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## Master's Students' Challenges, Achievements, and Professional Development

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## Master's Students' Challenges, Achievements, and Professional Development

### Abstract

Few inquiries have investigated master's students in education as they mentor preservice teachers. In this embedded case study I explored the professional development of 15 master's students as they mentored 35 preservice teachers for eight weeks in a summer literacy camp. Data sources were e-mail exchanges, written reports, and transcriptions from focus groups and in-class conversations. I analyzed the data through constant comparison methods and discovered that the mentors were initially frustrated with their mentoring responsibilities and had little empathy for the preservice teachers. By the end of the camp, they recognized the benefits of mentoring and gained confidence as mentors. Learning occurred for both the mentors and the preservice teachers. Implications include the power of social participation in authentic contexts.

### Keywords

Community of Practice, Embedded Case Study, Master's Student Mentors, and Summer Literacy Camp

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# **Mentoring Preservice Teachers in a Community of Practice Summer Literacy Camp: Master's Students' Challenges, Achievements, and Professional Development**

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*Few inquiries have investigated master's students in education as they mentor preservice teachers. In this embedded case study I explored the professional development of 15 master's students as they mentored 35 preservice teachers for eight weeks in a summer literacy camp. Data sources were e-mail exchanges, written reports, and transcriptions from focus groups and in-class conversations. I analyzed the data through constant comparison methods and discovered that the mentors were initially frustrated with their mentoring responsibilities and had little empathy for the preservice teachers. By the end of the camp, they recognized the benefits of mentoring and gained confidence as mentors. Learning occurred for both the mentors and the preservice teachers. Implications include the power of social participation in authentic contexts. Key Words: Community of Practice, Embedded Case Study, Master's Student Mentors, and Summer Literacy Camp*

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## **Introduction**

*We need more direct studies on mentoring...especially in urban environments. We also need to know how mentors learn to work with novices in productive ways. (Feiman-Nemser, 1996, p. 2)*

Members of a community of practice are practitioners who work toward common goals in an authentic context (Lave & Wenger, 1990; Richards, Bennett, & Shea, 2007). Typically, experts in a community of practice mentor individuals who are newcomers to the group, and help them acquire skills and dispositions specific to a community's purpose (Peddy, 2001; Podsen & Denmark, 2007; Richards et al.). As newcomers gain knowledge and experience vital to a community's function, experts redefine their mentoring responsibilities. They gradually step back, and help newcomers move from the periphery of the community to its center (Lave, & Wenger, 1990; Wang & Odell, 2007). At present, communities of practice are not well known in teacher education. Yet, recent research indicates education majors' professional development is enhanced when they have opportunities to collaborate in a community environment in which newcomers are mentored by experts (Richards et al.). Unlike communities of practice, "mentoring is a critical topic in education today" (Podsen & Denmark, p. 9). However, as mentoring programs gain momentum there is little information to guide mentors or those who assist mentors in understanding the mentoring role. Moreover, a review of the literature shows that, with the exception of Bryan (2006), research on

mentoring has not yet begun to examine the problems mentors face and attempt to solve in field-based settings. Therefore, in an effort to add to the body of literature and acquire insights that might help my own practices as a supervisor of master's student mentors and preservice teachers in an educational community of practice, I responded to Feiman-Nemser's (1996) call for research on direct studies on mentoring. I decided to specifically focus on the master's students who served as experts (i.e., mentors) to preservice teachers (i.e., newcomers) in a community of practice because minimal attention has been given to those who serve as mentors to beginning teachers (Billett, 1996).

### **Informing the Inquiry**

This study was grounded in contemporary perspectives from the field of communication particularly the examination of the dynamics and nuances of interactions between message senders and receivers (Burgoon & Dillman, 1995). As communication experts note, when individuals develop close interpersonal relationships over time, they also develop mutual respect, empathy, trust, and common goals (Knapp & Daly, 2002). As they become more secure and confident about their abilities and identities they reveal more of themselves and express "an attitude toward each other that is honest, open, spontaneous, and nonjudgmental, and based on equality rather than superiority" (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2005, p. 7). Interpersonal communication principles are closely tied to mentoring frameworks. For example, it is well known that skilled mentors recognize the importance of establishing reciprocal rapport and trust with mentees (Podsen & Denmark, 2007). In fact, trust and open communication are the heart of mentoring. Therefore, Pitton (2006) notes "interactions between mentors and mentees must be based on trust" (p. 19, also see Hicks, Glasgow, & McNary, 2004). This process is not linear; rather, it is a circular loop. Open communication builds trust. In turn, trust promotes open communication (Pitton). Excellent mentors also listen actively. They take time to listen to mentees' overt messages as well as their subtle covert messages so they can discern the intended meaning behind verbal communication. In addition, successful mentors convey genuine interest and offer consistent attention to those whom they mentor (Johnson & Ridley, 2008).

