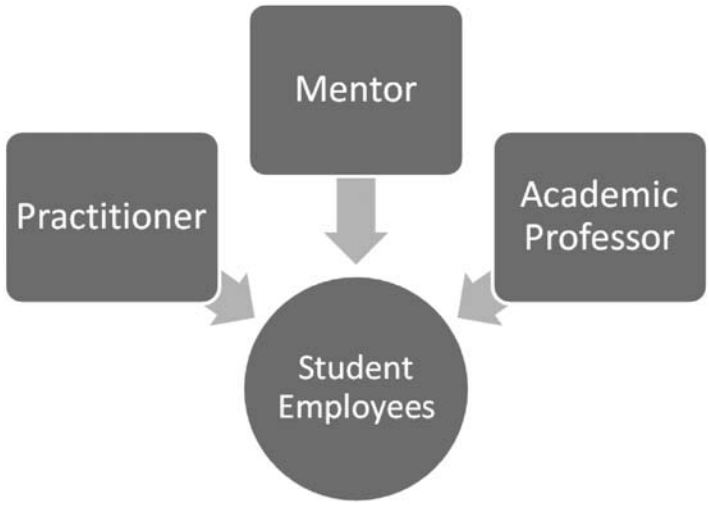

Figure 1 Metadiscrete Experiential Learning Experience

Problem Statement

Although substantial evidence supports the benefits of mentoring students within traditional discrete field experiences in physical education (exercise science or kinesiology majors), there is limited research with regards to the metadiscrete field experience (Southall, Nagel, LeGrande, & Han, 2003). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the mentoring relationship within a physical education (exercise science or kinesiology majors) metadiscrete field experience. Thus, the study focused on two research questions:

What mentoring characteristics did the Main Mentor (MM) display throughout the field experience?

What were the advantages of the Main Mentor (MM) acting simultaneously as a professor in an academic setting and a practitioner in the field?

Methods

The Participants

The participants for the study were student interns (N=8; 7 male, 1 female) majoring in exercise science (n=3) or kinesiology (n=5) and who were completing a practicum requirement. The average age of the participants were about 23 years with a range of 22-25. All the students were Caucasian and identified the MM as a mentor based on her experience, influence, and achievements within the academic setting.

The students were chosen based on a criterion sample. Thus, all interns participating in the metadiscrete field experience had to meet three criteria for quality assurance. First, each intern had to be a senior with no more than 9 hours to complete the major requirements for his or her program. Second, all the student interns had to complete nondiscrete assignments (i.e., interviews, bi-weekly reports) and a traditional discrete field experience with the MM when they were a second semester sophomore. These criteria were important because the students would have both a nondiscrete and discrete field experience to compare to the metadiscrete in responding to the mentoring questions. Finally, the interns had to complete a 12-week Youth Fitness and Nutrition After-School Program with 150 hours in the workplace to meet graduation requirements.

The Metadiscrete Model

Many people were involved within the organizational structure and program dynamics of the field experience. The organizational structure (Figure 2) of the field experience consisted of the following groups: (a) the principal and after-school coordinator from a low-socioeconomic middle school, (b) one mentor (identified as MM = Main Mentor throughout the study) acting in a dual role of professor in an academic setting (teach and advise) and practitioner in the field, (c) eight (N=8) student interns from exercise science (n=3) or kinesiology (n=5) majors, and (d) four academic faculty members from the Physical Education Department who participated in the programs (see field experience) and acted as the After-School Advisory Committee (Figure 3).

