The Impact of Mentoring and Scholarships on Teacher Candidates

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Introduction

Research Overview. Using data based on demographics, financial need, and academic performance, the researchers identified eight Midwest university educator preparation candidates from under-represented backgrounds. Each teacher candidate was invited to receive an academic scholarship of $1,500 per semester for two terms—fall 2022 and spring 2023—with the understanding each scholarship recipient would be paired with a university mentor and an in-district mentor from one of two rural school districts with close proximity to the university. Students were required to attend introductory, professional learning, and culminating sessions in order to receive and retain the scholarship funds. Researchers sought to understand perceptions on mentoring, financial support, and professional development from the teacher candidates while investigating the impact of mentoring on retention. For the mentors and district administrator participants, the researchers wanted to learn their perspectives on the efficacy of the grant components and impact on each district's ability to recruit teachers into the field of education. To measure this, researchers used a pre- and post-survey for scholarship recipients, university mentors, school district mentors, and district administrator partners. Following each professional development event, surveys were conducted with participants and mentors. At the end of the spring 2023 semester, interviews were conducted with each student participant. The focus of this article is the research conducted with the teacher candidates.

Recruitment and Retention of Teacher Candidates. There is a shortage of certified teachers in the United States and a disparity in the representativeness of the teacher workforce when considering the students who comprise public schools in Missouri (Katnik, 2016) and the U.S. (Aragon, 2016; Martin & Mulvihill, 2016). Katnik (2016) also notes that there is a lack of diverse representation in the Missouri teacher workforce. During the summer of 2022, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education offered universities *Grow Your Own* teaching grants to incentivize innovative approaches to bringing under-represented candidates into teaching, and mentoring them to increase retention throughout their teacher preparation coursework. The grants were competitive in nature and awarding of grants was based on the size of each university's teacher preparation program. The primary researchers secured grant funding to support under-represented teacher candidates through academic, financial, and social support with mentoring.

This research involved eight teacher candidates, with each receiving the grant-funded scholarship for two academic semesters: fall 2022 and spring 2023. As a requirement of the financial support, recipients were required to attend professional development and meet with university and school district mentors. Mentors and teacher candidates were given freedom to decide about where to meet, to get further acquainted, and discuss teaching and learning. Recipients' perceptions of mentoring and financial support were obtained through surveys and interviews to determine the impact of mentoring and financial support on teacher candidate retention during teacher preparation.

The Reality for Teacher Candidates. This vignette describes one teacher candidate's experience during the year the research was conducted. The vignette illustrates the importance of having a university mentor and the critical role the mentors played in retaining the teacher candidates in the preparation program.

Before class begins, the instructor checks in with students while preparing for instruction. While many students have not arrived yet, she asks Nate (pseudonym) how he is doing. Nate simply responded, "Oh, okay. You probably have heard about what's going on with me. If not, I can tell you after class." She sensed that something in the candidate's demeanor was not right; Nate is generally very outgoing and engaged, but this day he was quiet. The instructor checks back in with Nate after class.

Nate relates that he owed a great deal of money to the university, because his bills had not been paid. If he didn't get them paid in the next few days, he would be "kicked out" (Nate's words). His student loans hadn't come through because his parents didn't complete the FAFSA form with him. He couldn't borrow money because the processing relied on the credit of his parents, and they have poor credit with past due bills. Dr. Wade (pseudonym), who is Nate's mentor for the Grow Your Own program, worked with Nate to make connections with the university's finance department in an attempt to help him resolve his financial issues.

Nate's situation was compounded by other issues, as well, that certainly impacted his ability to stay in school and focus on his academic success. He recently dropped his computer and the screen had broken. He was able to retrieve most of his documents because the university's OneDrive system had backed them up. The technology department was able to repair the computer rather than replacing it which would have been a major expense for him.

Recently, the instructor mentioned earlier, saw Nate as they entered the gymnasium for a basketball game. They chatted a bit, and she asked how his holiday break had been. Nate said, "It was all right. I only went home for two days." She wishes now she had followed up on his comment, but can certainly inform his university mentor so that Nate is checked on and given support.

Unfortunately, Nate's story is not unique. Many university students struggle, often in silence, with finances, keeping up with assignments, studying, navigating resources, and other factors that impact not only their academic performance and success, but their overall mental health, as well.

Literature Review

In *Teaching toward freedom*, Ayers (2004) poignantly writes

> Schools do not exist outside of history or culture, of course: they are, rather, at the heart of each–schools serve societies; societies shape schools. School is both mirror and window–it shows us what we value and what we ignore, what is precious and what is venal. Our schools belong to us, they tell us who we are and who we want to be. (p. 8)

Ayers's (2004) words written nearly 20 years ago now beg the questions: How do the teachers in front of our students reflect them? What barriers exist for students of color, students with financial difficulties, and students with an average GPA who want to become teachers? And, how do these factors influence a student's ability to complete a teacher preparation program?

College entrance exams can put up roadblocks for many students trying to gain admittance into a teacher preparation program. Goldhaber & Hansen (2010) found the failure of licensing standards is higher among Black teacher candidates. Passing an assessment before being admitted to a program after entering a university can also deter a student if they are unable to pass the exam.

In the state of Missouri, state statute requires teacher candidates to pass three standardized examinations; these occur at program entrance, mid-point during the program, and at point of licensure after program completion. These tests–ACT, Missouri General Education Examination (MoGEA), and Missouri Content Examination (MoCA)—are multiple-choice examinations. Research shows that in Missouri educator preparation programs, such examinations are highly correlated (Wall, 2008) and plagued with systemic biases (Edmonds, 2014; McBride, 2015). Each examination acts as a contributing factor to the ongoing teacher shortage in Missouri, a phenomenon originally addressed by Wakefield (2003). Taken in aggregate, policymakers' overreliance on standardized tests to determine entrance into the fields of teaching and leadership serves as a root cause in a decades-long, persistent decline in teacher candidates seeking licensure in Missouri. Furthermore, Edmonds (2014), and Edmonds, Wall, McBride and Gordon, (2015) revealed significant biases in standardized examinations used to admit, enroll, and license Missouri teacher candidates from 2008-2017. These gaps in performance were statistically significant when disaggregated by race and gender (diverse candidates and female-identifying candidates performing worse than their White, male counterparts) when evaluating differences in mean scores by group on the MoGEA. McBride (2016) explored relationships between program selectivity and use of standardized testing, revealing statistically significant candidate differences in performance on the Elementary Education MOCA (Missouri Content Assessment), demonstrating that Black and Latino/a candidates had significantly lower test scores than non-Black/Latino/a candidates. This evidence paints a disturbing policy landscape for Missouri institutions seeking to diversify the teaching field when forced to use standardized examinations which serve as barriers to entrance into schools of education and when seeking licensure.

