

# The Development of Mentoring Partnerships: How a Shared Learning Experience Enhanced the Final Internship

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Practicing teachers often identify the final internship as the most valuable and relevant component of teacher preparation. An important key to effective internship experiences is quality mentoring, which should be educative in nature (Bradbury & Koballa, 2008; Feiman-Nemser, 2012). While the rationale for these educative mentoring relationships and interactions are outlined in the literature, there is less information about how to foster their development. In this study we examined how a shared learning experience held prior to the internship was perceived by mentors and interns as contributing to their mentoring relationships and interactions throughout the internship.

Practicing teachers often identify the final internship as the most valuable and relevant component of their preparation for classroom practice. An important key to effective internship experiences is the quality of mentoring, which should be educative in nature (Bradbury & Koballa, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Feiman-Nemser, 2012). Educative mentoring emphasizes a collaborative partnership focused on enhancing learning for all stakeholders, and a key component of this relationship is the enactment of mentoring interactions. While the rationale for these educative mentoring interactions are outlined in the literature, there is less information about how to foster their development. In this paper we will share the results of a study designed to examine how a shared learning experience during the summer, jointly attended by mentor-intern pairs, helped to foster mentoring interactions. What we learned has implications for program design and subsequent research on improving internship experiences.

## Background and Literature

The final internship is viewed as one of the most critical components of preparation for classroom practice (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005; Feiman-Nemser, 2012; Valencia, Martin, Place, & Grossman, 2009). During the final internship, teacher candidates are afforded the opportunity to refine and apply their content and pedagogical knowledge in an authentic setting with the guided support of a mentor teacher. As Darling-Hammond (2010) stated, “Learning to practice *in* practice, with expert guidance, is essential to becoming a great teacher” (p. 40) and this experience may, in turn, influence initial effectiveness.

Clinical experiences vary quite a bit across institutions (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001). Recent literature has focused on recommendations for intentional and authentic clinical experiences in teacher preparation with the purpose of enhanced program alignment and candidate success (AACTE, 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009; NCATE, 2010; Zeichner & Conklin, 2008). In particular, Darling-Hammond

(2006) called for strong integration among coursework and clinical experiences; placements which are “extensive and intensely supervised” (p. 307); and strong university-school partnerships to align knowledge and beliefs and develop a collective mission towards collaboratively educating 21<sup>st</sup> century teachers in PK-12 classroom contexts.

With particular attention toward the improvement of the final internship, Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1987) suggested that perhaps not all student teaching is educative, and they outlined a framework to “increase the educative power of student teaching” (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1987, p. 256). Their framework included three key considerations for educative internships: 1) a holistic classroom experience, 2) a focus on reflection, and 3) a collaborative, guiding environment.

One area of the internship that could use strengthening is the traditional mentor-intern relationship (He, 2010; Russell & Russell, 2011; Wang & Odell, 2002). That relationship could be enhanced with a focus on educative learning (Feiman-Nemser, 2012; Rozelle & Wilson, 2012; Valencia et al., 2009). In turn, shared learning opportunities outside the classroom have been proposed as an opportunity to develop collective knowledge and enhance educative relationships between mentors and interns (Bradbury & Koballa, 2008; Zeichner, 2010).

Scholars have suggested that teacher preparation programs attempt to bridge the disconnect between university-based teacher educators and mentor teachers (Bradbury & Koballa, 2008; Grossman et al., 2009; Zeichner, 2010). Specifically, the development of opportunities for university supervisors and instructors, mentor teachers, and teacher candidates to collectively engage in collaborative learning could strengthen university-school partnerships and internship experiences (AACTE, 2018; He, 2010;

Putnam & Borko, 2000). These innovative learning structures create “hybrid spaces” where “academic and practitioner knowledge” converge in a manner that may flatten the power hierarchy; thus, enhancing the educational opportunities for all stakeholders (Zeichner, 2010, p. 89).

Additionally, shared learning opportunities may facilitate mentor-intern relationships that result in educative mentoring interactions. He (2010) developed a model for educative mentoring experiences where mentor-intern pairs work together outside the classroom to “know each other as both professionals and willing individuals in the collaborative learning experiences” (p. 270). He (2010) also proposed that these “orientation experiences” (p. 271) can help mentor-intern pairs to discover each others’ strengths and co-construct knowledge and teaching goals for the final internship (p. 272). In this study, we examine how an eleven-day shared learning experience and internship orientation at one university impacted the internship experience for mentors and teacher candidates.

## **Methods and Data Sources**

This paper reports findings from one part of a larger qualitative study about the development of mentoring interactions after participation in a shared learning experience in the summer prior to internship. In this section, we describe the institute, and then present the study methods and design.

### **Description of the Shared Learning Experience**

Pairs of mentors and their interns participated together in an eleven-day interdisciplinary institute held in Summer 2016 as part of a teacher education grant. The institute was a university-sponsored shared learning opportunity that mentors and interns jointly attended at the beginning of the summer. The institute aimed to increase all

participants' content and pedagogical knowledge through activities and lessons designed collaboratively by content area faculty in liberal arts and sciences disciplines and education faculty. The 2016 summer institute concentrated on the integration of English Language Arts (ELA) and social studies content with a specific emphasis on civics, history, government and politics, and economics content. Additionally, participants learned how to apply technology across content areas.