Literature on teacher mentoring served as another foundation for the research. Mentoring in education has been an important topic only since the early 1980s (Feiman-Nemser, 1996). Not surprisingly, the literature indicates mentors can assist those new to a profession. Experienced teachers possess an extensive repertoire of helping strategies they can offer to "meet beginning teacher needs" (Wildman, Magliaro, Niles, & Niles, 1992, p. 205). In particular, veteran educators can help new teachers (a) devise solutions to teaching challenges; (b) improve instructional practices; and (c) accept responsibility for what goes on in their classrooms (Holloway, 2001). Relevant to this study is that empirically validated helper-therapy principles originating in the discipline of psychotherapy (Roberts, 1999, 2000) are now considered germane to the field of mentoring. Scholars who investigate the dynamics of helper therapy principles state there are personal and professional rewards associated with assisting others (Holloway; Reissman, 1965; Yalom, 1995). As Betz (2009) observes, individuals in a relationship benefit more from what they give than from what they receive. Helping another takes away anxieties and self-absorption and replaces negative emotions with feelings of

energy and wellbeing (Betz). Paradoxical as it may appear, providing help is the most advantageous way of being helped (Reissman). For instance, experts who share their knowledge with newcomers to a community have opportunities to review and reflect upon their own beliefs, perceptions, and understandings (Gitterman & Shulman, 2005). In addition, as mentors provide ongoing guidance they are able to enhance their interpersonal communication skills and they experience a professional and personal synergy and personal satisfaction when they engage in helping relationships with others (Johnson & Ridley, 2008; Jonson, 2002; Knoche & Zamboanga, 2006). In short, as Reissman, a social worker, noted over 40 years ago, mentors help themselves through the process of helping others.

Tenets from situated apprenticeship models (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pratt, 1998; Rogoff, 1984) were also used to position the inquiry. Basically, this model assumes a constructivist approach to learning that emphasizes authentic projects that include novices and experts who engage in dialogue concerning a shared experience. In addition, constructivists view cognition as situation-bound and emphasize the benefits of coaching, apprenticeship, and collaboration (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). “Based on this perspective, learning involves a gradual participation in the practices of a professional community” (Wang & Odell, 2007, p. 476). Scholars propose that engaging in practices inherent to a professional community is likely to lead to positive changes in members’ cognitive development (Billett, 1996). When applied to education, these views help to explain how over time, mentors can help novice teachers become familiar and comfortable with the culture and practice of teaching (Franke & Dahlgren, 1996). In the same way, it appears that those who mentor may also experience positive outcomes, signaling the need for exploration to provide research-based verification (Billett). As Billett notes, although some research has been conducted in business organizational settings on the benefits of mentoring, few studies have investigated mentors’ experiences in educational contexts. In particular, there is a paucity of information about mentors in education as they move through stages and competencies of mentoring. Therefore, although “mentoring is a critical issue in education today” (Podsen & Denmark, 2007, p. 9), the literature related to the possible benefits of mentoring for mentors is limited.

### **My Role in Shaping the Inquiry**

As qualitative researchers recognize, “understanding who we are can shape what we see, hear, know, and learn during fieldwork and subsequent analysis” (Patton, 2002, p. 27). Therefore, in this section I describe my professional work and explain how my experiences and beliefs connect to the inquiry depicted in this paper. I am a professor of literacy teacher education who believes education majors’ learning is best accomplished in field-based settings in which they can connect theory with practice. I also believe preservice teachers’ professional development is enhanced when they have opportunities to work in a community of practice structure where they receive support from mentors. Therefore, each summer I organize and coordinate two courses that connect master’s student mentors and preservice teachers.

A review of the extant literature showed there is a need to understand how to prepare mentors in education. Thus, I decided to conduct an inquiry that centered on the master’s students who served as mentors to the preservice teachers. I sought to discover

the ways mentoring activities might benefit the master's students. I also wanted to learn how I might better assist the master's students as they served as mentors. Ultimately, I hoped to enhance my own practices as a supervisor of a community of practice that included mentoring activities. The following two questions guided my inquiry.

1. What are the concerns and accomplishments of the master's students as they mentor preservice teachers for eight weeks in a community of practice summer literacy camp?
2. In what ways does coaching preservice teachers in a community of practice summer literacy camp facilitate the master's students' professional development?

## Methods

### *Qualitative research methodology employed*

Prior to the beginning of this third consecutive summer literacy camp and as supervisor of the initiative, I thought I might capture and report on all of the multifaceted phenomena associated with the project. Therefore, I contemplated employing a holistic case study approach to present a comprehensive picture of the camp as a bounded system (Smith, 1979). However, agreeing with Stake (2000) that "the whole story exceeds anyone's knowing" (p. 444), I decided to concentrate on a key component of the project and focus on the development of the master's students' mentoring abilities. As formal mentoring programs in education grow in popularity, there is a growing need to understand how to prepare skilled mentors (Podsen & Denmark, 2007; Wang & Odell, 2007). In particular, I wanted to learn about the master's students' challenges, concerns, and achievements as they coached the preservice teachers. I also hoped to discover the ways in which serving as mentors to the master's students over the course of the 8-week program might enhance the master's students' professional development. I had a hunch engaging in mentoring activities had the potential to benefit the master's students in multiple ways. But, previous studies centered on mentor's experiences "have lacked a research focus on the details of mentoring interactions in practical settings" (Awaya, McEwan, Heyler, Linsky, Lum, & Wakakawa, 2003, p. 47). Therefore, I had limited information to support my intuitive feelings. Accordingly, I had an intrinsic, central interest in understanding the master's student mentors within the context, boundaries, and events of a milieu. Because I made a choice to study a specific dimension of the camp (i.e., the master's student mentors), I selected an embedded case design (i.e., a small case within a larger bounded case; Stake, 2000) as the appropriate methodology for maximizing my understanding of the master's student mentors' concerns, problems, and accomplishments.

