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Innovations in Mentoring: Creating Partnership Links in a Florida School-University Collaborative

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to invite school and university faculty to participate in an action study of mentoring to promote deeper, more extensive partnership links. A faculty support group was formed in 1997 to promote professional development within the school-university collaborative at The Florida State University (FSU) and The Florida State University School (FSUS). Through an applied study of mentoring, a diverse group of teachers, professors, and administrators was guided to make a contribution to teacher research and the mentoring literature. Members of the Partnership Support Group (PSG) produced original research material that was published as an edited book. This discussion is organized to emphasize the purpose and scope of the study; the sociopolitical framework that underscored its implementation; strategies for developing co-mentoring research and group structures; and assessments and results.

Purpose and Scope

Studies in teacher and higher education are designed to support the perspective of the practitioner (see, e.g., Carter, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Elbaz, 1983), yet the voices of teachers and administrators are seldom heard. Field-based researchers use the perspectives of practitioners in their own work but mostly as data sources and case studies. School and university faculty rarely engage in joint research endeavors and when they do it is primarily the interests of teacher educator-researchers that are advanced. Goodlad (1988), Little (1990), and others have attempted for years to facilitate a cultural shift by encouraging school-university partnerships that create symbiotic, equal relationships. Instead, institutional collaboration generally occurs to facilitate faculty-initiated school research, teacher certification, and other higher education agendas.

Collaborative research between university faculty and school practitioners involves hierarchical differences that need to be challenged. Status and power influence how school and university faculty negotiate educational partnerships and experience field-based efforts (Mullen, Cox, Boettcher, & Adoue, 1997). Emihovich (1992) conducted an action research project only to conclude that "Despite the positive effects of . . . collaborative efforts, vexing problems in differential status and

power between faculty in public schools and universities still need to be resolved" (p. 12). Another kind of relationship is needed, one that promotes mutuality of interest, purpose, and reward. One approach, called co-mentoring, offers an alternative to mentoring which has been defined as the teaching of specialized knowledge and training of professional development skills (Merriam, 1983). The "top-down" experience of mentoring changes when a context is established for the sharing of roles, responsibilities, and abilities.

Co-mentoring reconstructs teaching as mutual learning and human relationships as nonhierarchical and reciprocal. Co-mentoring also values diversity across professional rank, ethnicity and gender, and subject matter discipline (Bona, Rinehart, & Volbrecht, 1995). As a proactive force in social change, co-mentoring encourages professional learning among partners that enables organizational cultures to be reworked. In the context of the action study reported herein, co-mentoring is potentially an even larger force that infiltrates and reshapes the socialization process in and across schools and universities.

Co-mentorship is not a "compensatory" practice for those less capable or qualified. Rather, it is an opportunity for professionals to experiment differently and to exchange feedback while developing along an agreed upon path. For example, during our support group meetings we assisted one another to problem-solve with respect to our research development, data-collecting methods, and explanations of our processes and findings. Here is a snapshot of one such exchange:

> Participant speaker (university administrator): My problem is that I don't have enough data to prove that the mentoring program we established in the College of Education for untenured faculty of color was as effective as it appeared to those of us who directed and experienced it. It became obvious that the untenured faculty could become successful in terms of tenure and promotion, but we failed to determine whether their success was a direct correlation of time spent with designated mentors.
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> Responder 1 (university professor): Concepts of data and validity have changed in some areas of the social sciences. They have become redefined, through narrative qualitative methods, to give importance to story and storytelling, impressions and experiences, and perceptions and memories. Even "significance" can be thought of in nonstatistical terms as a quality relationship that has had an impact on one's professional development and career. In other words, you can reconstruct the event to highlight its value.
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> Responder 2 (school administrator): Yes, all of that but you [to the speaker] can also collect data even now to develop a retrospective picture and assessment of the program. You could interview some of the mentees and even mentors in your university program to get their input, or at least their perception, of what this ongoing learning experience has meant in their lives. (excerpt from meeting transcription)

Sociopolitical Framework

Higher education is the laboratory of the development, implementation, and dissemination of university research. Campus laboratory school facilities are an integral part of school-university systems whose research missions require participatory cooperation by teachers, professors, and administrators. Researchers who strive for educational reform must contend with the accusation that university faculty act intellectually superior when they work on schools rather than with them to achieve mutual goals (Sarason, 1993). Researchers' work must be critically self-reflective and needs to incorporate ethical concerns at all levels, including the question of who is credited for authorship of published works. As a teacher educator-researcher who produced a joint mentoring study in a laboratory K–12 public school setting in Florida, I had the option of publishing the results of "my" research as a sole author. This leads me to think that we have only begun to develop an ethic of research responsibility in higher education.