Due to the research cited above, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education no longer requires the passage of the Missouri General Education Assessment (MoGEA). Schools of Education can determine their own admittance standards which may include the successful passage of the MoGEA; however, universities have the flexibility of using other indicators for admittance into the teacher preparation program at those institutions. In the university where this study took place, the requirement is for students to have taken the MoGEA. Alternatively, they can be admitted to the professional school of education by one of the following: successful passage of MoGEA, ACT score of 20 or higher, or 3.00 or higher university cumulative grade point average (GPA). Another way to support student success is by conducting workshops that focus on passing entrance and exit exams.

Mentoring Support of College Campuses. Mentoring programs are effective ways to meet the needs of under-represented student populations on college campuses (Phillip et al., 2004). Opportunities to interact with a mentor who may have similar cultural experiences or be of the same race support the successful completion of the college career. Mentors need to understand ways to model, support, and be sensitive to other cultures recognizing teacher candidates of color "come to school already having mastered many cultural skills and ways of knowing" (Gay, 2010, p. 21). Effective mentors can come from multiple experiences including university faculty and staff members, K-12 teachers, civic organizations and community-based professional groups (AACTE, 2019).

Seeger studied early career teachers' perceptions, and how professional learning with faculty when they were undergraduates impacted them. What was discovered is that mentoring by faculty (while an undergraduate) for attendance at and presenting with them at conferences, participating in research, co-teaching in courses, and co-writing, contributed to the teachers' confidence, motivation to lead in their schools and districts, abilities to communicate professionally, and willingness to collaborate with their colleagues (while an early career teacher) (Seeger & Boyles, 2021). Confidence, especially, was impacted by the opportunities the research participants had with their faculty mentors. "The research participants repeatedly reported that the early professional learning experiences helped them with confidence in daily interactions and promoted professional conversations with their colleagues and administrators" (Seeger & Boyles, 2021, p. 7). Their increased confidence helped them ask their colleagues and administrators questions rather than trying to navigate their teaching position alone.

Mentoring Role in Retention. While not nearly as formal as the collaborations described and researched by Zeichner (2010) and Wood and Turner (2015), for this study, the triad mentoring between teacher candidate, university faculty, and school mentors was important for retention of the teacher candidates in the teacher preparation program. Third spaces are discussed as a way to mediate the gaps occurring between what is taught in teacher preparation coursework and what is expected of teachers in the classroom. Zeichner (2010) describes third spaces as "bring[ing] practitioner and academic knowledge together in less hierarchical ways to create new learning opportunities for prospective teachers" (p. 92). Wood and Turner (2015) describe this phenomenon as "neither side fully embrac[ing] the knowledge of the other, leaving the prospective teachers to travel unaided across the gap between their methods and their field experiences" (p. 28). Helping teacher candidates make connections between what they are learning in their courses, activities in classes, and early field experiences with what is actually happening in classrooms and schools of mentors from these settings creates stronger preparation tactics. These third spaces are another opportunity for university faculty and district staff to collaborate for more meaningful preparation of teacher candidates.

Hayden and Gratteau-Zinnel (2019) note the critical nature of beginning the mentoring process before candidates are in student teaching experiences and have become first-year teachers. A mentoring process is essential to retain novice teachers and is well documented in the literature. Mentoring before student teaching, however, is not. They note, "We cannot afford to wait until induction to provide support that will lay the foundation for critically reflective, thoughtfully adaptive, and culturally relevant practices that enable a teacher to engage effectively with the challenges of teaching" (Hayden & Gratteau-Zinnel, 2019, p. 144). Mentoring can help a teacher

candidate forge a connection between what they are learning in traditional methods coursework and what actually occurs in classrooms. Cohen (2017) is clear that we must adopt "policies and attitudes that incentivize strong student interest in joining the profession of teaching and that support their practice once they are hired" (pp. 183-184).

Coombs and Goodwin (2013) discuss how traditional observations required by teacher candidates are followed by planned reflections, discussions, and feedback that is obligatory and may well require a checklist for what is written or discussed. While they researched and wrote about the feedback a teacher candidate receives following an observation, their work is appropriate for the mentoring that occurred for our research. They note that discussions between a mentor and teacher candidate can "serve as a chance for the mentee and mentor to view the classroom as another text with which to dialogue, ensuring that the student feels supported and encouraged by a mentor who truly wants him or her to succeed" (Coombs & Goodwin, 2013, p. 61). Their work also supports several notions: mentors are learning from the mentees, dialogue plays an important role in the relationships that form, and reciprocal learning occurs. They write, "as the relationship between the mentor and mentee develops, their dialogue affects not only each other but also the students and future teachers both work with on a daily basis" (Coombs & Goodwin, 2013, p. 64).

Match Between Teacher Race/Ethnicity and Student Race/Ethnicity. Grow Your Own students of color and those from rural backgrounds were important to this study because of the expectations of the grant funding. Banks (1998) advised there is a need to identify teacher candidates who will become insiders in the communities where they teach through the knowledge, skills, and perspectives they bring to their teaching. Educators from a similar background more easily form relationships with families.

Many factors influence student success in the classroom. While culture is the shared way groups of people have learned to live with each other, the norms of behavior and the accepted interpretations of one's actions make it possible for individuals to successfully interact (Erickson, 1993). Researchers have found that pairing students with same-race teachers improves learning and reduces inappropriate classroom behaviors. Goldhaber and Hansen (2010) posit minority students are more successful when there is a match of race/ethnicity with the teacher who provides a positive role model and may have higher expectations of the minority students.

Student achievement likely is influenced in part by the race match of the student and the teacher. Egalite et al. (2015) found positive impacts on reading achievement for Black and White students in grades three through ten, when the student was assigned a teacher of their own race/ethnicity. There were significant positive effects in math achievement for Black, White, and Alaska/Pacific Islander students. Results were the most profound for the Black and White students who had teachers of the same race in the elementary school. Interestingly, the lowest-performing Black and White students appear to specifically benefit from being instructed by a teacher of the same race.

An appreciation of the culture is also a consideration in rural areas. Those who have grown up in a rural area are more likely to have lived in poverty and to have attended a low-resource school (Brown & Swanson, 2003). Students who graduate from a rural school are less likely than

suburban or urban counterparts to have attended a school that offered Advanced Placement courses (Gagno & Mattingly, 2016). Henry (2019) found teachers who have lived in rural areas have place-based-consciousness. They likely understand the stresses on the students of poor crop years, and of shopping for major staples on a monthly basis at a Sam's Club that may be 40 miles away. The understanding of the students makes relevant instruction possible and enables students to learn the desired content.