### *Context for the camp, camp structure, and instructional philosophy*

The literacy camp met one morning per week for eight weeks in a community center adjacent to a low-income urban housing area close to the university. Seventy-five children, whose ages ranged from 6-12, participated in the camp. Most had difficulties reading and writing. Ninety

percent of the children who attended the camp received free or subsidized breakfast and lunch in their elementary schools during the school year. Eighty percent of the children in the camp were African-American, 15 percent were Hispanic, and 5 percent were Caucasian. The majority scored at or below the 20th percentile on annual reading and language arts standardized assessments administered at their schools. (M. Dorvil, University Area Community Development Corporation Supervisor, personal communication, April 6, 2009)

A total of 50 education majors in two courses participated in the camp. Thirty-five preservice teachers were enrolled in an undergraduate reading methods course entitled, *Linking Literacy Instruction to Assessment*, taught by a doctoral student. The preservice teachers in the course (ages 21- 45) were either in their third or fourth year of a four-year elementary teacher education program. All were female and none had teaching experience other than serving as assistants in elementary classrooms two mornings a week for two semesters.

In addition to the preservice teachers, 15 master's students (two males and 13 females, ages 26 - 44) were enrolled in a Practicum in Reading course that I taught. The course was designed to help master's students develop expertise in assessment and remediation of pre-Kindergarten - 12th grade learners' reading difficulties. Ten of the master's students were veteran teachers with at least ten years of experience and five had at least two years experience in the classroom; only one had previously served for a short time as a mentor in her school. Thus, the master's students had varying levels of teaching experiences and with one exception; they had no experience serving as mentors.

The preservice teachers and master's students in each course received two separate three-hour introductory sessions about the camp and course requirements. Following the two initial class meetings, once a week the preservice teachers and master's students traveled to the community center and engaged in independent course activities that included weekly lectures, class discussions, and demonstration lessons. As supervisor of the camp I arranged the two courses so they met at the same time at the community center, although each course remained autonomous. Each course had its own instructor and met in separate rooms because of university requirements related to disparities between the master's students' and preservice teachers' professional knowledge and experiences, which influenced course content. Following the independent class meetings, the master's students and preservice teachers convened together in small groups (one master's student and two or three preservice teachers) to plan for half an hour. Then, they tutored their small groups of children for two hours once a week for a total of 16 hours.

I answered the master's students' questions about mentoring during class meetings; however, because of time constraints and my own lack of understanding about the importance of preparing mentors, I did not organize orientation meetings, or supply professional readings prior to the beginning of the program that might have helped clarify the interpersonal supportive roles and coaching competencies I expected the master's students to demonstrate as mentors to the preservice teachers. I also did not arrange social events in which the master's students and preservice teachers could meet, engage in informal conversations, and get to know one another in preparation for their

mentoring/mentee partnerships although Bryan (2006) advises that supervisors of mentoring programs should organize these types of meetings.

I initiated the mentoring component of the project because it aligned with my staunch beliefs about the benefits of collaboration and coaching in educational communities (Bryan, 2006; Richards, 2006). Specifically because of my previous research initiatives in mentoring (Richards et al., 2007) and my experiences supervising communities of practice in educational contexts, I believed engaging in mentoring activities had the potential to enhance the master's students' professional development, and at the same time, the master's students would provide support to the preservice teachers as they learned to connect literacy theory with practice.

Four female volunteer doctoral assistants (Annie, Beth, Diane, and Susan) helped in the program. They each had considerable experience as elementary teachers, reading coaches, and instructors of preservice teacher literacy courses. They held firm constructivist teaching/learning orientations and modeled literacy lessons in which they exemplified quality instruction.

There were 15 tutoring teams comprised of one master's student, two or three preservice teachers, and five children. I grouped the children according to grade level, and the mentors and preservice teachers chose their tutoring groups according to grade level preference. As a result, grade level selection determined the master's students' and preservice teachers' mentor/mentee relationships although research indicates successful mentor-novice relationships are best facilitated through personal choice on the part of both parties (Bryan, 2006; Wildman et al., 1992).

The four doctoral assistants, were each responsible for advising three or four tutoring groups, although they also provided teaching tips to all of the master's students and preservice teachers. The doctoral assistants attended the Practicum in Reading lectures, seminar discussions, and model lessons, and helped me answer the master's students' questions about mentoring. They also met with me after each camp session to share what they had observed, and discuss ways to facilitate all of the education majors' professional growth.

Since communication between mentors and novices is critical to the mentoring process (Bryan, 2006; Feiman-Nemser, 2001), I required the master's students to e-mail the preservice teachers weekly and asked them to forward these weekly messages to me. Although it was not mandatory, some of the master's student mentors and preservice teachers also met after the tutoring sessions, or during the week to plan lessons. When class meetings ended at 10:30 a.m. as part of class requirements, the master's student mentors and preservice teachers worked together in their designated groups for half an hour to plan and coordinate their 11 a.m. - 1 p.m. lessons.

### *Recruitment of study participants*

I received Institutional Review Board approval for the study prior to the beginning of the camp. Then, at our first class meeting on campus, I explained my rationale for the inquiry to the 15 master's students and solicited their participation. I told them that they did not have to take part in the study and that non-participation would not affect their final grade. All of the master's students elected to participate.



