

BEYOND THE PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF LEARNING TO TEACH: MENTORING TEACHER CANDIDATES TOWARD THE DIVERSE NEEDS OF STUDENTS

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Abstract

Mentoring teacher candidates toward practices that value culturally responsive pedagogy is essential during clinical placements, yet this aspect of learning to teach can often be eclipsed by the practical aspects of the classroom. This study seeks to understand how mentors conceptualized their role and how this influenced their practices. The analysis drew a purposeful sample of mentors who ranked planning for cultural diversity high in an initial survey; six mentors participated in a semi-structured interview conducted in their own classroom environment. Despite the purposeful sampling, the mentors' conceptualization of their role did not reflect an overt understanding of the need to address diversity issues with teacher candidates. Development of mentor preparation and on-going support focused on intentional professional development is needed.

Keywords: mentoring, clinical preparation, diversity, teacher preparation, culturally responsive pedagogy

Introduction

Mentoring teacher candidates toward practices that value culturally responsive pedagogy is essential during clinical placements (Bullough, Draper, Smith, & Birrell, 2004; Korthagen, 2004; Valencia, Martin, Place, & Grossman, 2009; Zeichner, 2010), yet this aspect of learning to teach can often be eclipsed by the practical aspects of the classroom. If mentoring is reduced to simply focusing on classroom operations, the educative functions of the field-placement can be lost (Feiman-Nesmer, 1998). Therefore, it is crucial to explore the space between a school-based mentor's understanding of purpose within teacher preparation and mentoring practices they enact to support candidate learning. To strengthen our teacher preparation programs, it is imperative to enable school-based mentors to better guide the growth and development of the teacher candidates toward meeting the diverse needs of all students.

This study investigated mentor teachers, who work with teacher candidates in a teacher preparation program to understand the mentors' conceptualization of their role and essential function related to the teacher candidates' learning and teaching. A teacher's mentoring behaviors are mediated by their cultural values; such as their own background, the students they teach, and the values of the school. This context is key to the development of teachers' conceptualization of mentoring. Therefore, understanding how mentors conceptualized their role and how this conceptualization influenced externalized practices is imperative to the development of the mentors' knowledge base. The goal for clinical preparation is to expand the teacher candidates' development beyond the practical aspects of learning to teach, to include ways in which new teachers can address diversity within their practice. Mentor teachers must draw upon a wide repertoire of practices to facilitate this development.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the importance of mentor teachers' conceptualization of their role, a sociocultural perspective offers a lens to examine the cultural values related to mentoring. This examination includes the context in which the mentoring occurred, as well as the types of mentoring activities that are valued. As sociocultural theorists remind us, human beings interact with their world primarily through mediational means (Vygotsky, 1978). We make meaning through our social interactions with our world by accessing tool mediation - the use of artifacts, semiotic resources - the use of signs and knowledge systems, and social relations - for the construction of meaning. Life activities, semiotic means and social relations are critical in the development of thinking (Vygotsky, 1978). When considering

mentoring as a practice to construct meaning, an examination of how a mentor comes to understand his or her role toward a particular orientation affects the outcome for the teacher candidate. For teacher preparation programs, the mentors' influence on teacher candidates helps determine program outcomes; therefore, the development of clearly defined roles is imperative.