The institute occurred over eleven days and participants attended from 8:30-3:30 daily. The institute was held in the "community room" at the College of Education's laboratory school and breakout sessions occurred in two classrooms. Thirty-four interns (master's degree level, year-long internship) attended the institute. For these interns, the institute counted as six master's course credits, and they had various assignments to complete before, during, and after the institute. All mentor teachers were invited to attend with their intern and they received a stipend for their daily attendance. Thirty mentor teachers attended the institute, representing grades K-5 from sixteen schools within the district. Five university-based supervisors were in attendance daily to gain knowledge and interact with mentor-intern pairs.

Institute curriculum was designed to keep a tight focus on ELA, social studies, and technology integration. The daily agenda engaged participants in rigorous content by embedding varied pedagogical strategies that could also be applied to K-5 classroom contexts. Guest speakers, videos, readings, and lectures were accompanied by activities such as writing workshop, small group discussions, and critical text analysis and comparisons. All content was structured around the essential question: "What is a citizen?" This question was presented on day

one and became the framework for engaging participants in interdisciplinary learning.

Throughout the institute participants worked in mentor-intern pairs to create lesson and unit plans. In particular, the pairs developed an interdisciplinary unit. While the interdisciplinary unit was a large component of the interns' graded coursework, it also provided an opportunity for mentor-intern pairs to collectively plan an authentic unit for application in their classroom. Mentor-intern pairs collaboratively identified a social studies topic related to grade-level standards, and daily opportunities for planning were strategically infused into the institute agenda. At the institute's conclusion mentor-intern pairs jointly presented their interdisciplinary unit.

### **Study Methods**

Data collection began during the institute in order to describe and understand the experience and to seek out pairs who were fully engaged in the institute and interested in the topic under study. Four mentor-intern pairs agreed to participate and were located at high-poverty elementary schools (80% or higher free/reduced lunch) in our local suburban school district. Mentor teacher experience ranged from nine to twenty-one years. Interns were all females of traditional college age who were enrolled in the master's year of a five-year elementary teacher preparation program.

There were two phases of data collection. Phase one, collected at the 2016 summer institute, included field notes and focus group interviews (mentor and intern). Phase two data were collected during the first semester of the year-long internship and included a series of four semi-structured interviews and a round of day-long observations. An inductive thematic analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) was used to uncover aspects of each mentor-

intern relationship and participants' perceptions related to the institute's influence on the internship experience. A longer description of the methods and analysis, as well as full descriptions of the mentor-intern pair participants, can be found in Curcio (2017).

## Findings

Findings reflected that the pairs cultivated a relationship at the institute that jumpstarted their ability to engage in mentoring interactions (co-teaching, co-planning, collaborative reflection, coaching, and feedback). First and foremost, data conveyed that participation in the interdisciplinary summer institute provided mentors and interns opportunities to establish relationships. However, while these relationships may have begun as congenial, throughout the institute the mentor-intern relationships evolved into collegial professional partnerships that transferred into their elementary classrooms. Participants identified critical institute features they deemed as important in the development of their professional mentoring relationships (location, duration, and authentic work tasks). In addition, the participants noted that the institute accelerated and strengthened their teaching partnerships, allowing them to immediately focus on teaching and learning in their elementary classrooms (see Figure 1).



Figure 1

## Critical Institute Features

Three institute features emerged as influential in developing the mentor-intern pairs' professional relationships: 1) institute location, 2) institute duration, and 3) the use of authentic works tasks.

**Institute location.** The institute was held at the university's laboratory school, a neutral site for all participants which created a hybrid learning space outside the domain of the university and the mentor teachers' school sites. In particular, the interns made note of how the institute's setting created a common domain where they felt like valued participants. As Kara (intern) stated:

It was nice being not only on an even playing field, but it wasn't her turf, I guess, and it wasn't my turf at the university or her turf at Thomas Elementary, but it was common ground. If it was held at Thomas I feel like she... Not that there would be more power to her, but it would feel as if I am intruding... But when it was at a different site, it was like we were both saying, Here is what we're both bringing to the table. And then just laying it all out, instead of saying, Oh, here's what's established already. And then me saying, Here's what I'm bringing to change everything.

During our final interview, Fiona (another intern) further elaborated on how the institute location made her feel like a professional working alongside other teachers. She stated that rather than feeling like a college student "just taking another class at the university" the institute felt more like "teacher training than just being a college

student, because we were doing things for the classroom. It just felt different.”

**Institute duration.** The institute took place over eleven days and each day included seven hours of mentor-intern contact time that included an onsite lunch and planned breaks. Participants told us that this extended duration was important, as it allowed pairs to engage in varied interactions and conversations throughout the institute which helped them gain interpersonal and professional knowledge about each other.