Theoretical Constructs/Framework

There are many theories that play roles in discussing recruitment and retention of college students. The authors identified three that seemed to repeatedly surface during the research process. Those theories were related to self-efficacy, the quality of persistence, and the role of growth mindset. Each will be considered here. Additionally, another way to consider the students involved in the Grow Your Own program—which prioritized students of color, students from low socio-economic families, and males—is to consider the Community of Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), from which each student was reared and graduated. Yosso (2005) created a model of community cultural wealth which can be useful in analyzing the backgrounds of each of the teacher candidates in the program. This model discusses the notion of capital from six different lenses, where each "kind" of capital influences a student's ability to navigate entering college and retention of that student once they have entered the setting.

Self-efficacy Elements Impacting Students' Decision to Attend College. Self-efficacy theory, and those related to self-efficacy like motivation and social learning, are all a part of Bandura's body of work (1977, 1982, 1986, 1997). In short, a person's self-efficacy beliefs also give us insight on how one's motivations, thinking, feelings, and behaviors contribute to one's accomplishments and achievements (Bandura, 1997). There are three identified areas affecting human performance including the individual, the environment, and outcomes (Bandura, 2000; Barkley, 2006). Related to the individual, our own beliefs about self-efficacy contribute to determining expectations for outcomes and accomplishments (Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2008) and how we view our own competencies (Vacca & Vacca, 2008). In the school setting, students who show evidence of high self-efficacy tend to work harder and longer (persevere) and demonstrate resilience for academic work (Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2008). The level of accomplishment we are able to achieve and our capacity to solve problems are both impacted by our self-efficacy beliefs (Pajares, 2008; Schunk, 2003; Costa, 2008).

Self-efficacy as an Educator. The belief that one can be successful in teaching situations is teacher self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) posited that the belief that one can be successful is a stronger indicator for success than actual experience. In addition, the sociocultural view of agency, including the context or environment of the individual, affects their feelings of self-efficacy (Massey & Wall, 2020). Agency allows individuals to develop new identities as they experience different situations and interact with various people (Wenger, 1999). Social networks with other educators providing support for the teacher candidate reinforces the belief in one's future success as a teacher. Massey and Wall (2020) found the development of agency also has a temporal component where one's beliefs are influenced by experiences in the past, in the present, and conceptualizing the future. Visions of oneself as a teacher that are developed while a teacher

candidate continue to influence the individual for seven years which includes the first years of being a classroom teacher (Parsons, et. al., 2017).

Support for development of a professional identity occurs when teacher candidates participate in professional development activities as professional educators. Efficacy is increased when the candidate makes the choice to engage with topics and individuals with knowledge to share (Karnopp, 2022). The teacher candidates' sense of self, of one's purpose in becoming an educator, and of the actual work one envisions affects one's ability to believe in success as a teacher. Teacher candidates with a vision are empowered to teach toward their vision (Duffy, 2005). Expecting candidates to focus specifically on the students where field experiences and classroom observations are occurring supports the development of self-efficacy as a teacher. The assignment to one district, one classroom (with background research into the community's and classroom's demographics) allows teacher candidates to focus on the students in front of them in providing relevant and contextual instruction. Spaces where responsibility for learning is shared between the teacher and students allows confidence in one's skills for both. Action research conducted by teacher candidates also supports the confidence in one's ability to teach instead of waiting for professional development provided by an outside source. Analysis of effectiveness allows teacher candidates to effect change in ways that support their students' learning (Massey & Wall, 2020).

Persistence and Its Role in Attending College and Retention Thereafter. In Boyer's 2005 longitudinal study, the ability to persist was directly influenced by whether or not a student had financial support from their families or from the university, and scholarships and grants were found to impact students' persistence the most. Involvement and interactions with faculty and peers was also found to be a factor in students' persisting with their education at the university (Boyer, 2005). Wilson (2016), in a review of the literature, identified factors that influence a high-achieving, low-income college student continuing to attend college. The studies found that students may leave the college setting based on "their underlying need for psychosocial development" (Wilson, 2016, p. 49). The internal and external influences that pertain to our study include students' social supports and engagement with others including faculty and general support within the campus setting.

Growth Mindset for College. Dweck's work in growth and fixed mindsets is applicable to this study. We can define growth mindset as an individual's belief that talents, intelligence, and performance are developed and improved (Culver et al., 2020; Dweck, 2016) "through hard work, good strategies, and input from others" as opposed to a fixed mindset when an individual believes "their talents are innate gifts" (Dweck, 2016, para. 2). A person with a growth mindset is likely to achieve more "because they worry less about looking smart and put more energy into learning" (Dweck, 2016, para. 2). Culver et al. (2020) note that having a growth mindset is important for all students, but "may be especially important for students who face negative stereotypes, such as racial/ethnic minorities, first-generation students, and women in certain fields of study" (p. 75).

Capital for Students Attending College. Yosso (2005) identifies six forms of capital in their model of community cultural wealth. These include aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005), and all have an impact on a students' abilities

to navigate and understand how to "attend" college. Each also impacts recruitment to enter college and retention once there.

Students' access to family and community social capital influences the educational success of a student (Israel et al., 2001). While families do have a role in supporting their children in knowing what their future can hold, others in the community also contribute to a vision beyond the present. Mentors, non-parental adults who take an interest in the lives of youth (Erickson et al., 2009) have been shown to play an effective role for all youth. Students from financially secure families tend to be enrolled in more activities and have friends who earn good grades. They benefit from the informal mentoring by coaches of the sports teams and leaders of activities in which they are involved. For the advantaged youth, mentorship is complementary to success in high school and in college degree attainment. While advantaged youth are more likely to identify a specific teacher mentor, student success is less likely to be dependent on the connection with the teacher mentor. For disadvantaged youth of less financial means and those of color, the "influence of a teacher mentor on education attainment is the greatest" with the contradiction being disadvantaged youth are unlikely to have teacher mentors (Erickson et al., 2009).

