Lessons Learned from Facilitating a Pre-Service Teacher Youth Mentoring Program

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When I moved from secondary education to higher education, one of the aspects of my new position that I was most excited about was an opportunity to directly utilize my expertise gained during my dissertation research. One of my new colleagues had only the year before begun a mentoring program between our institution's pre-service teachers and middle school students at our local school district. Because of my research background on mentoring programs, my colleague offered to allow me to take the program over. While my colleague identified with the overall mission of such a mentoring program, she lacked a professional background in mentoring programs and had been given other professional responsibilities that prevented her from wholeheartedly devoting herself to implementing a research-based mentoring program. I eagerly accepted the offer and looked forward to the challenge. The program I inherited was still in its infancy, and I immediately began to implement structural changes that I believed were representative of current literature on mentoring programs and what I saw to be practically sustainable. I am now preparing for my fifth semester of facilitating the mentoring program and thought it the right time to share a series of practical lessons I have learned. While my experiences may have varying degrees of transferability, I hope them to be of some value for those looking to begin a similar program. Furthermore, while there is a robust body of research on mentoring programs in general, little research has been conducted specifically on pre-service teacher/youth mentoring programs. If more research on such programs is to come, such programs must first exist. Therefore, in addition to encouraging teacher educators to begin mentoring programs, I hope to encourage the development of a body of research on best practices in that specific context.

Mentoring Programs

While little research specific to pre-service teacher/youth mentoring programs was found in preparation for this article, there is reason to believe that such a program would be beneficial for any college or university to implement with a K-12 school district. First, traditional adult/youth mentoring programs have been associated with a wide variety of positive outcomes in youth including lower drug usage (Rhodes, Reddy, & Grossman, 2005), higher math and reading scores (Leos-Urbel, 2015; Sheldon, Arbreton, Hopkins, & Grossman, 2010), improved interpersonal relationships (Rhodes, Reddy, & Grossman, 2005), higher English grades (Shernoff, 2010), increased physical activity (Gortmaker et al, 2011), and lower rates of depression and social anxiety (DeWit, DuBois, Erdem, Larose, & Lipman, 2016). While these results are promising, it is difficult to determine how relevant they are for pre-service teacher mentoring programs, which may differ in many ways from a typical mentoring program. Still, it

would be reasonable to think that at least some of these benefits of a mentoring relationship could be replicated with pre-service teachers acting as mentors.

One of the most promising aspects of pre-service teacher/youth mentoring programs is that they could potentially benefit the mentor as much as the mentee. Practicum experience is central to any quality teacher education program (Darling-Hammond, 2006). For example, previous research has demonstrated practicum experience as being key to developing a sense of self-identity in pre-service teachers, which is central to a pre-service teacher's growth in their ability to challenge previous assumptions about education (Clift & Brady, 2005; Cooper & Olson, 1996; Hong, 2010; Navarro, 1998.). Traditionally, the bulk of a pre-service teacher's practicum experience has been during student teaching, in which the student spends an intensive period of time in a classroom of their age and content area largely removed from their teacher education course work. Darling-Hammond (2006) argued that in order to improve teacher education programs, pre-service teachers need to be given practicum opportunities that are integrated into and placed within their coursework. Furthermore, while practicum experience in traditional classrooms is essential and common in teacher education, some pre-service teachers may not yet be prepared to deliver a lesson in their future content area to a classroom of as many as 30 students (Wang & Apraiz, 2018). Therefore, mentoring programs where pre-service teachers work with individual or small groups of students offer potential as a means to strengthen teacher education programs and a bridge toward more traditional practicum experiences.

What little literature was found on pre-service teacher/youth mentoring programs similarly indicates that such a program could be mutually beneficial to mentors and mentees. Navarro (1998) describes a program where pre-service teachers met with middle school youth for five, two-hour blocks throughout a school semester to provide academic remediation. Youth in the program were receptive to their mentors' efforts to remediate, and mentors reported that their experience either led them to add a middle school endorsement to their teaching license or cemented in their mind that middle school was not for them. Furthermore, mentors reported that their mentoring experience helped them to develop their self-identity as a teacher and consider teaching in contexts different from their previous experiences.

Wang and Apraiz (2018) researched a program in which pre-service teachers were paired with one or two youth, whom they met with for one hour, twice a week for twelve weeks. Mentors designed math and reading lessons to instruct for remediation. The pre-service teachers reported that their experience was positive, that it allowed for a more comfortable transition for those not yet ready to lead a full class in content instruction, and that greater flexibility concerning the content of their lessons would have been appreciated.

