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Enhancing Understanding: Clarifying Teacher Mentor Roles in the Education of Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract

As more teacher preparation programs emerge in Alberta and as a significant numbers of teachers retire, there is an ongoing need for clearly communicating practicum roles and responsibilities among stakeholders, especially to new Teacher Mentors. This paper outlines the implementation of the University of Lethbridge, Faculty of Education's Educational Partners Orientation Program (EPOP) and briefly outlines the importance of clarifying what it means to mentor pre-service teachers in their internships.

Introduction

Throughout the literature, mentor is defined in a variety of ways. Smith (2007) proposed that mentoring is a type of learning, where the mentee is supported but also challenged by the mentor in order to progress as a professional. Many definitions suggest a hierarchical relationship, the mentor holding more experience and knowledge that is to be passed to the mentee (Aladejana, Aladejana, & Ehindero, 2006; Fowler, & O’Gorman, 2005). Schwille (2008) suggests that being a mentor should be considered professional practice in itself for teachers, requiring a unique skill set that has been developed over time. Yet another definition of mentoring describes it as a combination of a relationship and a process (Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2005).

Within our Teacher Preparation program, we found a need to clarify the role of both the Teacher Mentor and the Intern Teacher within our last professional semester (PS III). This paper outlines the implementation of the University of Lethbridge, Faculty of Education’s Educational Partners Orientation Program (EPOP) and how the EPOP workshops played a significant role in enhancing understanding of what it means to mentor in our PS III internship.

The Structure of our Teacher Education Program

The Faculty of Education program at the University of Lethbridge is comprised of four practicums. Prior to being admitted into the Faculty, students must complete Education 2500 or equivalent, which includes a 13-week on-campus course and a 60-hour practicum. Education 2500 is an opportunity for students and the Faculty to see if students are suited to the teaching profession. Upon successful completion of ED2500 and admission

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into the Faculty, students complete three practicums. Professional Semester One (PS I) includes on-campus courses ending in a five-week practicum. Professional Semester Two (PS II) includes on-campus courses culminating in a six-week practicum. Finally, Professional Semester Three (PS III) is a 13-week internship wherein the Intern Teacher teaches half of the Teacher Mentor's teaching load. During the PS III internship, the Teacher Mentor uses the half-time *release* from teaching duties to mentor the Intern Teacher and work on a professional development project. Table 1.1 outlines the responsibilities and expectations of the three practica in more detail.

The Role of Mentor Teachers in Professional Semester Three (PS III)

For the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge, Teacher Mentors are practicing teachers who are willing to take a Professional Semester Three (PS III) Intern Teacher. Teachers willing to mentor Intern Teachers need to be aware that the role of a Teacher Associate in one of our Faculty's first two professional semesters differs from acting as a Teacher Mentor in PS III. In all practica, teachers are expected to model teaching and general classroom management as well as explain the thoughts and beliefs behind their actions. Mentoring relationships in PS III, however, should shift towards a considerably more equal relationship, one in which the Intern Teacher should contribute actively (Walkington, 2005). This unique distinction separates the PS III Internship and the first two practica in our program.

Defining mentorship is a first step in helping Teacher Mentors understand their role in pre-service teacher education. After defining mentorship, exploring the benefits to both

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Table 1. 1

Expectations and Responsibilities by Practica

Ed. 3500 (PS I)	Ed. 3600 (PS II)	Ed. 457X (PS III)
Description		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General teaching skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject major teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to first year teaching
Intern/Student Teacher Teaching Responsibilities		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 week practicum • 1/3 time assisting • 1/3 time teaching • 1/3 time observing/planning • Written lesson plans for all lessons taught • May teach from plans prepared with/by Teacher Associate • Plans for informal evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 week practicum • 2/3 time teaching • 1/3 time assisting • If appropriate, progress to 3-5 days of full time teaching • Written lesson and unit plans, including assessment and evaluation components • Plan, conduct, and research evaluation of pupil work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximately ½ time teaching assignment • Engage in all professional school activities including district and site-based professional development days, Teachers' Conventions, etc. • All levels of planning • Unit and long-range plans prepared in advance of internship • Individual Professional Growth Plan (aligned with school goals) • Professional Development Project (aligned with goals and Individual Professional Growth Plan IPGP)
Teacher Mentor/Associate Expectations		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation of most lessons taught • On-going assessment and coaching • Regular supervision and written feedback of at least one lesson daily • Final evaluation with University Consultant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation of most lessons taught • On-going assessment and coaching • Regular supervision and written feedback of at least one lesson daily • Final evaluation with University Consultant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interact as knowledgeable, supportive, experienced colleague and coach • Actively monitors Intern based on classroom observations • Completes the Teacher Mentor section of the Descriptive Final Report