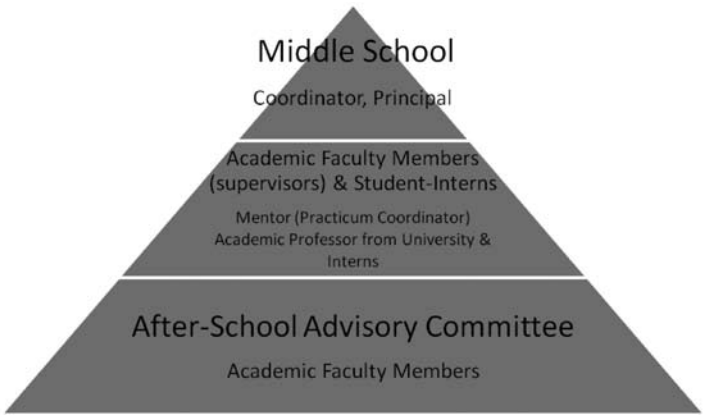

Figure 2 Youth Fitness and Nutrition After-School Organizational Structure

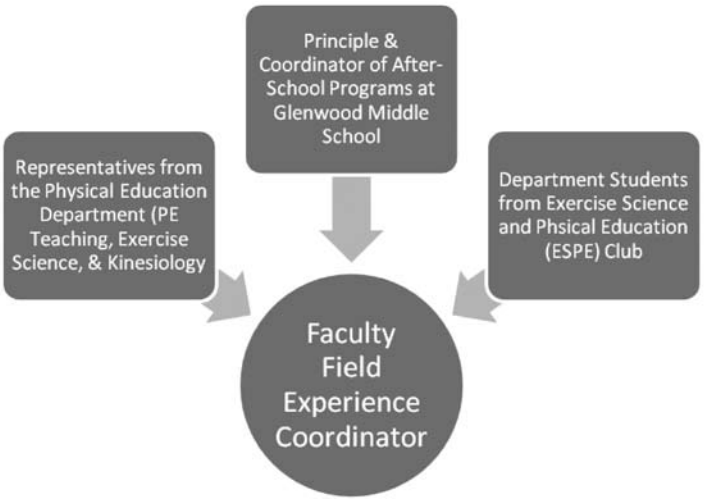

Figure 3 After-School Advising Committee

The MM played multiple roles throughout the study. First, the MM was the direct liaison between the After-School Advisory Committee and the student interns. The MM and other faculty members held weekly meetings with the student interns. These meetings provided the students with the opportunity to reflect on the successes and failures that occurred for the day, how to improve on those failures, and future ideas. These meetings provided a valuable learning opportunity for the students and faculty to tie sport and physical activity theory to the After-School program. The members of the committee who could not make the meetings were contacted via email and/or phone.

Second, the MM acted as a university assistant professor who taught the student interns in a variety of courses (i.e, Principles and Applications of Fitness Training, Methods of Group Exercise Instruction) to meet exercise science or kinesiology graduation requirements. The MM was also the practicum coordinator for all exercise science and kinesiology majors. The MM served in a university assistant professor role and supervised all the student interns for the past five years.

Finally, the MM also had six years of experience as a practitioner, providing personal training as well as the development of fitness and wellness programs for adult and youth populations. The experience as a practitioner allowed the MM to be an ideal candidate as the site supervisor for the metadiscrete field experience.

The MM acted as a practitioner in many ways: (a) she taught lesson plans onsite for the first two weeks of the program to allow the interns time to observe and become acclimated to the environment, (b) she co-taught with each student for the next four weeks, (c) she allowed students to teach individually or as a group during the final six weeks of the program, and (d) she provided feedback and allowed students to reflect on their teaching following each lesson. Thus, the MM was able to provide onsite feedback in helping students associate classroom theory (professor) with real-work experiences (practitioner). Finally, one of the researchers was the MM playing an active role throughout the field experience.

The Field Experience

The interns completed their metadiscrete field experience by

implementing the Student's Mentoring At-Risk Teens (SMART) Youth Fitness and Nutrition After-School Program. The SMART program was designed for schools with low socioeconomic backgrounds. The low socioeconomic criteria helped determine the middle school chosen for the experience. The school chosen was declared Title I status because it was "considered to have higher numbers of children below the poverty level and receive extra funding to support an overall initiative toward school improvement"(O'Donnell, Lambert, McCarthy, 2008, p. 154).

The middle school participants included 15-20 students, ages 11-14. The students met after school twice a week for two hours over a 12-week period to participate in fitness (i.e., step, swimming, yoga, hiking) and nutrition activities (i.e. nutritional facts, food guide pyramid, reading food labels).

Data Collection

Data was collected from the eight (N=8) interns by administering the Practicum Perception Survey. Additional qualitative data was also collected by asking students to complete an internship journal consisting of bi-weekly reports. The internship journal was a reflective-learning activity that helped the students to reflect on their mentoring experiences, skills, abilities and long/short-term goals during the field experience. The internship journal was useful because it offered an effective way of linking classroom theory to practical experiences.