University professors understand that authorship is a vital source of reputation, status, and power. However, university researchers are generally not introduced to strategies that support innovations in mentoring and new ways in which authorship can be rethought within the academy. Furthermore, school practitioners have not been socialized to expect authorship credit on their research and writing contributions. I am arguing for a critique of mainstream academic systems of research that build upon authority, privilege, status, and reward. An alternative research system would force researchers to set collaborative research goals. An important collaborative goal would be to provide guided research opportunities that could produce joint publications for teachers and administrators. When professors intentionally co-mentor, the role of school practitioners and university faculty as change agents can be enhanced.

Research Methods and Project Data

A co-mentoring action research methodology facilitated the development of the team structure of the Partnership Support Group. Planning and research coordination between the university and school was the essential first step toward constructing our co-mentoring framework. Biweekly meetings, regular follow-up, and interpersonal contact were vital to sustaining the process and productivity of our group structure. Assessment took many forms.

Participant profile data, based on the group membership, was collected through an introductory questionnaire (see Table 1). This particular source provided key information about the composition and philosophy of the group. The questionnaire also helped to clarify and establish our shared goal to function as a co-mentoring publishing team.

Table 1. *Strategies for developing partnership support groups.*

1. Introductory questionnaire: A questionnaire enables the group to identify areas of interest (e.g., members' perceptions of the goals of the project; familiarity with a particular literature base; background in research, writing, and publication; extent to which teacher education projects have been fostered). I designed the questionnaire and compiled results to generate a group portrait of experiences with mentoring. Using a matrix, I compared members along similar dimensions to highlight levels of experience and types of expectation.	2. Regular communications: Follow-up reports and newsflashes keep everyone posted, motivated, and team and goal oriented. The PSG members appreciated being kept up-to-date on the goals of our project and its various phases. For example, after the 1998 AERA conference I informed members of my meetings with senior acquisitioners of publishing houses. With several book contracts soon offered and one secured, members became even more motivated but the majority did not require this "carrot."
3. Packet of readings: Facilitators can assemble salient readings on topics of interest and participants can add to the reading packet. Members read and interpret studies to help foster an understanding of the relevant literature as well as perspectives useful to individuals and the group. In the PSG, members found the readings stimulating and useful for generating their own ideas.	4. Nuts-and-bolts tasks: Ongoing reshaping of "items" (e.g., key terms, titles, and table of contents) keeps negotiations open and focused. In the PSG, we began each meeting by reviewing our emerging contents page for the book. Each time, we gained clarity of purpose and greater comfort as everyone extended and received help with chapter titles.
5. Publishing works: The actual process of publication of a joint project is worth sharing. In the PSG, I produced the book prospectus and shared it to help de-mystify the publishing process and to foster synergy. I also shared my correspondence to and from publishers.	6. Audiotaped meetings: Transcriptions provide an essential record for everyone to draw upon for their individual project work and purposes. As PSG participants conducted their own studies, I produced transcripts of our sessions that they discussed and used in their writing.
7. Local records: Exploring a local culture and its history through recordings of events helps put the current study in context. The PSG teachers felt empowered when they shared material that had been generated in their school. This process legitimates the local context and keeps the current project in perspective, enabling comparison with previous projects.	8. Interview research participants: Members and nonmembers represent a rich resource of experience and material for case study development. PSG participants learned valuable action research strategies by identifying interviewees, transcribing tapes and notes, and working with quotes. Everyone appreciated articles that demonstrated participant quotation and meta-analysis.
9. Mentoring/learning logs: Members documented their own research ideas, responses to articles, and areas of interest. Mentoring logs provided a useful method for forwarding everyone's study, and for helping us to understand our "fit" with existing studies.	10. Draft manuscripts: Close editorial feedback on material prepared for public release is an important formal step in writing-for-publication groups. In the PSG, all chapters were edited numerous times by the senior editor. An assistant editor provided input.
11. Storytelling exchanges: Storytelling and feedback offer a conversational structure for effective learning and analysis. The PSG members relied heavily on storytelling as a way of interpreting the literature on mentoring, support groups, and action research.	12. Members' publications/writings: Members become empowered when their own writing is shared and their image as developing authors is reinforced. In the PSG most members had published something, however modest. They enjoyed discussions of their work(s) in the context of our co-mentoring project.

