

Creating Connections through Project Teacher Development (PTD)

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Abstract

The goal of Project Teacher Development (PTD) is to identify, educate, and inspire future teachers through mentoring ethnically diverse students and educating them on how to access and navigate college. PTD consists of the Color of Teaching (CoT) Mentoring Program, Side-by-Side, Summer Academy, and a dual enrollment college course which are held at the Millersville University (MU). CoT is the undergirding component of a multi-year program serving students in 7-12th grade. Student-based mentoring and the coexisting connections are CoT's foundational elements. In PTD, college students mentor 7-12th grade students of color who are considering pursuing a career in education. Using triangulation, data from a combination of field observations, mentor and mentee interviews, and pre-post surveys are analyzed. Mentees have expressed improvement in goal setting, group engagement, decision-making, public speaking, stress management, self-advocacy, college readiness, and career decisions. The connections to college students and the college campus are solidified through mentoring. The creation of high-quality connections between mentors/faculty and mentees provides opportunities for mutual growth for all parties. By creating meaningful connections on the college campus, mentees can explore opportunities that are available in college. Through these experiences, mentees develop personal skills while mentors can explore their professional development and improve their mentoring skills. PTD is creating meaningful connections for students and is transforming both the lives of students of color who want to become educators and their mentors.

Literature Review

In many ways educational institutions represent society. It is no secret that there has been a dramatic shift in the demographics of the population in the United States (Riser-Kositsky, 2019). The nation has become multi-dimensional in race, ethnicity, class, language, and religion. This shift has been very apparent in public schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 47% of all school-aged children were students of color who identified as Hispanic, Asian, or two or more races (NCES, 2016). Historically, the enrollment of white students decreased from 61% in 2000-01 to 48% in 2016 (NCES, 2016). While the diversity of the PK-12 student population continues to increase, the diversity of the teaching workforce has not. Black students comprise about 15.3% of the public-school students nationwide, but Black teachers represent only 6.7% of the teaching workforce (Riser-Kositsky, 2019). Latinx students are the fastest growing underrepresented group in the United States. Latinx students make up 26.4% of the total U.S. school-age population (ages 3-17) but represent only 8.8% of the teacher workforce (Riser-Kositsky, 2019). However, data from NCES between 2003 and 2011 show the percentage of public-school teachers of color increased only one percent from 17 percent to 18 percent (Murray & Jenkins-Scott, 2014).

Given the increasing diversity of today's student body and the lack of diversity in the teaching workforce, colleges and universities have a need to recruit and retain more students of color in teacher preparation programs. The literature is replete with concerns from educators, politicians, and others about the racial and ethnic underrepresentation in colleges of education (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Kozol, 1992).

To address these disparities, many universities and school systems use pipeline programs, like teacher cadet programs and teacher fellowship programs, to expose underrepresented high school students to the possibility of obtaining a college degree in education (Toshalis, 2014). These Grow-Your-Own programs provide an opportunity for students to develop positive feelings towards teaching that may or may not have existed before while intentionally recruiting from within communities (Gist, Bianco & Lynn, 2019). The outreach programs work with PK-12 schools to increase students' awareness and motivation, and to demystify the college experience. Many previous programs have involved internships and summer enrichment programs in which high school students were able to explore teaching as a potential career option (Sleeter & Milner, 2011).

To address the disparity between the demographics of PK-12 students and those who teach them, colleges and universities must identify effective practices in developing pathways toward the teaching profession for underrepresented groups. Several pathways have been proposed including alternative route programs for adults who may want to switch into teaching as a career (Boser, 2011), and alternative provider programs have been proposed (Fraser & Lefty, 2018). Additionally, Grow-Your-Own programs use partnerships between a college or university and a local school district to aid individuals in their school or community to become certified to teach in the partnering school district (Gist, Bianco & Lynn, 2019; Toshalis, 2014; Bireda & Chait, 2011).

Content

One university in southeast Pennsylvania and a local urban school district are attempting to address the need for more teachers of color by partnering to establish Project Teacher Development (PTD). PTD consists of multiple programs that give students opportunities to become active from 7th grade through college graduation (see Figure 1). Color of Teaching (CoT) Mentoring Program is the backbone of PTD. CoT connects 7th through 12th graders with a trained college mentor. The goal of these mentorships is to create connections among students and provide opportunities for students of color to consider pursuing a career in education. CoT also provides the opportunity for a college student to have a university faculty member as a mentor.