The Instrument

The Practicum Perception Survey was developed through the modification of two surveys: (a) self-response questionnaire and (b) the Mentoring in Sport Survey. The researchers obtained opened ended questions about the "Practicum Experience" (section 1 of survey) from a self-response questionnaire developed and piloted by an intern coordinator in teacher education (Cook, Parker, & Pettijohn, 2004). Next, the researchers obtained open-ended questions about the "Mentoring Experience" (section 2 of survey) from the Mentoring in Sports Survey developed and piloted by an intern coordinator in physical education (Bower, 2008).

A panel of experts (3 faculty members working with students in the field of physical education and teacher education) examined the survey to make sure the instrument displayed content validity and avoided biased items and terms.

The Practicum Perception Survey elicited responses in several areas including: (a) demographic information, (b) open-ended questions about the practicum experience, and (c) open-ended questions about the mentoring relationship. The demographic data consisted of age, education, gender, and race/ethnicity. The demographic section also asked whether the particpants perceived MM as a mentor.

The open-ended questions about the practicum experience asked the student to reflect on classroom preparation, career goals, professional growth and expectations of the program. The open-ended questions about the mentoring relationship, which is a precursor for a metadiscrete practicum, included questions about mentoring characteristics and the advantages of having the MM play a dual role as a professor in the academic setting and a practitioner in the field.

Data Analysis

Each researcher used HyperResearcher 2.8 to code and categorize the qualitative responses from the Practicum Perception Survey and the bi-weekly reports. A code was identified for any statement that stood out in describing student perceptions of the mentoring relationship during a metadiscrete sport and physical activity field experience. The codes were further separated into categories and compared with previous information. The comparison of categories is a technique commonly known as the constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Codes eventually cultivated into themes which helped answer the research questions.

The researchers also used the strategy of peer debriefing. Each researcher examined the data and met to discuss themes and categories. Following numerous meetings amongst the researchers a final conclusion on the themes and categories were determined. Students were also asked to read the qualitative responses they provided on the Practicum Perception Survey to see if their responses meant what the researchers conveyed throughout this paper. This technique is commonly known as member checking.

Plausibility of the Study

In order to establish plausibility of the study, the researchers used several techniques developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). First, credibility (internal validity) was established through the use of the constant comparative method and member checking. The constant comparative analysis strengthened the validity by establishing categories and developing themes from the open-ended questions and member checking solicited students' views of the findings and interpretations. Second, transferability (external validity) was established through quotes provided by the protégés supporting the themes (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993. Third, dependability (reliability) relied on peer debriefing. Each researcher examined the data through the use of HyperReseracher 2.8 to determine themes and categories. Finally, confirmability (objectivity) was based on the researchers' ability to limit student bias with regards to grades being attached to the field experience. Thus, students were advised and provided a syllabus before beginning the field experience, stating a passing or no passing grade was simply based on completing the 150 hours of the program. The syllabus also stated students were able to terminate this after-school field experience at anytime with the awareness they could count completed hours in finishing the practicum requirement at another site. The syllabus was signed by the MM and a copy was submitted to the chair of the physical education department and the Institutional Research Board (IRB).

Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the mentoring relationship within a physical education (exercise science or kinesiology majors) metadiscrete field experience. Therefore, the results focused on themes to help answer the research questions related to the mentoring relationship between the MM and the student interns during the metadiscrete field experience.

Research Question #1 – Mentoring Characteristics

Five themes developed through the analysis of the data on the mentoring characteristics of the MM throughout the

field experience. All of the themes support the two theoretical mentoring models discussed at the beginning of this paper (Kram, 1985; Tentoni, 1995). The five themes identified aligned with the psychosocial functions. The five themes describing the MM included the following: (a) a role model, (b) accepting and confirming, (c) a counselor, (d) a "fun" personality, and (e) a coach. Weaver and Chelladurai (1999) defined psychosocial functions as social interactions between the mentor and protégé. This interaction requires the protégé to share personal and work experiences with the mentor (Lazovsky & Shimoni, 2007).