Connection to the Literature

The critical importance of high quality clinical placements in teacher preparation has received increased attention (CCSSO, 2013; Greenburg, Pomerance, & Walsh, 2011; NCATE, 2010). As indicated in the research literature, the conceptualization of the school-based mentor's role is that of a model teacher (Feiman-Nemser, 1998), a coach to the candidate (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014), a source of feedback (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009; McDonald & Flint, 2011), and a co-inquirer or reflective practitioner (Crasborn, Hennissen, Brouwer, Korthagen, & Bergen 2011; Gardiner, 2009) who challenges the teacher candidate, and themselves, to question their practice (Leshem, 2014) and the established norms regarding diversity and equity in the classroom (Athanasios et al., 2008). Teacher education programs seek to develop teachers who meet the needs of our culturally and linguistically diverse student population. The development of the dispositions and skills necessary to address this diversity are formed within the mentor teachers' classroom (Wang & Odell, 2002). Yet, studies have shown that mentor teachers characterize their role as primarily emotional and professional support, or as the responsible party for the fulfillment of responsibilities outlined by the university. Further, "teachers viewed their role in mentoring relationships as a resource person, guide, role model, friend, and experienced professional" (Russell & Russell, 2011). Finally, most mentors believe that their personal and practical contributions to the teacher candidate's experience include their own personality, years of experience, and the ability to provide constructive criticism (Hall, Draper, Smith, & Bullough, 2008). Studies confirm that mentor teachers maintain the normative view of their role as mainly one of emotional support and a place for candidates to practice teaching as their task (Clark et al., 2014). The intellectual, personal, and philosophical trials of collaborative work challenges mentors as they vacillate between being a practitioner and a teacher educator.

Unfortunately, this is a narrow conception of a mentor's role. The belief that a mentor creates a friendly environment for a teacher candidate to learn, with the expectation that the teaching, as a result of the modeling, will be a replication of the mentor's practice, leaves much of the educative nuances from being realized. Yet, Bullough (2012) argues, "no highly prescriptive role definition of mentoring ever can promise improved practice, although ...standards and orienting guidelines can be helpful" (p. 77). The mentor's conceptualization of her or his role should be based in a constructivist perspective that establishes the mentor as an investigator (Crasborn et al., 2011) of the teaching and learning necessary to enact teaching that is culturally responsive, flexible, and meets the needs of both the students and the teacher candidate. The conceptualization of the mentor's role should be educative in nature, non-directive in style, and act as a critical constructivist of new knowledge in the classroom; serving not only as a teacher educator, but also as an agent of change in the education system (Feiman-Nemser, Parker, & Zeichner, 1992).

Identification of the essential functions related to the act of mentoring and characteristics that are common to successful mentors reveals commonalities. First, mentors must be able to "develop working relationships with adults, determine the strengths and needs of a new teacher, help teachers set meaningful goals, and provide constructive feedback on instruction" (Grossman & Davis, 2012, p.55). Second, Hobson et al. (2009) suggest mentors should be "supportive, approachable, non-judgmental and trustworthy, have a positive demeanor, and possess good listening skills and the ability to empathize, as well as the willingness and ability to take an interest in beginning teachers' work and lives" (p.212). Third, there must be time for the mentor to observe and provide feedback to the teacher candidate (Giebelhaus & Bowman, 2002), which includes challenging conversations about diversity and equitable teaching practices (Achinstein & Athanasios, 2005; Wang & Odell, 2002), as feedback is considered an essential element of mentoring (Clarke et al., 2014). The development of effective communication skills provides mentors with a platform from which to deliver high-quality feedback (Killian & Wilkins, 2009). The quality of the feedback is relevant and must move beyond a focus on the procedural aspects of teaching to the promotion of reflection of the thinking and beliefs held by both the mentor and the teacher candidate (Wang & Odell, 2002), even if these critical conversations are uncomfortable and possibly disruptive to the relationship (Martin, 1994).

The creation of a supportive environment has an emotional, situational, and pedagogical dimension. The situational support that is

focused on technical advice, school norms and policies, and guidance necessary to function in the classroom (Athanases et al., 2008) must be accompanied by the skills to deconstruct pedagogy and misconceptions related to teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students (Achinstein & Athanases, 2005). This “knowledge base,” as referenced by Achinstein and Athanases (2005), should be focused on equitable teaching practices and should challenge the teaching schema developed by an apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975). Skilled, supportive mentors celebrate the richness of diversity and develop cultural competence to expand the instructional repertoires of the teacher candidates. Wang and Odell (2002) argued that skilled mentors avoid approaching diversity through a deficit perspective by working “deliberately to blur the borders between themselves and their students and to help students develop counter-knowledge that challenged the status quo” (p.486). The affective skills of a mentor who is oriented toward developing equitable teaching practices must rely on effective communication skills used in feedback and other critical conversations. The primary research question for this study is, how do mentor teachers conceptualize their role in developing preservice teachers’ understanding of diverse student needs?