Advantages are found in rural communities where the social capital is strongly interwoven in relationships between individuals, families, extended families, and community structures such as schools, churches, and youth organizations which benefit most rural youth. Nelson (2016) found "significant relationship between social capital in rural places and positive educational outcomes" (p. 252). The support comes from adults (both relatives and nonrelatives), extended family ties, and the community itself. One example is the way students are supported in their involvement in activities. Many rural students find themselves on the school's athletic teams because, without their involvement, the team might lack players to be viable in competition. Rural students tend to be involved in many leadership activities partly because there are fewer students vying for leadership roles. While guidance for college-specific questions and answers tend to correlate with the parents' own education and the income of the family, the influence of teachers and administrators play an important role in the decision to attend college, in the selection of a major to study, with the college-specific support for those youth who are first-generation college students (Nelson, 2016). In addition, when selecting a college to attend, first generation parents tended to emphasize financial constraints rather than the fit of the student to the college. In contrast, college-educated parents, even with low family incomes, emphasized to their children the importance of the "fit" of the college to their students (Nelson, 2016).

When families and students are making decisions about selecting a university to attend, one factor that influences them is having faculty that serve as teachers *and* mentors (Bulgar et al., 2015). And, Simmons's study (2019) noted that, "Even for highly resourced families, the admissions process is chaotic, but for under-resourced families with limited histories of higher education attainment, it is almost a locked door" (p. 49). The study conducted by Simmons (2019), found that for "vulnerable students who do not have access to outside resources and relationships, the lack of information and assistance at the high school level can have a detrimental impact on their future educational choices and opportunities" (p. 45). They further write that acquiring social capital "is a crucial factor in changing the higher education narrative of vulnerable students" (p. 52) and builds when we establish relationships with other individuals. And, social capital is more difficult for rural students to acquire than other students because they

may be isolated in their setting (Simmons, 2019). Boyer's (2005) study would indicate that these relationships need to continue as soon as a student enters the university setting to assist them in persisting at college.

Vedantam (2022) addresses social capital in a *Hidden Brain* podcast interview with Matthew Jackson who says,

> "...there's lots of different things about a person's network and community structure that you could imagine would matter. Things that are commonly referred to as social capital. We know financial capital matters, if you have wealth, that helps you. Human capital, if you have parents who are educated, that's going to help you. But social capital. What is it about your network that matters?"

Vedantam (2022) elaborated on social capital noting that it matters who we know and how we connect with others where we live. Having connections or bridges between people in different economic circumstances creates "economic connectedness" and can contribute to mobility.

Social capital, as defined by Siebert et al. (2001), emphasizes the strong ties to those individuals who can provide information and social support. Access to information, resources, and career sponsorship are likely to be provided by those with whom one has a strong relationship. In universities, student-faculty interactions where support is provided for the foundation of learning, for a sense of belonging, and for achievement are most critical for students of color and for first-generation college students (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Johnson (2016) emphasizes the importance of moments when experienced mentors help students understand about their discipline, college life, or their future careers.

Oppositional behavior in the university classroom allows each individual's story to be heard and validated. Relationships matter particularly to those who are marginalized. First-generation college students, people of color, LGBTQUIA, religious affiliation, each need to be heard and valued. Professors counteract the stereotypes that are identified by establishing demanding but supportive relationships, allowing students to recognize the causes for negative experiences and enabling learning through informal conversations, and teaching techniques that honor place and experience in the connections made in the content (Felton & Lambert, 2020).

Another structure that creates opportunity for the reduction of social inequities is the connection to a mentor who is an educator. While there are many mentors available through one's college experience, it is the teacher who is serving as a mentor who makes the greatest difference for marginalized youth. Erickson et al. (2009) write, "Mentoring offers the greatest promise for reducing social inequities" (p. 361).

Ardley, Goodloe, and Kerns (2020) advocate for "eliminating socioeconomic barriers" (p. 162) by providing financial assistance for teacher candidates—specifically students of color—completing their preparation program. This financial assistance can take many forms including money for travel, gas, and assessment fees. Other forms of support include honoring the professional identity of candidates by helping them find organizations for which they can become members, and asking them to make presentations with faculty who serve as mentors for this type of work for the teacher candidates.

According to the National Student Clearinghouse in 2019, Americans from rural areas are less likely to hold a college degree than peers from suburban or urban areas, and fewer students from rural areas enroll in college than peers in suburban areas. Students from rural areas are more likely to have lived in poverty and to have attended a low-resource school where Advanced Placement courses are not available (Brown & Swanson, 2003; Gagno & Mattingly, 2016).

Methodology

Research Methods. The decision to use case study design was carefully considered by the researchers and "chosen deliberately because of its [the case's] unique characteristics" (Saldana, 2011, p. 10). The uniqueness of this case being the first-time scholarships and mentoring at the level implemented were undertaken with diverse teacher candidates. The qualitative case study design allowed for in-depth study of eight teacher candidates receiving scholarship money, professional development, and mentoring as methods of retaining the candidates, and further engaging them in teacher preparation. The case study design assisted the researchers in examining a current situation within the university setting (Yin, 1981) and exploring an issue deserving deep consideration and understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). They tell us, "This detail can only be established by talking directly with people…allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature" (p. 45).

Creswell and Poth (2018) advocate for collection of artifacts in order to complete a detailed description of the participants' experiences. The participants in this study responded to surveys about their experiences throughout the year-long program and to questions posed in focus groups. Using surveys for a year and conducting the focus group interviews assisted the researchers in gaining "a spectrum of diverse perspectives" (Saldana, 2011, p. 77) useful to the study. This was critical in order to inform us about changes in teacher candidates' feelings and attitudes about college over time and motivation to remain engaged in learning. Responses to surveys and focus group questions were coded and analyzed at the conclusion of the academic year.

Coding Data. All data collected were reviewed, coded, and analyzed by each of the researchers involved in this study. After independently coding data, the researchers compared and discussed codes working toward consensus in findings. This enabled them to reduce the codes and identify themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018) through a process that Czerwionka et al. (2015) describe as "iterative, because it is repeated to allow the themes and organization of the themes to best fit the data" (p. 84). Creswell (2007) describes in vivo coding as a qualitative process that extracts and emphasizes the words of the participants. This was used by the researchers to highlight participants' thoughts deemed critical to the results and findings.

Participant Recruitment. Using data based on demographics, financial need, and academic performance, the researchers identified eight educator preparation candidates from under-represented backgrounds from an initial pool of more than fifty potential candidates. These included first-generation students, candidates from diverse racial backgrounds, candidates demonstrating financial need, and candidates usually not considered for scholarships because of GPA. Additionally, the teacher candidates were required to have completed at least three semesters in the teacher preparation program to be eligible. Candidates who were ready for

student teaching were not considered for the scholarship. The university's foundation provided scholarship eligibility information for the scholarship selection committee. The Office of Financial Assistance provided data related to financial need and scholarship eligibility. The selected teacher candidates were invited to receive an academic scholarship of $1,500 per semester for two terms—fall 2022 and spring 2023—with the understanding the students would be paired with a university mentor and an in-district mentor from one of two rural school districts. Initially, nine scholarships were issued; however, one student became ineligible when they moved away from the university to attend courses in the online environment. The number of teacher candidates studied was eight.