Figure 1. Project Teacher Development Logic Model

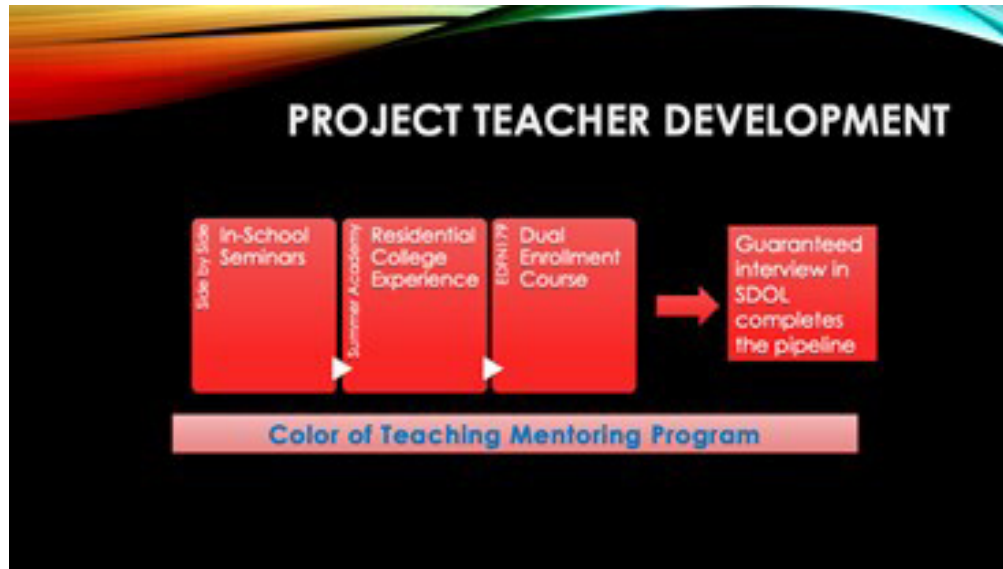


Figure 1. Displays the 4 components of PTD: Color of Teaching, Side by Side, Summer Academy, and a dual enrollment course focusing on teaching as an act of social justice. Finally, mentees who complete any part of PTD and earn their teaching certificate are guaranteed an interview at the partnering urban school district which completes the Grown-Your-Own pipeline.

Mentor Interviews

Mentors in the program identify various learning experiences that contribute to their professional development.

Claire Robinson, rising Junior Early Childhood major, current Treasurer and Mentor shared:

Color of Teaching's events are often aimed at bettering ourselves. From resume and goal setting workshops to being able to speak comfortably in front of people, I am always learning something new as a member of this program. These new skills help me to be a better mentor to my mentee.

Through CoT, members gain leadership experience, professional development, appreciation for diversity, public speaking experience, conference opportunities, study abroad opportunities, and are provided with a safe space to cultivate ideas for further development as culturally responsive educators.

Brynn Raub, rising Senior, Former Vice President and Mentor:

We[CoT] host a variety of different events. Many of which build skills that will help them [mentees] in the future. Their impact is not just limited to the members of CoT. They also seek to educate and assist the surrounding community. CoT hosts a variety of different events like Teacher Ed Day [on campus conference to celebrate educators], Dream Warriors [Native American performance including history], and the Scholastic Book Fair [community service project to promote literacy in urban elementary schools].

Teacher Ed Day is a student mentor run conference held by CoT at MU. The purpose of the conference is to introduce the education field to students from all backgrounds and encourage higher education and the education profession. In the past, the day has started with a welcoming speech, keynote speaker, then round table discussions with peers and mentors. Next, the students have lunch at the campus dining hall, so the attendees have an opportunity to try the food on campus. After lunch, the students tour the campus, experience a performance by a university student organization, and end that day with a Q&A with panelists who represent various majors and organizations on campus. This past year CoT held the 15th annual Teacher Ed Day with a record-breaking 169 middle and high school students attending.

Side by Side (SBS) is a program created for students in 9th and 10th grade. The goal of this program is to help inspire high school students to learn more about becoming an educator, to practice teaching skills through microteaching, and to discuss appropriate educator dispositions. These seminars are offered in a local urban high school during the school day. Students are nominated by their teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors to be invited to join SBS as a scholar. While there have been various formats used to deliver programming over the last three years. In the 2019-2020 school year, seminars were held monthly for 2.5 hours in the high school's media center. The SBS curriculum consisted of a variety of activities and dialogues about being an educator. SBS scholars practiced appropriate communication skills and lesson planning. Two university faculty and two college student mentors from CoT serve

as facilitators for the SBS activities. Data are collected via field notes, pre-post surveys, and an exit interview. SBS scholars are invited to join CoT. Many of the students are interested in being in a mentoring relationship because they have questions that the CoT mentors can answer or find resources for them about things such as college, careers, and other topics.