Methods

The Master of Education Program (MEP) is situated within the college of education at a large university located in a major urban center and provides a linguistically and culturally diverse context for this teacher preparation program. The selection of this program was appropriate because the year-long field placement of the teacher candidates is reflective of many teacher preparation programs’ desire to extend the length of field placements beyond the traditional semester-long experience. The graduates of this program are highly sought after in area districts, which further situated the program as a good model for exploring successful mentor teachers’ understanding of their role and purpose within the teacher preparation program.

The MEP worked with secondary schools across six urban and two rural school districts in the city. The program directors were directly involved with the recruitment and preparation of all mentors. The program directors also maintain strong relationships with many of the mentors and district administrators. While it is acknowledged that the program was running well, the directors, as reflective practitioners, engage in program evaluation each year. The directors make a concerted effort to respond to the needs of the teacher candidates, mentors, university supervisors, and instructors associated with the program. This responsiveness to program assessment and development presents this study as a valuable contribution to ongoing program development for this teacher preparation program.

Participants

During this study, the MEP placed 54 teacher candidates in secondary schools, grades six through 12. The diversity of the schools in which the mentors worked was reflective of the highly diverse, urban metropolitan area in which the teacher preparation program was situated. This diverse range of classrooms was representative of the type of classrooms that many first-year teachers face, so understanding how mentors work within their diverse classrooms to enact mentoring practices that prepare teacher candidates for culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms was an intended result of this study. In anticipation of determining mentoring practices that prepare candidates for this diversity, the interview sample was selected based on the Title I status of the mentor’s school and the mentor’s ranking of the importance of preparing the candidate to address the cultural and linguistic differences among students.

Survey sample. Participants in phase one consisted of all 54 mentor teachers who were involved with the Master of Education Program (MEP) during the 2013-14 academic year. Of the 54 mentors recruited for the survey, 40 completed the survey resulting in a 74% response rate.

Interview sample. The purposive sample for phase two was bound by the analysis of phase one data collection. The six participants in the sample were at multiple grade levels and at multiple sites, resulting in a sample that spanned five school sites; four of which were high schools. At one school, there were two participants, both female: an English teacher and a biology/chemistry teacher. The remaining participants were all English teachers. The grade levels taught by the interview sample mentors ranged from eighth to twelfth grades.

The boundaries used in selection of the interview sample were based on Vygotsky’s (1978) theory that learning happens in a particular social context, and engagement in our physical environment develops our understanding of the social dynamics of our thinking. Since it

was important not only to select mentors who worked in schools that potentially represented cultural and linguistic diversity, but to also select mentors who indicated they place value on promoting instruction that is inclusive of practices to meet the diverse needs of students, the following criteria were selected from the ranking section of the survey:

1. Designing of instruction for various cultural backgrounds and perspectives
2. Delivering engaging, student-centered instruction.

Based on the mentors who ranked those criteria highly, the selection was further narrowed to mentors who responded “Good” or “Very Good” to these survey questions:

1. “How well do you understand your purpose as a teacher candidate (student teacher / teacher intern) mentor teacher?”
2. “How do you rate your confidence in your ability to be a good mentor?”

This further filtering was intended to provide a sample that represented mentors with a clear conception of their role, who evaluated themselves as strong mentors, placed a high value on cultural diversity, and developed constructivist views through their mentoring practices.

The purposive sampling strategy was intended to identify mentors who were likely to have a higher level of diversity in their classroom as this would provide the stage for educative functions of mentoring that may promote diverse cultural perspectives (Feiman-Nemser, Parker, & Zeichner, 1992; Feiman-Nemser, 1998). It was also anticipated that mentors who ranked student-centered instruction highly would also display a willingness to encourage experimenting with pedagogical practices, classroom and behavior management, and building relationships (Grossman & Davis, 2012; Leatham & Peterson, 2009). Through this inclusion of participants, a sample of cases was established from which an analysis of mentor role conceptualization was conducted with the intent to understand the metacognitive aspects involved in mentoring a teacher candidate, as well as the challenges and barriers that may be present that prevent educative mentoring.

