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Extending the Vision: Mentoring Through University-School Partnerships

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To bring about student achievement, school improvement and educational reform must be coupled with teacher development (Holmes, 1995; Sykes, 1996; Wilson, et al., 1996). Universities that are in the business of teacher training must be willing to actively engage in programs that significantly impact teacher development by becoming pro-active, taking on “leadership roles”, promoting and providing professional development programs and making opportunities available for lifelong learning (Ishler and Edens, 1993). Teachers, administrators, university faculty, and prospective teachers must have firsthand experience with new and “reconceptualized” notions of teaching and learning to meet the needs of our ever-changing K-12 population (Goodlad, 1990) and the increased demand for classroom accountability. One means of accomplishing these notions is through the use of a well-defined mentoring program.

Background

Over the past two decades, the national rhetoric has focused on educational reform and improvement generally. This has created a climate where innovations, risk-taking, and experimentation have been encouraged. In states like Ohio, Kentucky, Connecticut, and Indiana such innovation has been promoted through state and federal money, new teacher education licensure standards, and performance-based assessment of teachers and teacher education programs. During the late 1980s, the Ohio Department of Education began to focus on the needs of entry-year teachers as part of the broader goal to provide “continual collegial support, feedback, and assistance essential for further (professional) growth” of teachers (ODE, 1990, p. IV). The establishment of university/school partnerships and mentoring has grown in this climate. In fact, the funding for competitive grants is contingent upon school district/university collaboration and the establishment of district mentoring programs. Tomorrow’s Teachers (1986) called for working relationships between schools and universities to assure the public of well-educated teachers. This collaboration was intended to establish school sites as clinical and laboratory experiences for in-service and pre-service teachers alike (Cruickshank, et al., 1996).

Often, teacher education institutions examine the possibilities of establishing collaborative partnerships with local school districts to meet the needs of initial certification. Similarly, school districts are interested in higher education institutions willing to provide the professional growth, de-

velopment, and support opportunities for experienced and entry-year teachers (Zetlin and MacLeod, 1995). When leadership in program development promotes true collaborative university/school partnerships and mentoring programs, an avenue opens for teacher education, research, and school improvement. Change occurs as those involved have opportunities to discuss, interact, and directly observe the impact of innovative teaching strategies.

This article presents a case study of the development of an award winning university/ school partnership—the core being teacher development through mentoring. The partnership gives ample opportunities for professional development and growth for practicing teachers and cultivates effective field placement sites for the professional development of future teachers. The focus of this collaborative partnership centers on teachers by helping them to reach their full potential through mentoring and research driven teaching strategies. This partnership has grown along with technology as the distance learning component has been added to the learning cycle.

The Vision

The conceptualization of this partnership came about after the hiring of a new superintendent in 1993. He spoke about a vision where “bus loads of university students arrive at our schools.” This vision gained definition as discussions were initiated with the Dean of the School of Education at a private mid-western university. From these discussions the vision became a reality.

Phase I

As the university was approached by the school district, both saw the potential for a partnership to address their needs. The first phase of this partnership was based upon a mutually beneficial relationship. Pre-service teachers were assigned to schools within the district and university faculty conducted workshops. The first series of workshops dealt with “mentor/supervision” training and writing strategies promoting student achievement. The mentoring workshop focused on general principles and practices of effective supervision (i.e. the clinical model, observation strategies, and conferencing techniques). During the second session of mentor training, a new framework was introduced known as the PATHWISE Model of Assessment (Dwyer, 1994). This framework was implemented due to a new state initiative:

the piloting of this model for probable statewide adoption as Ohio moved to state licensure for teachers.

At the same time a multi-session workshop addressing writing at the middle school level was offered to language arts teachers. This workshop series provided participants with opportunities to learn about the theory, talk with other teachers from within the school districts, and develop implementation plans for their own classrooms.

Phase II

The next step in the involvement was the mentoring process for non-tenured and first-year teachers. The school district recognized that their mentoring program was not meeting the needs of their first-year teachers. Like most school districts, first year teachers were supported by a “rules and regulations” approach to mentoring. Prior to 1993, the school district was hiring only a handful of teachers. Since that time, the numbers have increased to an average of 29 teachers per year with the expectation that as the “boomers” retire and the district grows—more will be hired. The reality that by the year 2000, three fourths of the teaching staff (250) would have less than 5 years experience prompted investigation into the further development of the cooperating teacher/mentoring training program already in place.