From: Faculty of Education, University of Lethbridge, PS II Handbook. Available at:

<http://www.uleth.ca/education/sites/education/files/PS%20II%20Handbook%20WEB%20Aug%202012.pdf>

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parties is an important activity in setting the stage for the mentorship relationship. Simpson, Hastings, & Hill (2007) found that teachers begin to learn again themselves as they reflect on their own practices. Teachers have also reported that they learn through mentor training programs and acquire new, fresh perspectives including new styles and strategies for teaching from their mentees (Kwan et al., 2005; Simpson et al., 2007). Finally, mentors report that they experience a sense of pride and accomplishment when they witness their mentees' success (Hagger, & McIntyre, 2006 as cited in Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009).

The benefits identified by teacher mentors and mentees make it clear that mentorship is beneficial for both individuals in the alliance. Hosting an Intern Teacher can contribute to the overall teaching quality of both Mentor Teacher and Intern Teacher. It is important that in-service teachers understand the key role they play in delivering a solid teacher preparation program and that this mentorship role is a significant contribution teachers can make to the development of a strong teaching profession. As our Faculty continues to work with teachers in the field, it is critical that in-service teachers be encouraged to develop a sense of pride in watching their mentees succeed. However, it is very clear that successful mentorship depends on clarity of participant roles and responsibilities and that not all in-service teachers have developed a variety of strategies for assisting beginning interns. Helping teachers build mentorship skills is an important aspect of any teacher preparation program that relies on teacher mentors being involved in their practica.

Context

In Fall 2011, more than forty percent of the teachers taking a student teacher from our program (PS I, PS II or PS III) were doing so for the first time. At the same time, several new teacher preparation programs were emerging in Alberta and a significant number of Alberta teachers were planning to retire in the near future. The combination of these realities created an increased need for communicating our practicum roles and responsibilities among stakeholders, especially to new Teacher Mentors. Responding to this need, the Faculty established an Educational Partners Orientation Program (EPOP). The Faculty had a strong commitment to this program and allocated monies for all aspects of EPOP, including travel and teacher substitute costs. Beginning in Fall 2011, EPOP workshops were integrated into all the professional semesters, typically as half-day sessions. The goals of the workshops were: 1) to clarify roles and responsibilities; 2) to help teachers understand what it means to supervise and/or mentor; and 3) to continue to build relationships between the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and in-service teachers.

Specifically the 3-hour EPOP workshops for Teacher Associates and Teacher Mentors were designed to be engaging with activities and opportunities for active participation. The workshops evolved, as they were delivered. In the Fall 2011, we completed five workshops for PS I, and two large workshops for PS III. Initially intended for teachers only, it became clear immediately that these workshops would also benefit Student Teachers and Intern Teachers. As well, it was clear from the feedback that even teachers who had taken many students in the past needed clarification regarding expectations in the various practica and were leaving the workshops with a renewed

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understanding of our program and of the expectations of Intern Teachers and University Consultants.

In the first year, slightly more than half of all teachers involved in the various practica attended the workshops. We felt this number was extremely successful for a first year. As the workshops continued, we realized a strong need existed to clarify distinctions between being a Teacher Associate in PS I or PS II and being a Teacher Mentor in PS III.

Feedback

At all EPOP workshops delivered in the first year, participants were asked to respond to five basic statements relating to the workshop — 4 Likert and one open-ended item. The intent of the workshop evaluation was simply to help presenters gather information from participants to ensure that the workshop goals were met. As well, it was important that the workshop was delivered in an interactive format that would encourage all participants to attend. In other words, we appreciate that teachers are busy and we wanted the workshop to be one teachers felt was important, useful, and engaging.

After the initial workshop, through informal verbal comments, we realized that including Intern Teachers at future workshops was both important and useful to the entire process of clarifying expectations. We added the following statement to the workshop evaluation form for all workshops going forward: *Including the Intern Teacher in the workshop was beneficial*. All Teacher Mentors responded positively to this statement (94% Strongly Agreed and 6% Agreed). This response demonstrates that teachers appreciate the complexity of teacher education and that sharing expectations with their Student Teacher or

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Intern Teacher is a valuable activity. As one Teacher Mentor stated, *This workshop has definitely set both of us (as teacher mentor and intern teacher), up for success.* It was clear from many other comments that teachers enjoyed hearing a common message with all stakeholders present.