Trusting the mentor to share personal and work experiences involves role modeling by the mentor. The protégés within this study mentioned the MM was a *role model* who acted as a professional and displayed leadership qualities important for the successful completion of the practicum. The role modeling took place both in the classroom and in the field. For example, a student responded to the characteristic question by saying the MM was,

> Helpful, caring, a role model figure, concerned with everything throughout the practicum - she wanted us to succeed. . .she was there side-by-side during the whole experience helping when we needed it. She was the root of the whole experience. . . she really cares about her job and she is an excellent role model to me.

The second psychosocial function mentioned by the students was *acceptance and confirmation* where the MM displayed genuine interest and self-motivation. The MM's genuine interest in the program reaffirmed the protégés' confidence in the mentor,

> I believe she cares a lot about this program and wants it to go well and smooth. She is doing everything she can to make it go as smoothly as possible. She cares and that is the most important characteristic.

The third theme described the ability of the mentor to listen and communicate throughout the field experience. This *counseling* was important to the students as one protégé mentioned, "She was open to meetings and always answers questions you may have – easy to talk to and gathers new ideas from. . . She was always there to help, sends informative emails, and keeps us on track". Finally, the students also indicated the MM had a fun and positive *personality*. A protégé explained, "She made it fun with her spunky personality which I love…she was enthusiastic and had an optimistic attitude which will reflect on our own attitude…she was awesome!"

Although the psychosocial functions were more prevalent, coaching was considered important career characteristic the MM displayed. This *coaching* function supports research conducted on mentoring relationships where knowledge, skills, and productive feedback on teaching were important for the development of the protégé (Bower, 2007a). The students mentioned the MM had the ability to answer questions and provide ideas and feedback for improvement. A protégé said,

> She was there to answer any questions we needed answered, and she gave us creative ideas for different activities. . .she helped us organize. . . if we needed help with anything, she was always there to help. . . she gave good feedback to help with the lessons.

The students' identification of the psychosocial functions the MM displayed supports the existing mentoring literature. First, Bower's (2007b) research indicated young protégés felt the most important functions provided by their mentors were encouragement, increasing their self-confidence, and serving as positive role-models. The mentor in this study focused on the importance of the nurturing characteristics of being supportive, empathetic, encouraging, and discovering the strength in others.

Second, research suggests female mentors are strongly associated with a psychosocial relationship (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000). For the current study, seven female interns and one male intern participated in the program. In addition, the MM was female who clearly displayed the importance of the psychosocial characteristics of the mentoring relationship. The more comfortable the protégé felt with the MM the more likely a successful mentoring relationship would develop throughout the field experience (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000).

Third, the mentoring relationships were unstructured. These unstructured mentoring relationships are commonly associated with psychosocial functions. Finally, providing psychosocial mentoring is strongly associated with the protégé's satisfaction with the mentor (Allen, Eby, Lentz, & Lima, 2004). For this study, all the student interns were satisfied with the mentoring relationship. For example a student intern mentioned, "I believe the field experience advisor acted as a mentor during the practicum experience. I believe she was involved with the program and helped us to better ourselves."

The career-related aspects of mentoring appeared to be important in this study as they related to coaching. Research has established that career-related aspects of mentoring are important because of information and instrumental social support (Allen, et al., 2004). The protégés' experienced coaching through assignments (i.e., developing fitness training programs) offered within their major leading to skill development used throughout this field experience.

Research Question #2 – Advantages

Four themes developed through the analysis of the data on the advantages of the MM acting as a professor in an academic setting and a practitioner in the field. The four themes describing the advantages of the MM acting in two roles included the following: (a) easily accessible, (b) has a vested interest, (c) provided useful feedback, and (d) organized the field experience well. The MM was easily accessible within three categories: (a) academic setting, (b) practitioner setting, and (c) other sources. First, the students mentioned the MM was *easily accessible* within the academic setting. For example a student said, "The advantages are being in the Physical Activity Center (PAC) on campus to stop by at anytime to ask questions." From a practitioner perspective a student mentioned, "She was easily accessible onsite when we needed to ask questions concerning our lesson plans." Finally, the student mentioned the MM was efficient in sending and responding to emails. One student said, "She was always quick to reply to my email or phone messages."