Summer Academy (SA) is a program designed to give students a “college residential experience” focused on college readiness and exploring careers in education. Last summer, there were seven student participants and three mentors over the course of five days. The students attend special college classes taught by university faculty just for them, helped teachers within a classroom at a summer program for urban elementary school students, and read a book which they discussed throughout the week during their self-reflection focus group time. The students stay on campus during the five days and also participate in many team bonding activities. In the end, the students present what they have learned at a ceremony in front of family and friends. The Dean and the Assistant Dean of the College of Education and Human Services at the University both attend this ceremony to support the program and these young potential teachers.

The final phase of this Grow-Your-Own program for educators is a dual enrollment course entitled, Foundations for Success: Preparing for Your Future. High school juniors and seniors at the partnership urban school are invited to participate and the school district pays their tuition. This course includes numerous self-reflection activities and a strong focus on how teaching has a responsibility to promote social justice. The course will be held in fall 2020 virtually because of Covid-19, but students will hear from a variety of office professionals on campus to help them learn to use college resources and services. Students will earn 3 college credits and will be invited to work with a CoT mentor if they do not already have one. Once mentees graduate from PTD and earn their teaching certificate, they are guaranteed an interview at the partnering school district, and in this way the pipeline is complete, serving both the new teacher of color and the school district’s personnel needs.

Findings

After reviewing the data, several themes emerged: belonging, focusing on teaching as a career decision, and the need for culturally responsive mentoring.

Belonging

CoT allows mentors, faculty, and mentees to closely bond through mentor training and a number of activities. Typically, CoT holds two activities per month for mentors, faculty, and mentees to attend. In addition, CoT holds monthly meetings for mentors and other members within the organization. Mentees and mentors express their belongingness in a variety of ways.

Taylor Hough, rising Senior Secondary English major, current Secretary:

The Color of Teaching Mentoring Program had quickly become my favorite organization when I joined my junior year. Education has always been a field in which I was eager to grow and learn more about myself and others. Color of Teaching has allowed me to do that through strong relationships with professors, peers, and other professionals in the field.

Senior African American female mentee in CoT:

Color of Teaching was one of my biggest support systems during my high school years. I always wanted to go to college, but I was very confused how to get there. Color of Teaching mentors helped me to set a goal in the beginning of the semester then midway through my 3rd marking period we would reflect back and ask ourselves if we have accomplished our goal.

Specific activities are designed to promote bonding, for example, the group participated in a series of low ropes course activities on the college campus. These activities promoted teamwork, problem-solving, and good communication skills. Participants worked in partners, small groups, and large groups to complete tasks an individual would not be able to complete as well alone. Afterward, mentors, mentees, and facilitators discussed the benefits of this activity as a whole. Mentees and mentors agreed that the activity showed the importance of communicating in many ways including when one person is struggling. Members of CoT reported that this activity strengthened all participants’ abilities to work together effectively.

Consideration for Teaching

Since the ultimate goal of PTD is to recruit more students of color to pursue careers in education, the following testimonials from mentees in the program highlight some of that growth and self-reflection.

Latino male mentee in CoT:

Hands down my favorite memory [in SBS] was the activity where I became the teacher and taught others how to play Hangman. That really showed me how difficult it was to teach simple things like games.

Sophomore African American female mentee in SBS:

I selected my top [career] choice because becoming a teacher is something I really want to do. What interests me about being a teacher is coming up with fun ways to learn and being able to help students with their education.

Senior Egyptian female mentee in CoT said:

I was in Color of Teaching for 3 years since my sophomore [year] and currently I'm a soon-to-be graduating senior. During my time in the Color of Teaching I always felt important because someone was there to help me or to hear me. I feel as a growing young woman I need that; in this society to not get caught up in my stress and just talk to someone about it. Color of Teaching helped me realize I wanted to help adolescents just like teachers, counselors, principals, etc.

Culturally Responsive Mentoring

When college members first join the program they attend mentor training. In this training, mentors are put in the shoes of mentees and asked to describe a good mentor. Among other parts of this training, the main goal is for mentors to become culturally responsive. The organization aligns with Ladson-Billings' definition of culturally relevant teaching (mentoring). She states, "A type of teaching that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 20). Participants, both mentees and mentors, in the program provide the following testimonials to support the importance of culturally relevant mentoring.