After the first workshop, we also added the statement to all PS III EPOP sessions: *This workshop helped me to recognize the difference between being a mentor and a supervisor.* The purpose of this question was to see if teachers were clearly seeing the change in the role of a Mentor Teacher in PS III from being a Teacher Associate in PS I and PS II. We felt that understanding this distinction was paramount for preparing teachers to mentor. Between June 2012 and January 2013, five PS III EPOP Workshops were held.

In the feedback for those workshops, all teachers replied positively to the following three statements (Strongly Agreed or Agreed): a) “This workshop helped me to understand and/or clarify my role as a teacher mentor;” b) “This workshop increased my understanding of the practicum and/or program expectations;” and, c) “This workshop helped me recognize the difference between being a mentor and a supervisor.” As well, 100% of the teachers replied positively (strongly agree or agree) to the statement: I would recommend this workshop to my colleagues. These responses verified that EPOP sessions were important for clarifying our program’s expectations and that teachers were comfortable taking time away from their own teaching to attend the workshop.

In the open-ended question, 100% of the teachers responded with positive statements. Some of these teacher statements included: a) “I’ve taken many student teachers

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and still didn't know a lot of the info." b) "Very helpful discussions and handouts." c) "I appreciate the time afforded to help us do our best to be great mentors and assessors." and, d) "Thank you for helping clarify and update expectations of the teacher mentor." Many other positive comments were related to having a half-day release time for the workshop, the atmosphere and the general overall structure of the workshop. The comments were consistent with our belief that teachers need clarification regarding program expectations and that they genuinely want to do their best for teacher education.

Overall, Teacher Mentors responded positively and constructively to the workshops. Student (Intern Teacher) feedback was equally as positive with one exception. Because Teacher Mentor attendance was not mandatory, some Intern Teachers were not as positive about their experience at the workshop when their Teacher Mentor was not present. For example, one Intern Teacher noted, "I wish my Teacher Mentor was there!" Intern Teachers reported that they felt left out if their Mentor Teacher wasn't present and felt the session would have been more beneficial if their Mentor Teacher had been present.

Overall, Intern Teachers responded positively to open-ended questions. Their comments included: a) "I found it very helpful to be able to chat with my UC (University Consultant) and my TA (Teacher Mentor) and participate in the activities with them;" b) "This was a great workshop for everyone to have a better understanding of what is coming up, and a chance to meet the people they will be working with!" and. c) "I feel better prepared to enter my final internship after this workshop than I did after the orientation. It should be mandatory for all PSIII interns to attend this workshop."

Conclusion

In-service teachers play a significant role training pre-service teachers. Our Faculty has a firm commitment to building relationships with the teaching profession and working together to develop and maintain quality teacher preparation programs. We understand the significance that quality mentorship has in the development of good teachers. As more and more teacher training institutions emerge, there is an increased need to build strong relationships with the teaching profession and to have structures in place, like EPOP workshops, that provide opportunities to clarify the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders for individual teacher preparation programs. The integration of EPOP workshops benefitted our Faculty by enhancing clarification about the roles and expectations of both Teacher Associates and Teacher Mentors. Significantly, for our program, we must continue to articulate how mentorship differs from supervision, and to build opportunities for in-service teachers to learn about mentoring students. We know mentorship requires building a relationship that includes trust, respect, and willingness to work together. It appears that our PS III EPOP workshops offered a starting point for developing this relationship among Teacher Mentors and Intern Teachers.

Finally, our Faculty needs to spend time with Teacher Mentors and Intern Teachers discussing mentorship and together establishing good mentorship. Research shows that mentees say feeling welcomed and supported while receiving helpful and creative tips made the internship experience a great learning experience and that pre-service teachers find mentorship invaluable for gathering information and experiences they could never get from books (Marais & Meier, 2004). For mentorship programs to be successful, mentees must also understand, and be open to, being mentored.

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Many effective teachers do not always know what makes their teaching successful and working with Interns can help develop that awareness. Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of Teacher Mentors within the PS III EPOP workshops has enhanced understanding among mentors and mentees, and helped set the stage for a successful internship. Through dialogue and shared expectations, both Teacher Mentors and Intern Teachers felt more prepared for mentoring relationships. Although we believe implementing the EPOP workshops was a good first step in enhancing understanding among all stakeholders, as we move forward, we will continue to explore strategies to develop skills for both mentors and mentees.

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