The diverse group of 17 members represented beginning and experienced teachers and professors, administrators, librarians, dissertation writers, family school therapists, consultants, and school directors. Our areas of research and teaching specialization included organizational and educator development, principalship, and inservice and preservice teacher education. The role of mentorship in helping to develop leaders as action researchers provided the framework for the participants' field studies.

Most of the PSG members had experience as published authors, although the range of experience varied. Many had written at least one newsletter story or article and several had already published books. One teacher and an administrator joined with the explicit intention to seek guidance for writing a book. The support group actively reached out to those who desired to publish, especially enthusiastic beginners. A primary goal of the PSG was to provide a guided opportunity for teachers to experience themselves as investigators and authors.

Project data was also gathered through some of the strategies that I used as the university researcher to develop the support group. Some examples of project data include mentoring logs that were shared, storytelling exchanges, and audiotaped meetings that were transcribed. Explanations of these data sources and several others are provided in Table 1.

Data was also made available through the manuscript drafts and book chapters produced by the members. As Principal Investigator, I approached each chapter as a source of data that reveals how different professionals understand mentoring and apply educational theory to practice. Some examples of research that resulted in chapters for our book are summarized in Table 2, with a brief explanation of participant role, focus of the action study, and data sources used by each writer.

Additionally, each group participant used data sources for his or her research development phase, an overview of which is presented in Table 2 (see column 3, "Data sources used in chapter"). Some data sources were used by the team and others were used by way of personal choice. Concerning individual preferences, some writers conducted interviews and shared data to develop insights, while others opted for an informal approach, reflecting on conversations and observations. Still others devised a theoretical framework derived from the mentoring and change literature and from professional experience.

"Student artworks" in Table 2 refers to those visual works that secondary students in an advanced art studio placement at the university school produced for the book. (Original works were produced in consultation with myself and the art teacher; we together interpreted the writers' major themes and guided the production of complementary artistic images.)

Table 2. *Examples of school-university action research development.*

Professional role of member	Action study focus	Data sources used in chapter
University professor-facilitator	Case study of the development of the Partnership Support Group (PSG); examination of socialization processes in higher education	Transcriptions of meetings, PSG mentoring log entries; reflective journal, poem (journal entry), literary sources, student artworks
Elementary school principal/ dissertation candidate	Role of principal in K–12 setting as mentor for beginning and experienced teachers, and university researchers	Reflective notes based on meeting and observation, mentoring log entries; recollections about personal development; student artworks
University administrator	Retrospective analysis of a college of education's longitudinal mentoring program for untenured faculty (especially women) of color	Interviews (note-taking), PSG mentoring log entries, autobiographical and biographical recollections; student artworks
School librarian	An analysis of developing mentoring relationships between novice and experienced librarian-teachers	Daily journal, mentoring log entries, professional narrative, media (film and books); student artworks
Modern language teacher	A professional account about the challenges of a mentoring relationship shared between a teacher and a preservice teacher	Recording of conversations, PSG mentoring log entries, French and Haitian literary works, student artworks
University professors	Investigation of mentoring in the career and personal development of female administrators and professors in K–12 and higher education	Transcribed interviews, comparison of the two professional groups, vignettes that include the writers' experiences, student artworks
Art teacher	Exploration of the artistic and professional development of secondary level students in an advanced art studio class; includes an application of artistic projects in the wider community	Curriculum resources and mandates, literary and poetic sources, studio classroom journal, mentoring log entries, teacher artworks, student artworks
Spanish teacher/dissertation candidate	Daily reflection on the teaching experiences of a particularly challenging Spanish language class that required the use of innovative instructional method	Cultural wheel mentoring tool, curriculum resources, daily journal, note-taking based on conversations, mentoring log entries, student artworks
Former director of school (female)/ university professor	Analysis of the school's former internal restructuring effort and its impact on the relations among faculty, staff, and students	Case study documents and school records, taped interviews with faculty and staff, mentoring log entries, student artworks
Former director of school (male)/ student services director (chapter with university professors)	Historical recollection of the long-term director with emphasis on the school's changed mission and the challenge this entailed for teachers to produce and publish research	Taped interview of the writer by group members; reconstruction of the story using the audiotapes, historical documents, including newspapers, student artworks
Director of school/doctoral candidate (chapter with university professors)	Focuses on the re-creation of the university school to foster an intensive collaborative culture	Conversational note-taking; annual school reports, including teacher research statistics, favorite painting by an artist, student artworks