Data Sources

The data sources in this study were drawn from two phases of data collection. In phase one, an initial survey of all of the mentor teachers in the Master of Education (MEP) teacher preparation program led to the selection of a purposive sample. This was intended to focus on participants with unique attributes for phase two, in which teachers were interviewed about their role as a mentor and observed while mentoring their teacher candidate. Based on a high ranking of valuing cultural diversity in their practice, six mentors were selected and participated in a semi-structured interview.

Through interviews and observation, the sample mentors enacted practices that may or may not be consistent with their perceived purpose and role; these practices were documented and analyzed. Considering the importance of this mentoring relationship on the teacher candidates’ preparation outcomes, identification of mentoring approaches that can be strengthened by preparation are important. Emphasizing these approaches as part of partnership development strengthen the mentoring system.

Data Collection

The survey employed in the first phase of data collection was distributed to all mentors working with teacher candidates in the MEP in January 2014. The analysis of the survey results provided the data necessary to use purposeful sampling for the second phase of the data collection. This sampling strategy involved selecting a sample across levels of experience and self-reported knowledge and skills to provide “information rich” cases (Merriam, 1998). Phase two included only the selected sample population and employed interviews toward the middle of the spring 2014 semester. The interview was developed to collect data in two ways. First, questions were specifically tailored toward the participants based on their answers in the survey. For example, based on the mentor’s ranking of areas of growth for their mentee, during the interview, each mentor was asked how she or he promoted that specific type of growth through mentoring practices. Second, during the interview, special attention was paid to uncovering “contradictions between the general and the specific” (Kvale, 1996, p.56) to better understand how the mentor developed her or his conceptions; and how, through mentoring practices, these contradictions may, or may not, “uncover new developmental tendencies in order to obtain true knowledge in the social worlds” (Kvale, 1996, p.56). Based on the context-specific nature of the interview, an individual protocol was used for each participant that was structured around a basic framework of questions.

Phase one data collection. The first phase of data collection provided an understanding of the mentor teachers' level of experience both as a classroom teacher and a mentor. The survey was developed to include general data about the mentor teachers. It was adapted from two existing protocols to understand mentors' conceptualization of their relationship with the teacher candidate based on knowledge and skills associated with mentoring (Podsen & Denmark, 2000), successful mentor characteristics, and a needs assessment (Gordon, 1991).

Phase two data collection. The primary instrument for data collection in phase two was a phenomenological interview, which is designed to capture the perception of participants who are involved in a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). This approach to interviewing was appropriate because the intent of the study was to "understand social phenomena from the actor's own perspectives, describing the world as experienced by the subjects, with the important assumption that the important reality is what people perceive it to be" (Kvale, 1996, p.52). In this study, understanding the mentor's conceptualization of her or his role, from their "reality" was the main research focus. Understanding the "reality" of how a participant perceived her or his role provided perspective on the relationship with the teacher candidate. After each mentor interview, an observation of the mentor and mentee working together was also conducted. This observation provided understanding of how the mentor externalized practices with her or his mentee and added to the richness of each case.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was also conducted in two phases: the initial analysis of data collected during phase one continued to inform the analysis during phase two. During phase two of data analysis, the transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed and the first cycle of protocol coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) was conducted. Once the transcripts and survey data were uploaded into the Dedoose software, the first cycle of protocol coding (Miles et al., 2014) was conducted. The codes used in this phase of analysis were developed deductively based on the general questions from the interview protocol. During this stage, particular attention was paid to emerging themes. These themes were considered as subsequent analysis of the interviews was conducted. After this initial coding of interview responses, a descriptive coding method was used to further condense the data to sharpen the focus of the coding, as well as to discard and sort the corpus of data (Miles et al., 2014). During this pass of coding, the "variables of interest" that were generated during the survey analysis were also considered, paying particular attention for occurrences of these variables within the interview as either congruent or incongruent with the mentors' previous responses. For each case, the interview protocol was adapted based on the survey response. These variables were sought within the more nuanced descriptive coding process. Additionally, throughout the descriptive coding, "meaning categorization" was used to "reduce long statements to simple categories" (Kvale, 1996, p.192) as themes emerged within the data.