The university and district decided to pilot, a “clinical mentoring program”. This involved a paradigm shift for administrators and cooperating teachers as well as university supervisors. Formerly, the cooperating teacher/student teacher relationship could be described as a “spectator sport”; what the university and the school district administration proposed was that the relationship be more collegial such as that of a “team”. It is generally understood that the success of a program is based upon the individuals (host school and its teachers) fully understanding the mission of the teacher education program and the roles and responsibilities of those most directly involved—the student teacher and cooperating teacher. The conversation of mentoring was revisited with each stakeholder understanding his/her role in this new adventure. Even with this conversation the notion of “clinical mentoring” was still misunderstood. The teacher’s association representative expressed dissatisfaction with the plan. Basically two concerns were noted: teachers were paid to teach and assurance of quality control.

The university liaison worked closely with the school district and engaged mentors in workshops that promoted the new philosophy. It was found that the administrators wanted to be involved in this training and actively participated in the sessions. Through these sessions, cooperating teachers realized that classroom teaching could only be enhanced with the addition of this clinical mentoring program where a veteran teacher and a novice teacher work side-by-side with a common goal—student achievement.

Teachers involved in the clinical mentoring training program realized this model was unique. The focus was on communication. Participating teachers were introduced to

the healthy triad relationship where university supervisor, mentor (cooperating teacher), and the student teacher work as a team to improve teaching and learning. In such a relationship communication is open, responsive, and ongoing. In this model, the triad is not a hierarchy, but rather a team supporting the professional development of the student teacher. The clinical mentor training program gives teachers the tools to effectively communicate with the pre-service teacher. It teaches the mentor not only the roles and responsibilities of supervision, but how to collect data, and how to give effective feedback, both positive and negative.

The mentors meet monthly to discuss concerns, research new teaching techniques, and agree on common procedures and initial expectations. The Lead Mentors, one representative from each of the buildings, planned workshops for entry-year teachers based on the input given to them by the mentors and mentees.

An unexpected development from the university/school partnership was the school district’s desire to examine and develop a research-based teacher assessment process that included an active, empowering role for the teacher. The model they selected and piloted with assistance from teachers’ union was performance based and addressed the criteria used in the mentor process as a framework for the assessment. This created a uniform language about teaching and learning for the whole staff as well as the mentor/mentee group.

Phase III

The third year found the university moving from one professor’s involvement to a team of four professors. Each individual on the team represented a specific content specialty where the faculty members could work with specific age groups in the schools: primary, special education, middle school, and high school. Using the same team concept the cooperating teachers (mentors) and university faculty met bimonthly to discuss pre-service teachers, partnership, roles, expectations, and improvements to the program. Cooperating teachers’ roles had expanded to and were viewed as adjunct faculty who took active roles in decision-making and leadership. The team worked not only as supervisors, but also as co-teachers. The clinical educators taught with the university faculty on campus, or on-site. The pre-service teachers believed they were receiving the best of both worlds, “We’re hearing “how to” in our methods classes, but the clinical educator shows us the “HOW.” The link from theory to practice was found to be stronger because both professor and clinical educator were reinforcing the same concepts and were speaking the same language. Classes were revised following the input from clinical educators and a closer, stronger trust bond was beginning to develop.

At the end of this phase a “renegotiation of needs” became apparent in order to enhance the program’s effectiveness. To expand the role of our clinical educators, certain issues had to be discussed. The traditional model of having them come to the university campus to teach was not fea-

sible. Time and parking constraints imposed problems greater than we could handle. The question, "Where do we go from here?", surfaced.

Phase IV

The university and the school district were both committed to this partnership, but the few glitches encountered became major stumbling blocks. An opportunity presented itself in the form of grant monies for wiring and distant learning equipment. This opened a new world and vision for the partnership. At the initial meeting it was decided by the group in attendance: administrators, teachers, and university personnel to pilot the idea of distance learning. Distance learning would allow the classroom teachers to be co-teachers without worrying about time releases, substitutes, parking, or travel. It was decided that four teleconferences would be held the first semester of the pilot. The grant monies received for the distance learning made it possible for the pilot to see how the "virtual classroom experience" would work. Once again the clinical educator became a critical part of the College of Education, making a seamless pedagogical link for students in teacher education.