Assessments and Results of Professional Growth

The Partnership Support Group published New Directions for Mentoring: Creating a Culture of Synergy, which provides documented case analysis of many examples of mentoring experiences, programs, projects, and activities. These areas became the basis for formal inquiry within a school-university system. Research results were published as 17 single authored and co-authored chapters on alternative approaches to mentoring.

The group participants learned to integrate the theory and practice of mentoring. At the outset of the project, these university and school professionals had been, generally speaking, respectively grounded in theory or practice but neither group had the opportunity to apply theories of mentoring to practice. The solution was to enroll both camps to serve as mentors for one another. Through this co-mentorship framework, everyone was actively guided in the effort to integrate educational theory and different forms of classroom, school, and university practice.

A post-assessment conducted collaboratively by PSG members clarified areas that had facilitated and hindered our group process. Nine dimensions of facilitation were identified: co-mentoring, openness, storytelling, leadership, active listening, fieldnotes, mutual support, appreciative understanding, and structured inquiry. Four areas were viewed as having hindered the positive result produced: uneven meeting attendance; conflicting responsibilities; varying degrees of commitment; and confusion between story and inquiry. I added range in individual writing effort and extensive editorial work. Notably, members found it easier to generate the list of benefits. Even our final assessment of the group proved to be an example of a "joint productive activity" (Gallimore, Tharp, & John-Steiner, 1992).

The work of the Partnership Support Group generated closer ties between the school and university professionals. Members have described, in their chapters and through correspondence, how the PSG is influencing their roles as collaborators, researchers, educators, and writers. They have provided feedback to the effect that the biweekly meetings, professional readings, and, above all, communication and synergy between the two worlds of school and university educators have changed their thoughts and actions.

A school administrator wrote in her chapter that "the greatest gift this group brought me was the time to reflect and write on my role as a school principal in a university climate which has shaped various mentoring connections in my own world." Teachers have expressed gratitude "for the support, help, and consistent mentoring" they received as well as for "the special efforts made to ensure that the project would come to closure at the end of the school year rather during the summer

months." Significantly, the school practitioners have been reporting new professional writing projects with colleagues both within the school and at the university.

Implications of Co-Mentoring Relationships and Research

School-university arrangements can become places of productive co-mentoring that benefit school participants as equal partners in research and publication. The role of university faculty is to foster a new research culture that can provide the guidance, reciprocity, and flexibility needed to nurture support group structures. Psychological barriers to this kind of work need to be addressed. For example, some educators share a covert language that highlights the impracticability of school-university research. According to Lieberman (cited in Glaser, Lieberman, & Anderson, 1997), the voices and cultural knowledge of school-based educators need to be included in teacher research agendas. In my view, this visionary thinking can inspire important connections but it may not go far enough. Research participants should have support to become published authors.

The PSG was challenged by the insufficient guidance teacher education offers for creating co-mentoring structures and publication across professional domains. The group was also challenged by the widespread cultural practice that supports the service mentality of research laboratory schools. Following in the footsteps of our book, this paper offers a view of a mentoring innovation with the hope that other diverse teams will make their own discoveries.

Author's Notes

The book anonymously alluded to is New Directions for Mentoring: Creating a Culture of Synergy. (C.A. Mullen, Senior Ed., London, England: Falmer Press, 1999).

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