Lessons Learned

The mentoring program I currently operate is small. We average approximately five college students per semester who work with approximately ten middle school students in our local school district. Part of this small size is reflective of the small size of my institution and the middle school we serve. Another part of it reflects opportunities we still have to grow as the program increases its footprint on the culture in our institution. My college students and I travel to the local middle school once a week, on Thursday afternoons. At that time, the middle school

as a whole conducts its "club time". While the mentoring program is technically categorized as one of these clubs, it operates outside of the format of club time in all practical senses. Mentors are scheduled to be responsible for planning the lesson for mentoring sessions in small groups or individuals, depending on the number of mentors in a given semester. Early in the semester, mentors are encouraged to design relationship-building activities. As the semester continues, mentors more commonly design lessons around soft skills necessary for success in our educational system such as time management, organization, or goal setting. Regardless of the content of the lesson, mentors are encouraged to design fun and engaging lessons that will encourage an informal and enjoyable environment that will keep the sessions purposeful but also keep the youth wanting to come back. While we certainly have room to grow and improve, I submit here a series of lessons I have learned that may be of use to those wishing to create similar programs.

Grain the Trust of School Administration

One of my primary goals when I moved into higher education was to develop a positive working relationship with administrators in our local school district. I volunteered to serve on several district committees, personally coordinated with them to place our student teachers and observers, and communicated with them far in advance as to my vision for the mentoring program. Because of the trust developed between them and myself, our program was allowed to operate with greater autonomy than it likely would have void of those relationships. For example, the program was allowed to operate during school hours without a school employee involved based on my still current state teaching license. The lack of a school employee in our mentoring session seemed to put the youth and pre-service teachers at ease. The youth felt less like they were in school, and therefore enjoyed coming to mentoring, and the pre-service teachers felt more freedom to experiment with their delivery, with the lack of an additional judgmental gaze upon them.

Need to Create and Application Process

When I took over the mentoring program, it was a volunteer-based program. Within weeks, I deemed this to be unsustainable. I perceived the atmosphere of the program to be that the pre-service teachers were doing me a favor by attending rather than doing something meaningful by being a positive influence for youth and gaining practical experience. In an aim to improve this atmosphere, I began requiring an application process of which I chose the most promising candidates. The application is minimal, requiring only an up-to-date resume, and I do not have nearly enough applications to be very selective. Nevertheless, I immediately noticed an improved climate where mentors were more committed to their mentoring responsibilities.

Provide a Carrot

While the implementation of an application process seemed to improve the climate of the program, I still sought more consistent attendance and greater commitment from my mentors. Therefore, leading up to my third semester with the program, I worked with my institution's Assistant Dean of Student Development to transform the mentoring experience from a volunteer program to an experienced based education (EBE) opportunity for one elective credit hour.

While students had some reflective journaling assignments, their primary task remained the mentoring program. As an additional bonus, I felt further justified in keeping mentors periodically for a few minutes after mentoring sessions to review how the lesson went, as mentors had a required number of hours to log for their course credit. The impact on the program was immense. I immediately noticed increased commitment and attendance. While a pessimist may suggest that pre-service teachers should be open to volunteering for a program that aims to bring about positive outcomes in youth while providing them practical experience in the classroom, my students (like many undergraduate students) are exceedingly busy. Between extra-curricular activities, off campus jobs, work study programs, personal responsibilities, and course loads, their free time is often limited to say the least. After offering the mentoring program for credit, it was my perception that students saw their participation and time as valued. Consequentially, they seemed to take their responsibilities in the mentoring program more seriously. With this improvement, I was able to give my mentors greater autonomy in designing activities for our mentoring sessions, undoubtedly leading to increased benefits for them.

Broaden your Net

As I saw an increased level of commitment from my mentors, I saw an opportunity for growth in both the size of the program and degree of selectiveness in the application process. One way I sought to do this was by advertising the program outside of the education department. I immediately saw interest. Not only did this act as a recruiting tool for the department, allowing non-education majors an opportunity to consider a career in teaching. It was also out of recognition that many other majors, theology, psychology, and criminal justice to name a few, work with youth. My allowing them into the program was one way I could serve our greater educational system.