The first teleconference met the definition of a video conference as defined by VanHorn (1999), a discussion between groups to solve a problem. This brainstorming session between the co-teachers from the district and the university team members occurred via teleconference. Ideas were discussed on how this new strategy would be used and implemented in to the general methods class. A time and date for the first session was discussed and much enthusiasm was generated with the possibilities set before the group.

The second teleconference involved the co-teacher on-site and the university faculty member on campus. The topic discussed was "Professionalism" taken from Domain D of the Pathwise framework (ETS, 1994). The equipment used was a two-way video and audio transmitter that allow students to be seen and to interact with the co-teacher. In most distance learning situations the format is a one-way video and a two-way audio thus limiting the interaction between the teacher and student (Malone, et al., 1998). With the two-way video teacher and students were able to observe each other's nonverbals and interact in a conversation manner. The university students' responses to this class were very positive.

Following the class, students' responses were recorded in a reflective journal. Students were instructed to write their impressions of the class, suggestions for future use, and effectiveness of deliverance. Student's responses were aligned with Kirkpatrick's (1994) assessment model for evaluating training programs. The model looks at four areas: motivation (like it), learning (learn it), application (use it), and results (pay off). From the 48 responses, 100% of the responses were positive about the class (motivation), 90% rated the means of deliverance as being very effective (learning and results), and 75% gave suggestions for future

use (application). Two major themes emerged from the journals: enthusiasm for use and future application. Student comments ranged from, "When do we get to do this again?" to "Did you rehearse your answers?". This second comment was made as a reaction to an affirmation by the clinical educator to an in-class discussion in a methods class the previous day. When theory is validated by practice (by the mentor teacher), students are more likely to accept the theory.

One annoying component of the system was the delayed response of two seconds following each comment. This technical difficulty is a problem when the connectors being at different levels. The university system is now being updated to be more compatible with the school district's system.

The third distance learning experience consisted of the university methods' instructors (three on-campus and two on-site), cooperating teachers (on-site), and students (on-campus) meeting to discuss the upcoming field experience. This was an opportunity for all of us to meet and learn more about the roles and expectations set by the participants in the program. The cooperating teachers (mentors) involved in the first teleconference session were very positive about the experience: however cooperating teachers (mentors) who did not participate in the first session, felt that this experience was a waste of their time and that nothing was accomplished. This attitude is supported by the literature suggesting that teachers and learners must possess a degree of confidence and comfort with technology in order for distance learning to be viewed as successful (Nay, et al., 1998). The methods' instructors who participated in the initial conference felt that this was a good introduction to the teachers and school prior to their visit. The students enjoyed the opportunity of meeting and talking to their cooperating teachers. They had opportunity to find out information about their class and teacher prior to entering the school as well as share information about themselves.

The fourth teleconference did not work as planned. The plan was to have an integrated language arts methods class visit via video conferencing an English classroom at the partner school. University students were to observe the co-teacher teaching and interactions with high school students so that a discussion could occur later with that teacher and the university students. The idea was to incorporate an actual classroom scenario into the specific methods class on-campus.

When methods classes incorporate actual classroom scenarios into their discussions, a clinical faculty is created within our public education system and completes the learning circle by providing a real frame of reference. As methods professors introduce theoretical frameworks, clinical educators open their classrooms to the pre-service student via distance learning, creating the discourse for application and transfer of learning. Pre-service teachers are presented the opportunities to discuss procedure with mentor teachers as well as the student in the classroom. This supports what we already know about problem-based learning and the reasons behind its effectiveness. Video capability brings a

much-needed clinical experience to the pre-service teacher with the end result being a community of learners—teachers, professors, pre-service teachers, administrators—working simultaneously to improve student achievement.

The aforementioned paragraph was the plan and the rationale, but following is the reality. The equipment could not make the necessary link for whatever reason. We know that failures in technology are part of the struggles of using and integrating new approaches with traditional approaches. So, Plan B was implemented whereby the teacher videotaped his class and later the method's class viewed the tape followed by discussion with the teacher. This was a wonderful learning experience for all. Even though, it appeared that everything needed to make the connections was complete, there are times when technology simply fails. This was an opportunity to demonstrate to the pre-service teachers that though technology can be an integral component of the educational process and that technical skill and awareness are essential, one always needs to have a plan B.