Participant,
including years of
experience and
previous mentoring
experience

Type

Participation

Style

Alicia, 15 or more
years of teaching,
three previous
teacher candidates

competency

- provider of feedback
- gatekeepers
- modelers of practice
- agents of socialization
- advocates of the practical
- abiders of change
- gleaners of knowledge
- teachers of children

directive

Doug, 11-15 years
of teaching, four

apprenticeship

- modelers of practice
- conveners of relation

absent/ indulgent

previous teacher candidates		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● agents of socialization ● advocates of the practical ● teachers of children 	
Julia, 6-10 years of teaching, no previous teacher candidates	competency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● provider of feedback ● modelers of practice ● supporters of reflection ● purveyors of context ● agents of socialization ● gleaners of knowledge ● teachers of children 	directive/ indulgent
Luanne, 15 or more years of teaching, three previous teacher candidates	apprenticeship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● provider of feedback ● modelers of practice ● conveners of relation ● agents of socialization ● advocates of the practical ● teachers of children 	indulgent/ directive
Murray, 15 or more years of teaching, four previous teacher candidates	reflective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● provider of feedback ● modelers of practice ● supporters of reflection ● purveyors of context ● conveners of relation ● agents of socialization ● gleaners of knowledge ● abiders of change 	non-directive
Sheila, 11-15 years of teaching, one previous teacher candidate	reflective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● provider of feedback ● modelers of practice ● supporters of reflection ● agents of socialization ● advocates of the practical ● gleaners of knowledge 	non-directive

Table 1: *Mentors' Externalization of Mentoring Type, Participation, and Style to Understand the Continuum of Practices*

In order to best display these data, this analysis used a case-oriented approach. By looking across the six mentors who were in the interview sample, observation of their conceptualization of their role was made. Creating a “rich, detailed profile” of each mentor allowed the cases to be compared against the conceptual framework in the literature (Athanases et al., 2008; Bradbury & Koballa, 2008; Clarke et al., 2014; Crasborn et al., 2011; Feiman-Nemser et al., 1992; Furlong & Maynard, 1995; Gardiner, 2009; Gut, Beam, Henning, Cochran, & Knight, 2014; Hennissen et al., 2008; Lai, 2010; Lawley, Moore, & Smajic, 2014; Tok, 2012; Wang & Odell, 2002). This profile was developed as a vignette describing each case and then developed as a “construct table” that displayed the “varying perspectives about selected concepts” related to the mentors’ role and identified in the literature as seen in Table 1 (Miles et al., 2014, p.170).

Results

Despite the purposive selection of mentors who valued designing instruction for diverse values and cultures, in this study, the mentors’ conceptualization of their role did not reflect an overt understanding of the need to address diversity issues with the candidates. Mentors in this study did not incorporate these values into their mentoring practices; rather, these mentors maintained a traditional view of mentoring that focused on the daily aspects of teaching, including classroom management and lesson planning. Teacher candidates need

mentoring that prepares them to become responsive and reflective teachers in order to engage the increasingly diverse composition of today's classrooms. This supports the findings of Achinstein and Athanases (2005) who posit that traditional mentoring does not address "equity-focused" practices to push teacher candidates toward diverse practices. Although, equity alone, which could be a part of the mentors' practices, can still fall short of meeting the needs of students in our contemporary classrooms and schools.

The most prevalent theme identified by mentors was that their primary function was to coach, provide feedback, and guide the teacher candidates; over half of the mentors reported this as their function. While this mirrors the findings of numerous studies (Hobson et al., 2009; Killian & Wilkins, 2009; McDonald & Flint, 2011), the mentors in this study indicated feedback on teaching strategies was the most important to provide; while none mentioned a focus on how they extended teaching strategies to address diverse student needs. Many mentors spoke about preparing the candidates with a "realistic experience" that included many of the procedural aspects like recording grades and attendance, attending meetings, and maintaining contact with parents. One mentor mentioned "reflective teaching and self-discovery," but it was not connected to elements of teaching, but instead, to the "emotional rollercoaster" of classroom teaching. None of the mentors framed feedback or conversation through the lens of diversity as an ongoing process.