### *Data collection*

Throughout the inquiry I collected four sources of narrative data: (a) weekly e-mail exchanges between the master's student mentors and the preservice teachers; (b) weekly e-mail communication between the master's student mentors and me; (c) master's student mentors' weekly typed reports that described their opinions, concerns, and reflections about mentoring, and; (d) transcribed focus group and in-class conversations that centered on the master's student concerns, achievements, and perceptions about mentoring. My rationale for employing these verbal and written data sources was that narrative data collected over time illuminates an individual's shifting feelings, perceptions, understanding, and experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The weekly e-mail messages between the master's students and the preservice teachers especially revealed their developing relationships (e.g., "Please prepare your lesson for this week. You must prepare" versus "Congratulations. You are doing so much better than when you first started in the camp. As your mentor, I have to say I am proud of you now"). The mentors' e-mail communication to me and their weekly typed reports also illuminated their on-going feelings and understandings about their mentoring responsibilities as did the transcribed focus group and in-class conversations (e.g., "They [the preservice teachers] are helpless" versus "I have to remember that the preservice teachers have never taught before").

### *Analysis of the data*

The embedded case study (i.e., a section of a holistic case; Stake, 2005) was complex because of the large number of education majors in the camp. Large numbers of study participants contribute to the possibility that a single researcher might overlook or discount relevant data. "When the case is too large for one researcher to know well...teaming is an important option" (Stake, 2005, p. 453). Therefore, at the conclusion of the camp, as Stake (2005) advises, the four doctoral assistants and I teamed together to systematically analyze the four sources of chronologically-ordered data that consisted of a total of 840 artifacts grouped according to: (a) weekly e-mail exchanges between the master's student mentors and the preservice teachers; (b) weekly e-mail communication between the master's student mentors and me; (c) master's student mentors' weekly typed reports that described their opinions, concerns, and reflections about mentoring, and; (d) transcribed focus group and in-class conversations that centered on the master's student experiences as they mentored the preservice teachers.

The four doctoral assistants and I met six times to review the data. We also engaged in inter-rater reliability throughout the data analysis and coding processes by reviewing sets of data separately and documenting discourse patterns. We reconvened to discuss the encompassing themes we believed were evident. We resolved any discrepancies in our opinions through discussion until we came to a consensus. For example, there were a few times when a doctoral assistant thought statements made by mentors were not important to the inquiry because they directed preservice teachers to simply follow directions (e.g., "Please prepare your lesson for this week. You must prepare"). However, considerable discussion allowed the doctoral assistant to consider

that impersonal or interpersonal qualities of messages are indicators of message senders' feelings and perceptions (Beebe et al., 2005).

We continued to read and, reread the data until we were familiar and sensitive to the content (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000). Then, guided by the two research questions that positioned the inquiry coupled with our professional judgment, we underlined words, sentences, and longer discourse across all data sets that appeared relevant to our inquiry. For example, we underlined the following e-mail message written by a master's student to me during the first week of camp: "It is just rude and inconsiderate of them [preservice teachers] to not respond to my e-mail."

Next, we coded the data using inductive constant comparative methods. Inductive constant comparative analysis involves revisiting the data numerous times to refine, rethink, and ultimately to document and come to conclusions about recurring themes or patterns (Creswell, 1998; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005; Patton, 2002). Inductive analysis "is a creative process that requires making careful considered judgements about what is meaningful in the data" (Patton, p. 406). For instance, we situated the message ("It is just rude and inconsiderate of them [preservice teachers] to not respond to my e-mail") with other messages that we deemed were similar in nature (e.g., "Are these preservice teachers committed? I am wondering about that," and "It is 9 PM and I still have not heard from my preservice teachers – not one! We tutor tomorrow. I am shocked I have not heard from them. I am going to e-mail them again right now. I want to know what's going on"). Finally, we developed themes through a process of continuous refinement.

As a final check on our assumptions and to substantiate our accuracy, we triangulated the four data sets (weekly e-mail exchanges between the master's students and the preservice teachers, weekly e-mail communication between the masters' students and me, master's students' weekly typed reports describing their opinions, concerns, and reflections about mentoring, and transcribed focus group and in-class conversations that centered on the master's students' concerns, achievements, and perceptions about mentoring). Comparing the information in multiple data sources allowed us to illuminate similarities that helped to clarify our assumptions and contributed to the trustworthiness of our interpretations about the mentors' perceptions and experiences (Patton, 2002; Stake, 2005).

## **Organizing the Results**

As we looked over our notes, we agreed there were four encompassing themes. We titled the themes to reflect the content of each of the themes. We also noted while there were a few deviations from these four themes, the master's students' development as mentors followed a progressive order from demonstrating frustrations and little empathy for the preservice teachers' pedagogical confusions and blunders to developing sensitivity to the preservice teachers' apprenticeship circumstances and concurrent mentoring needs. By the end of the project, the master's students also recognized the personal and professional benefits they attained by supporting and advising the preservice teachers that included gaining confidence as mentors and teachers and recognizing that three primary roles of mentors are to provide support for neophyte teachers, establish relationships of collegiality, and promote interpersonal communication.

In the following section, I present the four themes that depict a progression from frustration and anxiety toward understanding and empathy. I also include pertinent excerpts of the master's students' narratives. I then, provide limitations of the inquiry, offer my interpretations of the research, and discuss implications of the study.

*Theme one: Weeks 1 and 2: Feeling frustrated and anxious*

During the first two weeks of camp the majority of the master's student mentors' communication resonated with their perceptions of the preservice teachers' nonprofessional attitudes and incompetence. They criticized the preservice teachers' lack of verbal and written communication to mentors, made swift, negative judgments about their pedagogy, and demonstrated little empathy and regard for the preservice teachers' neophyte status.

A mentor shared in a focus group meeting:

I can't help these preservice teachers—they are inflexible.

Another mentor wrote in her weekly report:

The preservice teachers do not know what to expect—they are naïve—they seem not to be able to accept new ideas and they do not know how to collaborate.