Sam Waldman, Alumni, former Member at Large and Mentor:

Color of Teaching equips its members and mentors to be culturally responsive and aware. The program also challenges the mentors to examine their own unconscious biases, a task people are seldom asked to intentionally do. Those who join Color of Teaching leave with newfound skills and knowledge, not only about themselves as leaders and advocates, but about students of urban school districts, various cultural groups, and the world around them. This organization creates a sense of belonging and purpose on campus, but also prepares its members for life after college and equips them with an intangible foundation to become better leaders, advocates, and community members in society.

Anna Milner, rising Junior, President, and Mentor:

This past January I was able to teach Science Stem in Puerto Rico challenging myself to teach students who speak mostly Spanish. This organization gets people to think about the world beyond them and the bubble that we live in. I have learned lots about other students' cultures, races, and ethnicity. It has gotten me to look at my own unconscious biases which have made me realize that I have a lot to learn. This organization has encouraged us to defy our own limitations through many avenues. All this and more have made me become more confident, more energized, develop great relationships, and have clearly let me know that I chose the right path for me.

An African American female mentee in CoT:

My favorite memory ever being in Color of Teaching was BSU poetry night. I jokingly volunteered to talk about my experience of being a dark skin female. However, since Color of Teaching was invited, the mentors encouraged me so I talked about various obstacles that I had to deal with being in my skin tone. I have never been so vulnerable and felt so loved at the same time. All the mentors were there hugging me while I was crying.

Mentees are provided with experiences on and off the college campus. However, most activities are held on campus allowing for mentees to explore and get to know campus better. For example, activities are held in university classrooms, the low ropes course, the welcome center, the library, at the Ware Center which is a performing arts facility in downtown Lancaster, sports complexes, and at the student center. By providing such opportunities, mentees have shared that they feel more comfortable with the college campus and are more willing to explore other campuses. Holding activities in different buildings help the mentees navigate new places, even though mentors are typically with them, they try to allow mentees to navigate on their own. Mentees also have the comfort and confidence of the group. These connections strengthen the bond of the mentoring relationship within CoT and PTD.

Limitations

While PTD is flourishing, there are some limitations to the program. For instance, for CoT to hold events funding is necessary, or mentors may have to help pay for the events. The mentor's host fundraisers and the Dean of the College of Education and Human Services help to fund CoT, TED and SA. Events are typically held at the end of a school day which is 4:00 pm so the mentees can take the bus and get to the campus. The program has many students interested in the events; however, college students lead very busy lives. For the mentors, they may still be in class or have to work. This problem also exists for mentees, as most after school activities are at the same time. Finally, finding space to meet on a busy college campus can be a challenge. If the rooms are not reserved early enough, sometimes events need to be rescheduled or canceled. Some of the reasons that the space is unavailable are due to the number of classes, the time of the event, or other organizations reserving rooms.

While those limitations are real, the CoT student leaders are trying to address them. First, the organization is applying for more grants and is creating more fundraisers. To improve mentee participation in the programming, the leaders are going to try having events on different days so more students can come. CoT officers have increased the number of events this past year so more students could attend them. Finally, the Events Chair is registering early so the organization can choose dates and times earlier for better room availability.

Conclusion

Theoretically, PTD can support a student from 7th grade through college graduation and it fosters a sense of support and belongingness for students. As students go through the multiple programs, they will explore campus many times which should help them feel more comfortable on a college campus while decreasing their potential fears and anxiety of attending. Students are also presented

with many academic opportunities such as leadership training, experience presenting to large crowds, and other professional academic opportunities. Mentees have expressed their success in developing skills such as goal setting, group engagement, decision making, public speaking, stress management, how to access resources, college readiness, and career decisions. Students are also connecting with college students and professors to gain more experience with college lifestyle and expectations.

Of course, not all middle school students, or even high school students, are sure of the career path they want to pursue, but many of the mentees in the program indicate that being an educator (i.e. teacher, guidance counselor, social worker, administrator) is one of their top three career interests. Students who practice microteaching report the challenges of lesson planning and delivering an engaging lesson, but they say this encourages them to work harder to acquire those skills.

Developing culturally responsive educators is so important for PK-12 students and society. Mentors in PTD are predominantly white females so having this exposure to students of color can benefit them as developing teachers. Through training and self-reflection, mentors learn to uncover their own implicit biases. Mentors often report on how much they learn from their mentees about their ethnicities, traditions, and school cultures. Mentees, of course, also gain a lot of college knowledge by working with their mentors. Effective mentoring is mutually beneficial to all stakeholders. By building strong connections, PTD focuses on preparing all mentors and mentees to be the best version of themselves they can be and inspiring them to become effective culturally responsive educators.

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