Research Questions. The research questions included:
1. Is there a difference in year-to-year under-represented teacher candidates after participating in a mentoring program?
2. What are best practices for effectively recruiting and retaining candidates from under-represented groups in educator preparation?
3. What are the best practices in developing mutually co-beneficial partnerships between local education agencies and higher education educator preparation programs?
4. What are the influences of mentorship on under-represented candidates' perceptions?
5. Which aspects of the program (university mentor, LEA mentor, financial support, professional development, scholarly presentations) were most beneficial?

Data Sources. During the course of the research, pre- and post-surveys were administered to the teacher candidates. In addition, focus groups were conducted with the teacher candidates to allow researchers to understand the candidates' thinking about the program. The transcripts from those focus groups were analyzed. Pre- and post-evaluations were also given to the university and LEA mentors, and the school district administrators; however, those results are not a part of this article. After each of the professional learning events, the teacher candidates and mentors completed an evaluation of the event. For this article, only the teacher candidates' results are reported.

Focus Group Interviews. Focus group interviews were conducted with the scholarship recipients during the week before the spring semester ended. Students were given two dates and times of day from which to choose for the focus group they wished to attend. Five students attended the first focus group session. Two students attended the second. Only one research participant did not attend either focus group session. The focus groups were audio recorded with transcripts being generated by a secure online transcription service. Both researchers were present to conduct the focus group interviews. Each session began by explaining the purpose of a focus group. The researchers took turns asking the questions, but probing questions were asked by both at various times throughout the interviews.

Vaughn et al. (1996) explained the strengths of conducting focus group interviews for research noting that, "individuals are invited to participate in a forum where their diverse opinions and perspectives are desired" (p. 15). During the course of focus group interviews, the relationship between those being interviewed and the interviewer(s) allows for interactions to take place. Those interactions usually lead to probing questions, further elaboration by the participants, and

the opportunity to ask follow-up questions. This allows the researchers to gain further insights into the participants' thinking about their experiences (Vaughn et al., 1996).

Professional Development Sessions and Surveys. Professional development sessions were held six times throughout the academic year. The content of these sessions was determined by surveys given to the students and based on their interests and concerns. The content of the sessions is noted in the table below:

Table 1

Content of the Professional Development Sessions

Session Number	Professional Development Topic
1	Managing Behaviors
2	Trauma-Informed Care
3	Classroom Management
4	Self-Care
5	Standards; student questions answered by faculty members, mentors
6	Teacher of the Year "making a difference to a kid"

Results and Findings

Survey Results. NOTE: For all surveys, teacher candidates were given choices of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree as response options. There were no Disagree or Strongly Disagree responses on any of the surveys.

Pre- and Post-Program for Teacher Candidates. The table below represents the teacher candidates' responses to the pre- and post-program survey. The pre-program survey was completed by five of the eight students participating in the program; the post-program survey was completed by seven of the candidates. Initially, all candidates completing the survey predicted the program would assist them with networking, academic success, financial obligations, and overall success. Post-program, with more students participating in the survey, 86% responded that they agreed or strongly agreed with these statements.

Table 2

Pre- and Post-Program Survey Results for Teacher Candidates, Part 1

Agree or Strongly Agree	Pre (n=5)	Post (n=7)
This program game me opportunities to network	100%	86%
This program was helpful in my goal of academic success	100%	86%
This program helped me meet my financial obligations during my academics	100%	86%
People in my program help each other succeed	100%	86%
My mentor helped me develop as an educator	100%	100%

In this program the mentors care about the mentees	100%	100%

Additional survey prompts asked the teacher candidates about the core elements of the program: financial support through scholarships, a school district mentor, a university mentor, and professional learning. The students found the most value in having a university mentor. Seventy-one percent of the candidates agreed or strongly agreed that financial support, the school district mentor, and the professional learning sessions assisted in being able to continue in their teacher preparation.

Table 3

Pre- and Post-Program Survey Results for Teacher Candidates, Part 2

The following aspects of this helped me continue in my teacher preparation program		
Agree or Strongly Agree	Pre (n=5)	Post (n=7)
The financial support	85%	71%
My LEA mentor	100%	71%
My Northwest mentor	100%	100%
Monthly professional learning sessions	100%	71%

When teacher candidates completed the post-survey, they were asked about the learning that occurred for them while they were in the program, and response options specifically addressed the content of the professional development that occurred during each month of the program. Seven of the candidates completed the survey. One hundred percent of the students felt that the sessions and the program assisted them in understanding philosophies, cultures, and others' ways of life. The rate of response was the same when students responded to the program allowing them to form new relationships. As noted earlier, the content of the professional development sessions was decided based on feedback each month from surveys asking students what they needed. Only 71% of the responses felt that time management and organizational skills were addressed effectively in the sessions they attended. Other survey items were responded to at 86% for developing a sense of self, building candidates' self-esteem and confidence, improving their skills and talents for teacher preparation, developing their leadership skills, and helping them to be open to new ideas and experiences.

Table 4

Post-program Survey Results for Teacher Candidates, Part 3

What was gained from this program	
Agree or Strongly Agree	Post (n=7)
Developing time management/organizational skills	71%
Developing sense of self	86%
Building self-esteem and/or confidence	86%
Improving skills and/or talents	86%
Understanding different philosophies, cultures, and ways of life	100%

Leadership development	86%
Openness to new ideas and/or experiences	86%
Forming new relationships	100%

Focus Group Interviews. All research participants viewed the scholarship, professional learning, and mentoring in positive ways and found each aspect to be beneficial to their growth and learning about teacher education. One student summarized the benefits by saying, "…you get to go to different schools, you get to hang out with teachers, you get to learn a lot about the profession, how to make yourself better as a student being ready to go into teaching." During the interviews, they also indicated ways the experience was difficult and could be improved. To further paint a portrait of the research participants' responses to the focus group questions, extensive quotes from their interviews are included for each of the themes found by the researchers.

Choice of District and Teacher Mentor. The researchers note that the teacher candidates were extremely positive and appreciative of the program when responding to questions during the focus groups; there were, however, specific comments that lend themselves to improvement in the Grow Your Own program as it was enacted. The grant funding specified rural school districts, and the two districts involved in the program are rural: one with an enrollment of 1,349 in the same town as the university, and the other with an enrollment of 2,324 that is located 20 miles away. During the interviews, a participant commented that perhaps different school districts could be involved each year. The students suggested being involved in a nearby district with over 10,000 students across 24 school buildings or the very small, rural districts within the county with enrollments of 134-215 students (Missouri District Data, 2023).