A mentor asked a doctoral student:

Are these preservice teachers committed? I am wondering about that.

A mentor with ten years of teaching experience displayed frustration with the lack of communication from the preservice teachers in her group:

It is 9 PM and I still have not heard from my preservice teachers – not one! We tutor tomorrow. I am shocked I have not heard from them. I am going to e-mail them again right now. I want to know what's going on.

In a weekly report another mentor appropriately connected the preservice teachers' insecurities and uncertainties with their lack of communication. However, while he correctly identified a problem, he did not know how to develop a plan to solve it:

The preservice teachers are unsure of themselves as teachers so they don't volunteer to give their opinions. They don't volunteer to do anything actually. They are passive. Now what?

The mentors were also anxious about their own capabilities. During class discussions two master's students communicated that they lacked confidence in their teaching and mentoring skills:

My stress level is high. I am so nervous about mentoring preservice teachers. I lack confidence in myself. What do I know? I actually do not want the preservice teachers to observe me teaching. Suppose they critique my every movement?

My biggest surprise is not that we work with kids in the camp – my worries have nothing to do with the kids actually - my worries have to do with working with the preservice teachers.

In summary, during the first two weeks of camp, the majority of the master's student mentors displayed little understanding of the mentoring process. They complained about the preservice teachers' lack of flexibility and their naivety. They also questioned the commitment of the preservice teachers and commented on their inability to collaborate. Only one mentor appropriately connected the preservice teachers' lack of communication with their insecurities. The mentors were anxious about their own competence as well. They mentioned personal stress and worries as a result of working with the preservice teachers.

*Theme two: Weeks 3 and 4: Developing insights and skills as mentors versus continuing to be overwhelmed*

During the third and fourth weeks of camp eight of the 15 master's students (55 %) wrote in their weekly reports that they felt more at ease when the preservice teachers observed their lessons. Concurrently, they began to share teaching ideas with the preservice teachers and their communication shifted to a more positive, collaborative stance. They also showed some willingness and ability to understand and accept the preservice teachers as inexperienced beginners who were concerned with survival. Moreover, they began to reflect about what they had already learned about the mentoring process. For example, a mentor e-mailed me:

Hey, Dr. Richards told us when kids come across new or unusual words we must model and use the words in authentic sentences for the kids, help them use the words in sentences, and then help them write those words in sentences in their personal dictionaries. The preservice teachers aren't doing that. They are into definitions. They have these habits they hold onto. This is slow going, but I can tell I am learning to be a mentor. I have learned you just cannot tell people to do whatever. You have to guide them.

A mentor revealed in a group meeting:

I'm beginning to get it - these preservice teachers are fragile. They don't know a lot about teaching. I have learned a lot about myself as a mentor already. I need to slow down for these preservice teachers. As a teacher for 6 years, I still have loads to learn. However, I now know to explain, re-explain, model, offer guidance, and support.

Another mentor stated:

The preservice teachers are unsure. They take no leadership role in teaching or planning. They have few ideas about how to extend a lesson. I must be flexible and support them where they are in their development as teachers and as learners. I know I am growing in my abilities to mentor them. I am not so impatient with them.

Approximately half of the mentors continued to focus on themselves and their own concerns rather than consider how they might nurture the preservice teachers' professional growth. They also demonstrated they did not yet understand the principles of mentoring. For example, a mentor told a doctoral student:

We grad students expect something good and then it does not occur when the preservice teachers teach part of a lesson.

Some mentors continued to be annoyed because of the preservice teachers' ongoing lack of communication:

I have not heard from Denise again!!

I continue to have a problem with email communication. The preservice teachers are not very prompt with their responses and it makes it difficult for me. It does not seem important to the preservice teachers. They are not committed to the children in our group or this camp model.

In a focus group meeting another mentor complained about the preservice teachers' lack of professional knowledge and inappropriate teaching styles. To his credit, he accepted responsibility for the preservice teachers and the children in his charge:

My group of preservice teachers seems to know very little about reading and writing strategies. They don't use a conversational tone with the children. They dictate orders. I have brought this up but they do not make changes. If this continues, I'll have failed my preservice teachers and the children in my tutoring group.

A mentor who had completed two years of teaching criticized the preservice teachers' lack of professional behavior and expertise:

I am still taken aback—stunned by the preservice teachers' attitudes and lack of knowledge about teaching and literacy.

Another mentor equated mentoring with pointing out problem areas rather than engaging in constructive coaching:

We had to meet to discuss some issues. I could tell the preservice teachers were concerned that I had to talk about problem areas and they were offended that I told them what not to do. I explained that that was part of my job as a mentor in this community of practice—to offer assistance when needed and tell them what not to do. I did not mean to offend them for goodness sake!

Some of the mentors' comments and written messages in Weeks 3 and 4 portrayed a developing understanding of mentoring skills. A mentor commented on the fragility of the preservice teachers and another mentor reported that she must be flexible because the preservice teachers were unsure of themselves. Some mentors also recognized what they had learned about mentoring. For example, one spoke of being patient with the preservice teachers. However, other mentors continued to be irritated with the preservice teachers and a mentor associated mentoring with telling rather than offering constructive feedback. While some mentors exhibited a developing understanding of the mentoring role, others continued to comment about the preservice teachers in a judgmental way.