Benefits

Beneficiaries of the partnership are many. For the school district the needs of entry-year teachers as they make the transition from college to the demands of full-time teaching are addressed by developing a core of trained peer mentors. These mentors know and understand the roles and responsibilities of mentoring and support during this critical transitional period. These same mentors are also prepared to assist pre-service teachers as they struggle to make connections between the theory of college course work and the practice of teaching in a heterogeneous classroom. The experienced teacher who desires advanced certification, an expanded professional role, and/or the acquisition of new instructional strategies also has opportunities to participate in one of several workshop series at their school site. By enhancing the teaching of both current and prospective teachers providing them with the knowledge, skills, and support necessary to work with the changing and diverse population of students in our schools, increased student achievement and performance results.

For the university, the clinical mentor training has resulted in a core of trained teacher mentors at all grade levels and across disciplines who have the knowledge and skill to work with both pre-service and entry-year teachers. The placement of pre-service student teachers with trained mentors whose method of supervision includes a supportive, collaborative, team approach to teaching the children in their classes enhances the learning of both the children and teachers. Opportunities for using innovative practice (e.g. learning stations, role play, cooperative groups, and simulations) enhancing student achievement within various disciplines result. These prospective teachers, students in special methods classes, benefit from working with trained teachers who give them effective and appropriate feedback. (Giebelhaus and Bowman, 1996)

Finally, relationship between the schools and university is enhanced. Collaboration and communication is increased. Cooperating teachers can become adjunct university faculty which adds the "practitioner" component to the theory-to-practice model. By utilizing trained mentor/cooperating teachers, universities can save money. Although trained mentor/cooperating teacher for the University of Dayton are given a larger stipend than those who are untrained, the university does not need to hire adjunct university supervisors who are less visible and often much less familiar with the goals and mission of the teacher education program. Finally, university faculty have a viable, responsive venue for naturalistic research.

Conclusion

This model promotes active engagement of teachers with teachers, teachers with university faculty and teachers with preservice teachers. The potential offered through the use of technology can only enhance the partnership bringing real classrooms to university classrooms. The limits of our partnership can only be constrained by the limits of our vision.

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Attending MWERA—99 begins with a two-step process: registering for the conference and reserving a room at the hotel. These two steps require the completion of two different forms, mailed to two different locations, with different information needed and deposits. **DO NOT SEND YOUR CONFERENCE REGISTRATION TO THE HOTEL, OR SEND YOUR HOTEL RESERVATION IN WITH YOUR CONFERENCE REGISTRATION!** This can delay your registration/reservation, or result in your not being registered for the conference and/or not having a place to stay in Chicago.

Pre-Registration vs. On-Site Registration

MWERA allows both pre-registration and on-site registration; however, for the following reasons, pre-registration is strongly encouraged. Pre-registrants have first opportunity to enroll in Workshops, to purchase Materials, and to attend the catered Luncheon on Friday. Pre-registration is also less expensive! To pre-register for the 1999 Annual Meeting you must complete the form on the following page and return it, with your check or money order for payment in full, to Jean W. Pierce, MWERA's Executive Officer.

Pre-registrations must be postmarked by September 24th to qualify for the reduced rates!

On-site registration will be available at the registration desk on the 14th Floor of the Holiday Inn Mart Plaza beginning at 1:00 pm on Wednesday, October 13th and continuing though 5:00pm on Friday, October 15th.

The dates of our conference (October 13–16, 1999) are very busy ones in the city of Chicago, with several conventions and activities all going on at the same time. Hotel space will be tight, if not completely unavailable, to those who do not have confirmed reservations. Our convention hotel, the Holiday Inn Mart Plaza, is holding a block of rooms for MWERA—99 attendees; however, they will only hold these rooms until September 24th! To ensure that you have a place to stay please make your reservations with the hotel early, since once these rooms are gone we cannot guarantee housing anywhere in downtown.

Conference Registration and Hotel Reservation forms can be found on pages 39 and 40.