Another area of improvement that surfaced via the interviews focused on the teacher mentors with whom students were assigned. Students expressed they would have liked to have had a choice in identification of who the mentor teacher was. One participant stated a preference for working with the teacher they were currently observing through university coursework noting the teacher "…was super good at what he did," while two others agreed with involvement in the choice of teacher mentor. One participant stated, "You can choose someone that is a lot more close to you." Another teacher candidate explained an anomaly that resulted when they changed their major from elementary education to physical education. The assignment of teacher mentors was made in early August by the grant director based on university information identifying the content area of each student. The student stated, "…it was kind of weird. I mean they obviously didn't have that experience I'm needing. They gave me good classroom management skills and stuff like that. But obviously they were talking about mainly classroom setting, not P.E. setting." Another student in the focus group emphasized, "Put that mentor in the same content area (as the student), that's the overriding thing."

Stressors. Stressors identified by the participants included the need to drive 40 miles round trip to the classroom site to which they were assigned for the grant project. As a part of the coursework in which they were enrolled, students were assigned different classrooms to observe for course credit. In some cases, students drove 40 miles round trip in a different direction, resulting in driving 80 miles a week to spend time in K-12 classrooms. "That got to be a lot of money," the student stated. Balancing the travel time and the time in the classrooms were

difficult for some students to manage because of their work schedules. One student did note they expected to have difficulty meeting the expectations because they are a part of the football team and thought it would be difficult to schedule everything. However, the student stated, "I really never had a conflict and I was able to do everything." Comments from other students indicated students did not spend much time in the mentor teachers' classrooms because of scheduling and travel difficulties. They did, however, identify ways they kept in contact via texting, phone calls, and conversations with the university mentor who worked closely with the district mentor.

When reviewing the interview responses, we also acknowledge the perceptions do not necessarily align with their responses to the survey questions. We believe that this could be due to the anonymity of the surveys. During the focus groups, they were face-to-face with two faculty associated with the program but were not mentors in the Grow Your Own program. One of the researchers was a professor for five of the teacher candidates and an advisor for one of them. This may have impacted the candidness of their responses in the focus groups.

Unexpected Scholarship. Of course, the research participants viewed being a scholarship recipient as a positive aspect of the program. However, each of the participants discussed that they did not anticipate receiving a scholarship, even expressing that the email announcing them as a recipient was viewed as junk mail or spam. It was clear that students "like them" do not often receive scholarship money. One teacher candidate noted, "Getting that email and seeing how we're getting a scholarship for being a part of a program designated to us as education majors was really big."

The students were candid with their responses that some of the students do not come from families that have money for attending university. A participant stated they did not come from a "rich background" noting that the scholarship would contribute in positive ways to their time in college, and they found the scholarship to be "really helpful and surprising."

Participants Felt Special. During the interviews, it became apparent the invitation to participate in the Grow Your Own mentoring program felt different for the students than the current participation in education courses. As one student stated, "It made me feel special," and another student expressed, "We have a big education department. Why did I get chosen?" Self-efficacy comes from knowing one can do something, one has the internal grit to be successful. The teacher candidates understood that they were one of eight candidates selected for the program, and it mattered. While other funding sources, whether it be scholarships or loans, assist with financing college, one teacher candidate recognized, "This scholarship is different. It's a meeting. This is going to be really interesting." The connections the candidates had beyond their advisors, and the professors in the education courses in which the students were enrolled, built their confidence. As one teacher candidate expressed, "...having more connections is very important to me. I love meeting other professors in the ed department, and in the schools." Felton and Lambert (2020) write of the importance of every student experiencing a genuine welcome and deep care. Each has to be valued as individuals. In addition, Felton and Lambert (2020) believe each student must develop a web of significant relationships. These individuals are critical to helping students know they belong and can succeed.

Professional Learning. When crafting the required elements for receiving the scholarship money, the writers of the grant were concerned that the teacher candidates might be overwhelmed by the professional learning required of them. Some of the recipients were university athletes and one was involved in music studies, each requiring a significant amount of time outside of the classes the students attend and the course requirements expected of them. The music education major changed their major and dropped out of the grant programming and the university athlete indicated the involvement worked for them. However, the teacher candidates viewed the professional learning as positive while making suggestions for its improvement, even mentioning that they were receiving added learning that their peers were not. One noted, "We got to hear some fantastic speakers, and I think all of them that we heard all had very powerful messages that really motivated me and moved me. I got to meet and build tons of relationships, …I got a lot more tools that I can throw into the toolbox…". Another explained in detail how they recorded the information they were learning saying, "I would have my notebook ready. I would fill it up with notes with everything that I needed. I still have those notes with me that I still take around." Finally, one student discussed how much they appreciated meeting the people they were mentored by and found the interactions to be rewarding. They discussed the difference between what is discussed in a typical class and what they gained from the professional learning saying, "It gives you a lot more insight…because it feels like a lot of classes discussed theory things, but seeing practicality and other experts and teachers talk about their things, I think it's very eye-opening."

To the surprise of the researchers, the teacher candidates asked for more opportunities to interact with one another. They liked the idea of having the opportunity to participate in the focus group interview and said that they would like to have more sessions like that where they get to discuss with other scholarship recipients. During the six professional learning opportunities, there were two sessions where the total group was together; however, teacher candidates were seated with their school mentor and their university mentor, so they did not get to interact with the other program participants. The other six professional learning opportunities were held by Zoom. The majority of the participants indicated they preferred not to have the professional development sessions delivered via Zoom. "It's easier for me to listen and understand things when I'm in-person at events," stated one participant. There was another participant who did relay they do "prefer Zoom because if I have a meeting beforehand, I could just jump on the Zoom meeting." They noted that during the two, in-person professional learning sessions, they were with their mentors and did not get to interact with the other scholarship recipients. The other six professional learning opportunities were held by Zoom.

Beneficial Mentoring. Two types of mentoring occurred for each of the teacher candidates. They were assigned a university mentor and a mentor within a public-school setting. Both types of mentoring proved to be beneficial to the teacher candidates. While expectations for mentoring was shared with both the university mentors and the school-based mentors, there was variety in the implementation of mentoring. While each mentor/mentee implementation was different in the number of times they met together and the way they communicated with each other, students consistently discussed the relationships that they formed. These relationships allowed them to feel comfortable stopping by an instructor's office, not just their mentor's office, to chat or to ask advice and to spend time in a school setting in addition to the required observations and practicums within their courses. Positive comments included, "I think the relationships that I

built with my mentors and stuff is one of the most important things [about the program]." Another discussed how they were able to spend time in a classroom noting, "I would be in his class helping him out as well. Just having that hands-on experience in his classroom has been really helpful."