*Theme three: Weeks 5 and 6: Looking inward/establishing rapport/building trust*

By the fifth and sixth week of the camp, despite lack of preparation for the challenges of mentoring, the majority of the master's students demonstrated enhanced mentoring practices comparable to their peers who had shown abilities to coach the preservice teachers during the first two weeks of camp. They also began to examine and reflect upon their own coaching behaviors and consider what they had learned about themselves as mentors and teachers. In addition, they articulated the personal and professional benefits of their mentoring experiences. One master's student talked about what she had learned about herself as a mentor:

It's been tough and humbling – a big learning experience for me. I have learned to slow down with the preservice teachers. If I keep on talking and the preservice teachers do not understand they do not speak up. They are just like my second graders. I need to slow down and continue to re-explain, re-question, and also to re-think my own actions.

Another master's student mentor spoke about discovering her competence as a teacher and as a mentor and gaining confidence in herself. She also recognized the personal and professional benefits of collaboration and community:

Although my stress level increased when I found out I was responsible for mentoring preservice teachers, I have learned I am capable of mentoring. I have also gained a great deal of confidence in myself already. I am an experienced teacher! I never recognized that in me before. At first I hated the preservice teachers observing me teach. I thought they might critique my every move and word. I have discovered collaboration is the key to success. We are in this initiative together.

A master's student mentor commented about the importance of flexibility: I need to be flexible as a person and this mentoring is helping me become flexible. We have to be flexible and accepting of where the preservice teachers are in their professional development.

In her weekly report a master's student mentor wrote:

I am a quiet person and I do not like confrontation. However, this mentoring experience has taught me that sometimes it is necessary to be firm. I now realize I can be firm yet supportive and understanding at the same time. You would think that as a teacher I would know this. But, it is different working with adults. It was hard for me to be firm at first.

The master's students also developed understanding about the connections between the preservice teachers' levels of performance and their lack of teaching experience. In addition, they began to consider the preservice teachers' needs and feelings. At the same time, as interpersonal communication theory explains about the reciprocity of messages (Beebe, Beebe & Redmond, 2005; Knapp & Daly, 2002), when the mentors complimented the preservice teachers on their improved pedagogy, the preservice teachers began to praise the master's students about their mentoring abilities. A mentor told a doctoral student:

My preservice teachers now tell me they feel very relaxed and confident with my mentoring skills. Their feedback is important to me, because now I want to be a mentor in my own school. As a mentor I am aware that these preservice teachers need space and positive helpful feedback. They need my respect and me to view them as colleagues rather than subservient undergraduates. It is challenging being a mentor but it is also a rewarding experience.

The mentors recognized the importance of interpersonal communication as well:

I have learned being a mentor is not easy- sometimes it is not fun either. Everyone has to work together to make groups work out. Effective communication is a must. If there is a single miscommunication, someone's feelings might get hurt.

I learned technology is not one of my favorite communication systems when mentoring. I am a face-to-face person I need to see other's eyes, facial gestures, body language, and hear tones of voice. You can't do that when communicating through e-mail. Once everyone in our group had a chance to speak together each week, we understood one another and we felt better about working together.

It is lots of work helping preservice teachers and elementary students too, but it is well worth it. Constant communication and support are the keys to success. Now, I want to work in another community of practice like this.

It was a surprise to me, but I am a good mentor. I know I could have done some things better so far, but I have built a relationship with the preservice teachers - the most important factor in this project is mentoring and mentoring takes open, trusting communication.

During Weeks five and six, many of the mentors began to recognize the components and skills of successful mentoring. They especially demonstrated an ability to look within themselves and reflect upon their mentoring decisions and behaviors. They also developed confidence in themselves as mentors and commented on what they had learned about mentoring. In an interesting unexpected development, their communication offered caveats about mentoring (e.g., “It is lots of work ...but well worth it” and, “...mentoring takes open, trusting communication”). Moreover, compared to the first few weeks of camp, their messages portrayed pride in their accomplishments as mentors and also happiness and joy.

*Theme four: Final weeks of camp: Weeks 7 and 8: Demonstrating the art of mentoring*

By the last two weeks of camp, the majority of the master’s student mentors had established an environment of reciprocal trust and showed genuine mutual respect toward the preservice teachers. They recognized effective mentoring has a lot to do with managing relationships through honest dialogue and a “sharing of self with others” (Beebe et al., 2005, p. 7). Their focus group comments indicated they recognized the benefits and importance of interpersonal communication. For example, a mentor shared:

I have to say I have learned a lot. Making eye contact, sincerity, and yes, even jokes, like inside jokes are the best behaviors for me to use as a mentor because it helps build community. It’s human nature to want to be part of a group.

Another mentor reflected on how she had altered her way of responding to the preservice teachers:

A preservice teacher just said to me, ‘I don’t think some of these children will ever be able to do reading comprehension strategies.’ I just smiled and said in a non threatening way, ‘Shame on you - every child is capable of achievement.’ Now, earlier in this program I would have given her a lecture, but I know now that lecturing is not a mentoring behavior.

The mentors also recognized the benefits of collaboration. One mentor told a doctoral assistant:



Now we function as a team rather than me always telling the preservice teachers what to do and me leading the entire session. After our kids leave we stay and talk about our work with the kids. The preservice teachers even said that when I interjected during the lesson they could actually observe how the strategies I coached them in were helpful to the kids. Now they don't rush through the book and they take time to consider the lesson as a conversation. I consider this coaching- not telling.

Three other mentors mentioned teamwork in their weekly report:

We work well together and are generally on the same page. I view this as a co-teaching endeavor now. We work as a team.

Now we function as a team rather than me just leading the entire session.

We were able to talk honestly and truthfully about our session after we brought the boys back to their parents. We have a comfortable team approach now.