Kat (mentor) commented on how the overall duration and the length of the individual days almost forced participants into talking and learning about one another:

Being there, eleven days, you get to know the real person, because there are times when you're a little bored or there are times when there are a lot of opportunities to have different opinions and that kind of thing. I'm pretty vocal, so it wasn't ... I don't know, I just feel like she got to see who I am and I got to see who she is as a person, and that's really nice to have that opportunity in a way we might not typically have.

As Pattie (mentor) shared during our second interview, the institute provided her and her intern, Nicole, time to develop their relationship prior to working together teaching students:

Oh, absolutely. I think that having a chance to get to know each other on a bit of a personal level, a bit of a professional level outside of school... You know how busy you are in the classroom. It would have taken us longer to get to know each other. I

chatted about my kids and about her job and her family and her brother. We ate lunch together every day [during the institute].

All of the participants referenced how thankful they were to have had the chance to interact outside of the pressure of school and to meet in a neutral environment.

**Authentic work tasks.** All pairs conveyed that the institute's activities created opportunities to cultivate relationships by focusing mentor-intern pairs' professional knowledge on collaborative tasks. Throughout the institute, the pairs collectively worked on interdisciplinary activities and tasks, and these tasks took various forms. Ranging from jointly planning the culminating unit to producing a Public Service Announcement (PSA), these tasks aimed to engage the mentor-intern pairs in authentic work applicable to the classroom.

The institute tasks were structured in a manner that encouraged discussion, and the institute content elicited conversations that may not have occurred in the classroom. For example, Ilene shared how she and her intern, Kara, delved into more intimate personal conversations when writing about immigration at the institute, than they may have when conversing at school. Working together on authentic tasks allowed them to better understand each other's abilities, teaching styles, learning preferences, and beliefs. Thus, the opportunity to engage in varied activities over an extended period of time encouraged mentor-intern pairs to connect in a manner that provided them deeper knowledge on their partner as an educator and fostered a foundation for teaching partnerships.

### **Mentor-Intern Partnerships that Develop Quickly and Strongly**

The participants' interactive experiences at the summer institute laid the

groundwork for the cultivation of professional relationships in the classroom. As indicated by interviews and observations, the institute jump-started the mentor-intern pairs' work within the classroom and gave them the opportunity to form strong teaching partnerships that developed quickly. The mentors and interns all felt they were able to pick right up and reconnect during pre-planning, and all pairs referenced that their continued communications after the institute assisted their transition to the classroom.

Kara (intern) noted:

I really do think that attending the institute allowed us to kick-start this professional relationship, where it's not like we had to spend pre-planning in an awkward, "So, how do you like to teach?" Or the awkward trying to get to know the other person. But yeah, I think it really just kick-started it and we just fast-forwarded through the whole awkwardness.

Other participants shared the sentiments Kara expressed, as all pairs quickly transitioned into a professional relationship. Pattie (mentor) told us how she was able to quickly release instruction to Nicole and participate in co-teaching:

I probably would not have released my classroom as quickly to her had we not had the time together. I would have needed more time to see what her personality was like. I probably would have spent lot more time planning and talking about planning and feeling her out to see what she knows. We didn't have to do that piece. We were ready to teach.

Kara and Ilene also indicated they began passing off instruction and finishing each other's sentences from day one. They noted the ability to gain knowledge of each other's teaching styles at the institute contributed to the quick evolution of their co-teaching partnership. In particular, they appreciated the opportunity to identify individual communication and presentation styles without the added pressures of the students being present.

### **Implications and Significance**

Overall, this research highlights the importance of developing mentor-intern pairs' professional relationships and contends that teacher preparation programs should seek out opportunities to cultivate mentoring relationships that may enhance the internship experience. Whereas it has been noted that shared learning experiences may provide opportunities to strengthen mentor-intern relationships (AACTE, 2016; He, 2010; Zeichner, 2010) our study identifies some of the specific logistics preparation programs may want to attend to when planning these experiences. In particular, teacher preparation programs should carefully consider the design of future shared learning experiences, with particular emphasis the location, duration, and content of experiences.

Additionally, our study contends that more research is needed on the nature and development of educative mentoring relationships. In particular, our field would benefit from research focused on how universities can support powerful mentoring; and whether mentoring interactions also result in powerful learning for all stakeholders. Research of this nature would not only provide insight into the cultivating educative final internship experiences, but may also inform clinical experiences

embedded throughout every facet of a preparation program.

Cultivating strong mentor-intern relationships may be the key to powerful educative mentoring that impacts the learning of preservice teachers. While many individuals view relationship building as a “soft” skill (AACTE, 2016, p. 7), fostering productive mentoring relationships throughout a teaching career is essential (He, 2010; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). As AACTE’s Clinical Practice Commission recently stated (2016) we need to place “relationship development at its very center” (p. 7) to allow for productive “skills acquisition, risk-taking, collaboration, and effective coaching” (p. 7) within internship experiences. Thus, while we recognize the need for more research on how mentoring relationships play out, we cannot discount the perspectives of mentors and interns from studies like this who call for more time together in authentic learning experiences to jumpstart their work together.

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