One teacher candidate discussed how they communicated most often through texting. What was interesting about this relationship was that the teacher candidate, the university mentor, and the classroom mentor had a group chat together. The candidate explained, "We had a group chat, that's how we texted. We didn't text one-on-one, we all just texted together. … It was just all of us checking in on each other and communicating together."

Another teacher candidate understood the relationship that formed through the mentoring process served the important purpose of networking. The teacher candidate said, "…we're building a network and stuff. These are going to be our teacher-friends, these are going to be people that we communicate with and get ideas with. And now I have two that are experienced."

Teacher Recruitment for Under-Represented Groups. During the focus group interviews, the students were asked about how the university and the school of education can better recruit teacher candidates from under-represented groups. The purposeful ways in which professional learning presenters and speakers were chosen clearly resonated with the students of color in the program. One student noted, "I can definitely tell you that having people that look like me, being in these fields have really inspired me to become a teacher…". Another had good advice for our advisors and recruiters saying, "…just reaching out and having a sit down and talk. Because I'll say, for under-represented groups, they already feel their voice is unheard. So, most of the time students that are under-represented are not going to speak up. They're just going to sit in the classroom, get their degree the best way that they can."

The teacher candidates also noted that they were not recruited for teacher education programs in their high school settings. When asked a probing question about who they would have liked to talk to about teacher education during that time, they indicated that they would have liked to discuss the program with professors that teach in the program.

Better Retention for Under-Represented Groups. Keeping students in college and in the teacher education program is critical. The focus group participants had advice that the university and school of education need to consider focusing on positivity and building a growth mindset for students finishing their education. Much of the discussion during the focus groups was about assisting students in understanding that just because they are part of an under-represented population does not mean that college was not meant for them. One participant said, "Just keep reminding them that there's a goal, and then reminding them you are made for this." And, another noted, "…making sure they don't get discouraged, and being who you are. …people need who you are, and we need to build off of that."

A factor that impacts recruitment *and* retention for students attending a university is completion of the FAFSA. This presents a barrier for some students, especially students who are first-generation college students whose families may not have experiences completing such an extensive document and requiring information the family may view as private (taxes, income,

etc.). We found that these students need support in completing the federal student aid application (FAFSA) while they are still in high school and continuing into college. An impactful quote stands out to us, "…my mom, she only speaks Spanish. She did not have the education that I received while being here in the U.S. She's from Mexico. I was on my own for that (completion of the FAFSA). There wasn't really any tutorials or anything to really help me out. Just in the dark about that for sure."

Discussion

Limitations of the Study. The researchers acknowledge limitations to the study. There are three limitations identified that could have impacted the study including the number of participants in the study, the gender diversity represented by the research participants, and the relationship of one researcher conducting focus groups with the teacher candidates. The number of participants in the study was determined by the availability of scholarship money that could be offered to the students. The Grow Your Own program coordinator and committee members determined that larger scholarships to fewer students might have a greater impact on retention of the students. As noted earlier, these students were not receiving great amounts of financial aid from other sources. We wanted the scholarships to be an incentive to complete the professional learning and mentoring activities, i.e. to be engaged in teaching and learning opportunities afforded them. And, we wanted the scholarships to be significant enough to make a difference in their financial obligations.

With the exception of one scholarship recipient, all of the teacher candidates identified as male. When determining eligibility for the scholarship, a list of qualifying students was generated. Gender was not a factor in determining who would receive the scholarships.

And finally, as noted earlier, one of the researchers was an advisor for one of the teacher candidates in the study and a professor of five other participating students. This could have influenced how the teacher candidates responded to the focus group questions. This limitation is discussed in more detail later in the section titled *Implications for Mentoring by University Faculty for Retention and Recruitment*.

Implications for Teacher Candidates Receiving Scholarships. The receipt of the scholarship provided more than just financial assistance to these students. The notification of the scholarship helped the students to "feel special," to have confidence in their ability to succeed at college, and to have access to valuable mentorship. Students noted the confidence it gave them to know professors who they could access for assistance, chat with, and who could guide them through coursework.

The financial benefit of involvement in the Grow Your Own program was significant for these teacher candidates. While they had earned college credit before being involved in the Grow Your Own program, participants responded that the funding was helpful, with some of the candidates noting there was more than one child in their family who was either attending school or would be next year. The scholarship eased the burden of greater loan debt on the student, and in some cases, on their families.

Implications for Teacher Candidates Receiving Professional Learning. Educator agency toward professional development has been described by Datnow (2012) as the energy participants bring to the learning. Participants can be actively involved and will implement the learning, accept the learning on a surface level, or bring resistance to the learning. Because the teacher candidates in this study provided input for the professional development topics, they were actively engaged in the topics and visualized the connections with their teacher preparation coursework. The teacher candidates felt like increased student interaction with each other would have further enhanced their learning and practice. In effect, the agency participants evidenced was an asset to the building of knowledge and skills. The professional learning sessions allowed students to connect education course content with "real classrooms" in the K-12 schools. They were able to see, in practice, concepts they were studying in the university classrooms. As one student noted, "oh yeah, I heard about this [in class]."

Implications for Mentoring by University Faculty for Retention and Recruitment. Relationships were significant for students selecting to enroll in the teacher education preparation program at this particular university. Participants noted they enrolled here because they had teachers who they held in high regard in their high schools who attended this university. Erickson et al. (2009) found the "influence of teacher mentors on educational attainment is the greatest among the most disadvantaged youth" (p. 361), while Nelson (2016) found that teachers who were supportive influenced students in their decision to attend college. Some high school instructors of the candidates in the program inquired of them what they planned to do after high school, and when they expressed that they wanted to teach, their teachers recommended this university as one of the best for teacher preparation.

Relationships with faculty members seemed to be important throughout the grant period. Faculty members did not speak with teacher candidates about the opportunity to participate in the program, and some of the recipients commented they did not initially reply to the email invitation because they believed it was junk mail or spam. Smith had one of the students in class the spring and fall semesters before the grant period began, another student in class the semester prior to the start of the grant, two students in class the spring semester of the grant, and was an advisor for another of the mentees. The relationship with one candidate was such that they visited with each other at athletic events prior to, and during, the grant period. During advising sessions, a second candidate discussed her experiences in the grant helping her feel comfortable with the professors; and during class of her final semester, the author reminded the student twice to select the time they could complete the focus group interview. The faculty member subsequently served as one of the two interviewers for the data focus group discussions at the same time as having two of the candidates in class. As authors, we believe this relationship as a professor of the students might have influenced their positive remarks, possibly because they did not want to disappoint the faculty member, or perhaps they had respect for the faculty member with whom they had as a professor.