Another mentor reflected about her growth as a mentor and as a teacher:

At the beginning of camp my mentoring abilities were a mess, but I've grown as a mentor and a teacher. This mentoring experience and the entire camp itself has been a learning experience for me. I learned more in these few weeks than I have learned in many of my classes. It's been hard and humbling, but worth it.

The mentors also complimented the preservice teachers' professional growth:

They are getting better. They are more comfortable with their children. They are more involved. Now they are flexible. They plan and try new strategies.

It was thrilling for me to hear the preservice teachers offering an insightful lesson. They quit rushing. They converse with the kids throughout the lesson now rather than operate like they have a prepared script.

I have less concern now about the preservice teachers. They still have difficulty deviating from their plans when things are not going well. But, I see improvements. Their time management is better and they are beginning to use strategies. They rely on me less. This is kind of like parenting.

A mentor astutely noted the connection between effective mentoring and reflection and commented that mentors need to consider both the challenges and successes of protégés:

One aspect of mentoring is the reflection component. We need to reflect on our thinking and behavior and we also need to consider both the challenges and successes of our protégés. My preservice teachers are now delightful. They are always prepared, conscientious and eager to teach. They are planners and organizers. They are mature now in their thinking.

Another mentor who had some previous mentoring experience commented that the process of mentoring helped her understand herself as an individual and as a mentor:

I have learned about myself as an individual through this community of practice. I also now know I am a mentor and others perceive me as a mentor as well but, I had to go through a process to get there. Once, I was asked to be a mentor in my school and I did a terrible job. No one gave me directions. I did not know how to mentor and actually the administration only asked me to impart information - not truly mentor. I really understand how to mentor now.

A master's student shared in class how serving as a coach motivated her to learn more about mentoring and helped her gain insights about the mentoring process beyond her role as a preservice teacher mentor. It is interesting to note that this master's student also spoke about "phases of new teachers' experiences" which appear to parallel phases of the mentors' experiences:

This mentoring had inspired me. Since I began mentoring preservice teachers I have been reading *Mentoring Matters: A Practical Guide to Learning-Focused Relationships* by Lipton, Wellman, & Humbalt (2003). I attend Weight Watchers and they even asked me to attend training for mentoring in Weight Watchers. I have learned it is important to address phases of new teachers' experience. It is important to offer new teachers experience while they learn on the job and to support, challenge, and facilitate their vision so they can help themselves through self-coaching. I would encourage all graduate students to take this camp experience.

During the final two weeks of camp, the mentors' communication showed that coaching the preservice teachers had facilitated the mentors' professional development. Some of the mentors told stories to explain what they had learned. One mentor spoke about the importance of making eye contact. Another explained about the benefits of collaboration. Many mentors said their group now functioned as a team. Others mentioned being able to talk honestly and truthfully and some continued to mention the importance of mentors reflecting about their work. In addition, the mentors complimented the preservice teachers and mentioned specific professional attributes that the preservice teachers had developed. One mentor summed up the experience by saying, "I really understand how to mentor now."

### **Limitations of the Inquiry**

I must acknowledge several limitations of the inquiry before I present the Discussion and Implications section of the study. I recognize that all research is subjective and value-laden (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). To a large extent, researchers are influenced by their personal backgrounds and professional histories when they decide what to investigate, formulate research questions, and consciously or subconsciously identify noteworthy data. As Mehra (2002) notes, “researcher bias and subjectivity are commonly understood as inevitable” (p. 1). Thus, what information the doctoral assistants and I deemed notable and our interpretations of the data were filtered through our attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews.

I am also aware that our dual roles of researchers, camp supervisor (Janet), and doctoral assistants (Annie, Beth, Diane, and Susan) had the potential to impact our understanding of the data. As the course instructor, I had a more formal relationship with the master’s students than did the doctoral assistants who had opportunities to interact with them individually and in a relaxed way. Relating to and knowing the master’s students in slightly different ways may have shaped the doctoral assistants’ and my interpretations and assumptions. However, our collaborative interactions helped us to come to a consensus about the data.

I must also report that others might examine the data significant to this inquiry and formulate different conclusions. Hermeneutic principles explain how variations in experiences, viewpoints, and perceptions influence researchers’ interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

In addition, this inquiry relied exclusively on written and verbal communication the master’s students voluntarily shared. I did not document the master’s students’ informal communications during their planning times with the preservice teachers, or their reactions to the preservice teachers’ lessons during the tutoring sessions. These additional data might have offered further insights into the master’s students’ concerns, achievements, and professional development. Capturing their nonverbal communication might also have contributed additional understanding of the breadth and depth of their initial apprehensions and later achievements (Burgoon & Hoobler, 2002). Furthermore, a possibility exists that the doctoral students and I might have misconstrued some of the master’s students’ statements and the master’s students may have misinterpreted the preservice teachers’ comments. Models of human relationships explain how communication involves more than the transference of messages. Communication is a complex, challenging process in which individuals create meaning from the messages they receive and therefore, messages can be understood in different ways (Wiio, 1989). Meaning resides in people, not words (Beebe et al., 2005).

Another limitation relates to computer-mediated communication. It is well known that “e-mail messages convey information about the nature of relationships among correspondents” (Beebe et al., 2005, p. 350). Therefore, I felt comfortable requesting that the master’s student mentors send me copies of their weekly e-mails to the preservice teachers so I might monitor their interactions and make use of their electronic communication as a reliable data source. However, since I was the master’s students’ instructor, it is possible they might have withheld messages from me that revealed their

negative perceptions about their mentoring responsibilities, or exposed their lack of concern for the preservice teachers in their charge.