The protégés also said the MM had a *vested interest* in the program. The MM was not in the academic setting receiving information from an employer on the intern but was a practitioner

involved in making sure the program operated smoothly. A student said,

> It helped when the advisor acted as a mentor because you could tell she cared more about the outcome of the practicum. . . I see her [mentor] get excited about the program, and it makes me try harder. . . I care more about the program since she does. If she did not care then I would do the same.

The MM was able to *provide feedback* onsite in connecting theory with practice. For example, "being onsite allowed her [the MM] to be able to give us advice on how we could improve and make changes for future classes." Finally, the MM was able to keep the program organized to help better facilitate the experience. A student spoke about the mentor's organizational skills,

> She was able to keep us on track and made sure we had everything in order to stay focused and have good lessons. . . she helped us get through the experience. If it was not for her, it would not have gone as smoothly and organized as it did.

The students specifically pointed out these advantages were due to the nature of the field experience where the mentor acted as a professor in the academic setting and a practitioner in the field. The mentoring model introduced by Tentoni (1995) provided a means for the MM to display a set of behaviors for on-site mentoring in its practical implementation. First, the MM taught (informed) the students how to organize fitness programs and provided feedback as necessary. Teaching the students how to organization fitness programs and provide feedback as necessary may also relate to the career function of coaching (Kram, 1985). Second, the MM's vested interest in the program encouraged the interns, affirming and inspiring them. If the MM was excited about the program then the students were equally excited. The MM's excitement may not be evident in a traditional discrete field experience. In the traditional field experience, the faculty member may not have the same vested interest and the students do not have the opportunity to see the faculty member's onsite behavior. Encouraging and inspiring the student may also relate to the psychosocial function of counseling (Kram, 1985). Finally, the MM was accessible due to the nature of the metadiscrete experience. The MM was able to clarify and advise the students in both the academic setting and the field site. Again this accessibility could be a form of the psychosocial function of counseling (Kram, 1985). If the MM is easily accessible the student has more opportunity to get immediate advice, feedback, and clarification.

Implications and Future Research

There were several implications from examining the metadiscrete field experience and the advantages of the MM acting as a professor in an academic setting and a practitioner in the field. First, the metadiscrete field experience may help the student associate classroom theory with real-work experiences alongside their MM (professor/practitioner). Thus, physical education departments (exercise science or kinesiology majors) using nondiscrete and/or discrete field experiences may want to consider developing a metadiscrete field experience model similar to this one. Second, faculty members are expected to reevaluate their coursework materials to determine if changes need to be made based on new knowledge. The metadiscrete field experiences is another way for faculty members to reevaluate whether their classroom lectures and theories being taught within their course are indeed relevant to the "real world."

Finally, the MM may help to establish a social connection among the student interns. Rather than offering more knowledge about the career path he or she may want to pursue, the student intern is better able to gain experience in working with others and maturing as an individual. Working in a group setting may be a better way to understand the importance of working with others, a beneficial skill for future employment.

Several opportunities for future research emanate from the results of this study. First, future research may focus on completing in-depth interviews with faculty members and practitioners to get a better understanding of the perceptions of the mentor role. Second, the field experience occurred during an after-school program. It would be interesting to see if the metadiscrete structure could be implemented within a recreation setting (fitness center, campus recreation). Finally, a longitudinal researcher study aimed at following and observing content, processes, and developments of the mentoring role over time could be carried out.

Conclusion

Universities strive to graduate well-rounded individuals by providing them opportunities to gain knowledge in the classroom and experience in the "real world." The traditional discrete field experience has provided the "real world" experience since its conception in 1906 (Henry, Razzouk & Hoverland, 1988). Through the discrete field experience, the professor (MM) acts as a facilitator whose primary role is to ensure effective interaction between a learner and practitioner. However, the metadiscrete field experience needs to be considered as a future format for that "real world" experience. The advantages of this metadiscrete field experience in this study suggested the quality of the mentoring relationship was seen as vital, especially in the eyes of the intern. The students received additional theoretical and practical knowledge working with a mentor whose primary aim was in assisting the student in achieving long-term goals. Ultimately, the students were able to go through the process of moving from dependence to independence while developing professional confidence and competence.

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