The relationship with the mentors in the program provided a safety net for students to take risks and ask the questions for which they needed answers in the fifth professional development session. The relationship with the faculty mentors allowed students to feel confident in approaching other faculty members in the department with questions and for support. Students used the personal knowledge of faculty members to select the courses taught by faculty members

they knew. As more than one student stated, they have multiple individuals to whom they can go with questions, and they are growing their professional network. The students also suggested more face-to-face time with other participants would be helpful in strengthening their knowledge base.

Ardley et al. (2020) discuss the importance of recruiting students of color into the teaching profession. They mention mentoring through "personable and unofficial actions" (p. 160), a goal for the program discussed in this article. Mentors were encouraged to use informal meetings as a way to connect with their mentees in addition to more formal observational times in the mentors' classrooms. Ardley et al. (2020) write about four specific kinds of work universities and teacher preparation programs can undertake to encourage students of color to become teachers. Their ideas target faculty development as well as student development including diverse faculty recruitment methods, diverse faculty development strategies, effective curriculum strategies, and development of students of color. To address curriculum needs, they note the importance of a curriculum that focuses on multiculturalism including where field experiences are conducted, critical thinking skills, reflective practices, preparation to teach toward diversity, and a focus on social justice issues (Ardley et al., 2020).

Erickson et al. (2009) wrote mentoring by teachers, especially for disadvantaged youth, has potential to reduce social inequities in attainment of college degrees. One of the mentors in this study wrote about the impact they believed the mentoring had with the teacher candidates saying, "I feel like there have been connections between mentors and other mentees that have been beneficial. I see two of the students in this grant around campus quite a bit and visit with them from time to time" (personal communication, February 27, 2023). They went on to elaborate that when one of the candidates was struggling in a class, they were able to nudge the student into fulfilling their requirements for a class. And, another time, when a student discussed delaying graduation, they were able to refer the student to someone on campus who could help fix the situation in order to avoid delaying the graduation date. The mentor goes on to say,

> There are benefits beyond just being paired with one student. Sitting at a table with a couple of students at the initial meeting, driving down to [rural school district location] together and eating with a few students…these students are connected to multiple mentors, and there are benefits beyond what might be visible on the Google Docs sheets or in the surveys we fill out at the end. (personal communication, February 27, 2023)

Conclusion

In a time when students completed their last years of high school online because of COVID-19 protocols, and their first year of college masked and in off-schedule courses, the value of time together outside of the traditional class time was important. Felton and Lambert (2020) identified connecting "relationship principles that guide effective programs and generative cultures at colleges and universities" (p. 17). Their work guides us in understanding what is needed for teacher candidates like those in the Grow Your Own program to not only succeed, but to thrive in their teacher preparation program.

The first relationship principle, "Every student must experience genuine welcome and deep care" (p. 17), was demonstrated at the very first meeting between the teacher candidates and their

mentors in a welcoming session. As the candidates sat with their mentors, they could easily see through the exchange of cell numbers by text that their mentors were serious about assisting them through their first days in the university setting. Those connections continued and occurred outside of the traditional classroom for the teacher candidates. These were simple meet-ups between mentor and candidate as they stopped by the Starbucks in the university library or a fast-food restaurant in the eating commons area, drove together to a professional development session 20 miles away, or occurred during walks together around campus and drop-by moments in faculty member offices.

Second, "Every student must be inspired to learn" (p. 17). During their time in the program, the teacher candidates were a part of powerful face-to-face professional development sessions including presentations by former teachers of the year from our state. In Seeger and Boyles (2021) study, the teacher candidates "reported that the early professional learning experiences helped them with confidence in daily interactions and promoted professional conversations with their colleagues and administrators. Each embraced the ability to ask questions of colleagues rather than trying to navigate teaching alone" (p. 7). The professional learning for the Grow Your Own students inspired them to understand that their chosen profession, and preparation for it, are worthy endeavors and important work to complete. They also were able to observe teachers that "looked like them."

Third, "Every student must develop a web of significant relationships" (p. 17). Relationships with their mentor professors, local teacher mentors, and with other teacher candidates involved in the grant program created a broad and supportive professional network. The mentoring faculty and teachers provided what Raposa and Hurd (2018) describe as informational support to the teacher candidates. In their large-scale study, the college students "reported that natural mentors who were faculty and staff from college provided more informational support than natural mentors who were family members or family friends" (Raposa & Hurd, 2018, p. 46). They found the mentoring relationships helped students integrate into the university setting and persist in their education.

And last, "Every student must explore questions of meaning and purpose" (p. 17). The teacher candidates were given opportunities every month in the Grow Your Own program to complete anonymous surveys telling us what topics were important to them for professional development based on their interests and concerns. They gave us their opinions about their learning following events, in the focus groups, and in reflective discussions with their mentors. In a study of mentoring teacher candidates, Ruich et al. (2020) note that the mentoring process can benefit the mentors *and* teacher candidates with "self-confidence, professionalism, and self-discovery" (p. 48). Schutz and Hoffman (2017) examine teaching as a practice that includes action research; they remind us that "reflection often requires an inspection of our beliefs…reflection on action examines the ways to challenge the controlling conditions and work" (p. 8) helping us to hone our practice. They also make a point of telling us that this kind of reflection is not easy. These acts of self-discovery and reflection lead to questioning about becoming a teacher and finding meaning and purpose in doing so.

As researchers, we learned the time invested by university faculty and school mentors, and the relationships that evolved with the mentees, assisted the teacher candidates in feeling valued and

confident. This study has demonstrated that mentoring teacher candidates during their teacher education program is an important step in helping the candidates feel confident, especially in navigating overall college experiences. In Hayden and Gratteau-Zinnell's (2019) study, they found that mentoring for clinical experiences is critical as well. They note,

> When mentoring is connected to clinical experiences…support is grounded in practice. Mentors can focus on instructional questions that come from the teaching practice of novice teachers, and can provide modeling and practice in critically reflective, thoughtfully adaptive responses. When the setting for the clinical experience is diverse, mentors can guide novice teachers to develop and enact these teaching practices in ways that are culturally relevant as well. (p. 145)

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