Gardiner (2011) and Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen, and Bergen (2008) agree that effective mentors make their metacognitive processes while teaching transparent as a part of the mentoring dialog with teacher candidates. The enactment of practices that were evident in this study did not reveal a deconstruction of the pedagogical practices used by the mentor as she or he modeled practices. The coaching model that was described by a number of the interview sample mentors did not include rich conversations about the cultural and cognitive needs of students, although this sample was selected purposively based on their own ranking of the need to plan for diversity as well and the diverse nature of their school context. This omission points toward a clear need for mentor development in specific approaches for the essential cultural competence development teacher candidates will need in their future practice. It is unclear why these mentors did not address the richness of diversity in their practice, but it opens a space to explore ways for educator preparation programs to elicit this knowledge base alongside the mentors to develop practices that will enrich the teacher candidates' teaching and learning.

Conclusions

Mentors maintain a traditional approach to their role that is based not on a robust "knowledge base," but instead, on a more limited view of their role as a provider of procedural feedback and guide during field placements. Without clear guidance and intentional professional development, mentors are unlikely to change. In order to develop new systems of mentoring, preparation and on-going support needs to be designed in collaboration with mentors in order to guide professional learning opportunities.

While it remains unclear, as illustrated in the literature, how to implement preparation and on-going support for mentors, it is clear that mentors need to have the knowledge base to develop new practices (Achinstein & Athanases, 2005) and the flexibility to be reflexive to the teacher candidates' needs (Crasborn et al., 2011; Geibelhaus & Bowman, 2002). Mentors maintain a traditional approach to their role that is based not on a robust repertoire of practices, but instead on a more limited view of their role as a provider of feedback and guide during field placements. Due to unclear expectations of their purpose, mentors understood their purpose to be more practical, rather than educative, tending to the day-to-day experiences of teaching, very rarely moving toward a more challenging stance of exploring issues of diversity, student outcomes, or the teacher candidates' own learning outcomes. It can be inferred that the mentors' belief that they need little or no support is related to a lack of clear understanding of the potential of their role. While it is evident that clarity of role is necessary, there is not a clear model for the development of this knowledge base as it remains contextual; therefore, preparation of mentor teachers must be reflexive and rooted in the real experiences of the mentors and teacher candidates in the field placement.

The interview sample was limited to mentors who indicated that engaging teacher candidates in culturally responsive pedagogy was a priority for the candidates' growth. While this was intended to reveal mentoring practices that value issues of diversity in the classroom,

these issues were not openly a part of the discussion of mentoring. This missing component could be related to the mentors' own discomfort talking about critical issues with a white researcher. It could also be limited by the researcher not asking questions in a way that directed the participants toward this challenging work, although the researcher attempted to situate the interview toward these topics by pulling the mentors' own responses regarding culturally diverse practices from their survey responses. Further limiting this research was the omission of the mentor teachers' own cultural backgrounds as a part of the data collected. This information may have provided an inroad toward the mentors' understanding of race, ethnicity and cultural issues in the classroom. Also, while the larger sample reflected a relatively equal balance between mentors at Title I schools and non-Title I schools, the interview sample focused on mentors at a Title I schools. This study was also limited to mentor teachers and did not include perspectives from the teacher candidates or the university supervisors, who are affected by, and in turn influence, the mentor's function.

The mentors in this study maintain a traditional approach to mentoring that is based, in part, on their own experience being mentored during teacher preparation. This model of mentoring, while historically established and maintained as the status quo, fails to meet the increased need for robust clinical experiences for teacher candidates. Without clear guidance regarding expectations for mentoring that would align the mentoring practices with the necessary learning outcomes of the teacher candidates, mentors are unlikely to change. Since mentors are generally not forthright in sharing their needs, it is further evident that strong partnerships must be developed in which development agency is implemented across the teacher preparation stakeholders. In order to capture the co-development of new knowledge across the mentoring system, research related to this work must be design-based and longitudinal, adapting to the new needs and employing innovative solutions to maintain the nexus of the study inside the classrooms, at the center of the mentoring relationship.

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