### **Discussion and Implications for Practice in Education**

Common to many of my research projects, the inquiry illuminated some shortcomings in my practice and pinpointed adjustments needed in program structures that I did not consider prior to initiating the mentoring component of the camp. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) observe, an inquiry is a dynamic process of coming to an understanding, “not only of participants but those of the researchers as well” (p. xiv). One critique is that I did not give the master’s students and preservice teachers opportunities to choose mentor/mentee partners. “An element of personal choice, is an essential step first step in the gradual development of the mentoring relationship” (Awaya et al., 2003, p. 48).

In retrospect, another mistake was that the master’s students’ course and the preservice teachers’ course only met together for one class session, although to a large extent this division was the result of college requirements about course content because of disparities between the master’s students’ and preservice teachers’ professional knowledge and experiences. In all probability, the disconnection between the two courses may have contributed to the discomfort the mentors experienced when the preservice teachers observed their lessons during the first few weeks of camp. The mentors and preservice teachers had not yet developed any relationships, and therefore, the mentors felt insecure and unsure of themselves. Course separation may also help to explain the mentor’s initial inability to recognize the preservice teachers as neophytes in need of support and nurturing. In truth, at the beginning of the project, the mentors and the preservice teachers were strangers to one another (see Bryan, 2006, for a discussion of the importance of mentor/mentee partners having opportunities to interact socially and to get to know each other on a personal and professional basis).

One of the criticisms of mentoring programs in education is that “enthusiasm for mentoring has not been supported by a clearly defined purpose for mentoring and the training needed to support the mentors” (Podsen & Denmark, 2007, p. 10). Clearly, another concern is that I did not offer the master’s students guidance before I expected them to serve as coaches to the preservice teachers. Lack of preparation for their coaching responsibilities connects to the master’s students’ anxieties and self-doubts during the first few weeks of camp. They were not prepared to mentor, and therefore became frustrated and overwhelmed, which may have contributed to their initial negative views of the preservice teachers. As Podsen and Denmark state, the first step in understanding the mentoring role in education is to know how it is defined “within the context of teacher induction” (p. 14). More to the point, Sweeny (1994) asserts, the mentoring role must be well defined, especially if you have expectations for results.

Despite these problematic issues, analysis of the data indicates the project was largely successful. The inquiry, conducted in an urban environment, fills a void in investigations that have largely overlooked mentors’ opinions and perceptions about their coaching experiences in naturalistic settings (Hawkey, 1998). Rather than relying on after-the-fact post-mentoring questionnaires and surveys, this study employed data collected over the course of eight weeks in an urban learning context. Furthermore, the

inquiry highlights the master's students' authentic verbal and written communication. Moreover, the data illuminate positive changes in the master's students' reactions and understandings about their mentoring responsibilities as well as growth in their professional development.

Surprisingly, despite initial lack of mentorship preparation, mentor/mentee relationships did not break down over time. Rather, by the fourth and fifth weeks of camp, over half of the master's students developed positive attitudes about their mentoring roles, and as the camp progressed the majority of the master's student mentors developed collegial relationships with the preservice teachers. The master's students' comments also attest to their achievements and growth as professionals: "I cannot tell people what to do"; "I need to slow down"; "I am capable of mentoring"; "I must consider the preservice teachers' needs and feelings"; "Everyone has to work together"; "We function as a team"; "Effective communication is a must"; "I learned about myself"; "I am now a mentor."

Implications of the inquiry apply to teacher education or to any context where learning is a paramount goal. Despite the risk of romanticizing communities of practice or magnifying the benefits of such structures (Lave & Wenger, 1991), I think this study clearly confirms communities of practice provide opportunities that facilitate a collegial atmosphere, promote open communication, offer circumstances for constructions of knowledge, and present situations for a sharing of expertise. I believe these distinctive dimensions were instrumental in solidifying mentor/mentee relationships despite a tenuous, fragile beginning to the camp project (Lachance & Confrey, 2003). As social learning theorists note, social participation and interaction in authentic situated contexts are integral to the acquisition of skills and understanding (Wenger, 2006). I am uncertain at this point however, if the master's students' mentoring experiences in the community of practice offered them sufficient interactions and social participation to enable them to transfer what they learned to new environments. Certainly, the community of practice model provided opportunities for the master's students to develop mentoring skills over time that were appropriate for coaching preservice teachers in the summer literacy camp. However, as Prawat (1993) warns, individuals who learn a skill and develop knowledge in a specific milieu may not be able to transfer what they have learned to new environments because learning is situation specific.. Indeed, Lave and Wenger (2009) note, "it makes no sense to talk of knowledge that is decontextualized, abstract, or general" (p. 5). Knowledge is situationally specific and situationally bound (Brown et al., 1989). Therefore, the nature of the situation impacts what participants learn. In this particular community of practice the nature of the situation required master's students to serve as mentors to preservice teachers. Thus, the master's students' mentoring experiences and their reflections about mentoring served as a personal source of knowledge and professional development. Further research is needed to determine if those who serve in mentoring roles in specific situations have the ability to apply their context-specific mentoring skills and knowledge in new milieus. Nonetheless, this inquiry helps to explain why communities of practice are not just beneficial to novices. Knowledge-sharing experiences are valuable to all members of communities of practice whether they are neophytes or experts (Wenger). As Wenger notes, "a community of practice is dynamic and involves learning on the part of everyone" (p. 3).

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