Relationships Over Academic Curriculum

My initial vision for the mentoring program was that our sessions would largely consist of supplemental learning opportunities by way of fun, interactive science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) activities. Therefore, in my first semester facilitating the mentoring program, I led a variety of STEM-style lessons. While lessons such as building makeshift bridges to withhold stacks of textbooks or competing to see who could construct the tallest free-standing tower from collections of school supplies were engaging to the students, I failed to create the culture in the program that I sought. At least one reason was because of my failure to fully allow for the establishment of positive relationships between my mentors and mentees before I concerned myself with academic curriculum. I told myself that relationships could be built as a by-product of engaging activities, but relationships must be developed deliberately (Garrett, 2014, p. 45). Therefore, I now encourage my mentors to design activities specifically targeting and earning the trust of the mentees for our first several sessions. To the outside observer, it may appear as though we're simply playing icebreaker-style games, but those games are a prerequisite to learning and development. Youth in our program want to know who the mentors and I are, if we can be trusted, if we will come back, and if we care about them. Only once these concerns are addressed will youth be receptive to any sort of academic curriculum. Therefore, while learning certainly occurs in our mentoring sessions, I've learned to accept if not every session feels like traditional school.

Let go

As a former high school teacher, I (unsurprisingly) feel most comfortable teaching. As I was initially designing the program I (also unsurprisingly) took the responsibility upon myself to design the activities for each session. I asked my mentors to arrive early enough to go over my plans, but they were largely providing support for the lessons I designed. I justified this decision because I wanted to ensure that quality activities were planned and that relying on student-designed activities would be impossible because of their unreliable attendance. It was quickly apparent to me that this was far from best practice. My pre-service teachers were being robbed from valuable opportunities to design and carry out lesson plans in front of students. As I was able to more generally improve mentor attendance and commitment, I also grew comfortable assigning them to design lessons for upcoming mentoring sessions. Consequentially, my mentors felt increased ownership in the program and were gaining more practical experience.

Looking Forward

Given how scarce as the current literature is on pre-service teacher/youth mentoring programs, the lessons I have learned while implementing it might be a useful case study. That being said, it has always been a work in progress. No two semesters have been identical, and I am continually looking to improve the program. Below are a few changes I am seeking to implement.

First, I would like to more directly tie the mentoring program to my pre-service teachers' course work. Currently, I accept mentors at all stages of our education program. While I do periodically meet with my mentors, most commonly immediately before or after a mentoring session to connect mentoring sessions to course content or otherwise discuss how the session went, this practice is quite informal, unscheduled, and flawed. Most notably is that my mentors are not at the same stage of our educational program and therefore not in the same courses. Any connection I make to course content will naturally resonate with each of my mentors differently, if at all. While I have explored connecting the mentoring experience to our department curriculum more formally, I have not yet found an appropriate way to do this. Additionally, this would likely eliminate all non-education majors from the program, which would have its drawbacks.

Secondly, while I maintain that a mentoring program such as ours should retain a friendly, relatively informal environment that emphasizes the development of positive relationships and is genuinely enjoyable for the youth to participate in, I would like to incorporate academic support. When my attempts to emphasize STEM activities was a mild failure because of a lack of relationships established first, the pendulum between academics and relationships may have swung too far. I plan to meet with my mentors periodically this school year and discuss academic curriculum that we can incorporate in an interactive and enjoyable way.

It should finally be said that listing growth as a future aspiration for the program would be tempting. While our current program may sound nearly dormant to many at larger institutions, it should be pointed out that such growth has its drawbacks. True, I look for the program to establish itself into our campus's culture to the point that it is in greater demand and I am able to

be more selective in the application process. In such an event, I would likely allow a few more mentors and be able to in turn serve a few more youth. Nevertheless, it is my contention that mentoring programs work because of the personal relationships developed on the small scale. As it is, youth in our mentoring program feel like they are part of a selective group. My pre-service teachers feel as though they're getting a unique opportunity. While seeing the mentoring program grow may do well to my ego, it's possible that it would be no more than a sacrifice of quality for quantity.

Conclusion

Despite a relatively strong body of research indicating the utility of typical adult/youth mentoring programs in promoting positive youth development, little research has been done specifically on pre-service teacher/youth mentoring programs. This gap makes it difficult to determine what benefits demonstrated with typical mentoring programs can be expected in pre-service teacher/youth mentoring programs. What is so promising about utilizing pre-service teachers as mentors, however, is that the relationship would likely be mutually beneficial. More so than in traditional mentoring programs, pre-service teachers need experience working with youth just as badly as youth need positive role models. Until further research data can be collected, case studies such as this must suffice in developing an understanding of the potential of and best practices for such mentoring programs.

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