

5 Reciprocal mentoring in the PK-12 education sector

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Introduction

The PK-12 educational sector includes students, teachers, and administrators in the school grades before college. It encompasses elementary and secondary education, and in the United States (U.S.), it includes early childhood (pre-kindergarten), elementary school (kindergarten to 5th grades), middle school (6th–8th grades), and high school (9th–12th grades). This foundational educational sector provides the essential knowledge and skills for college and workplace success. It also prepares young people for the challenges of adulthood and their obligations to their communities.

Worldwide, the PK-12 educational system is considered compulsory. In 2014, approximately 1.29 billion students were enrolled in PK-12 (SDG 4 Data Digest, 2018). The U.S. PK-12 system comprises 128,961 schools, with 54.2 million students and employs 3.5 million teachers (NCES, 2022). Despite the importance of education for both personal and worldwide economic development, 617 million children and adolescents are unable to read or handle basic mathematics, creating a global dropout crisis due to lack of access, failure to keep students on track, and issues of quality in education (SDG 4 Data Digest, 2018). In addition, the world is experiencing a teacher shortage crisis due to the lack of training and unattractive work environments, exacerbated by post-pandemic teacher attrition, with 69 million teachers needed to achieve universal primary education by 2030 (UNESCO, 2022).

While global educational issues are complex, we draw from the cases presented in this chapter to alleviate some of these problems. Reciprocal mentoring initiatives and relationships assist in easing diversity disparities that increase children’s likelihood of incarceration, increase community engagement, and improve teachers’ working environments. In this chapter, we explore the design of reciprocal mentoring initiatives addressing these challenges at the micro-level.

The PK-12 educational sector context

Mentoring is a complex phenomenon, and it depends on the context, the purpose of the relationship, and the participant’s values and competencies.

Despite multiple and competing definitions of mentoring, many scholars agree that mentoring is, first and foremost, a relationship that implies a partnership to facilitate learning and growth (Dominguez, 2017), making the educational sector a natural context for mentoring relationships to grow and flourish.

Mutuality has been considered an essential element for the success of this developmental relationship. While mentors, mentees, and organizations benefit from establishing mentoring relationships, Allen and Eby (2007) consider them reciprocal but asymmetrical since they are primarily established for the mentee's benefit. In addition, many studies assumed that the effectiveness of a mentoring relationship depended on the amount of assistance provided, focusing on how different characteristics of the protege, the mentor, and the mentor–protege relationship accounted for variation in the quality of mentoring received. Some scholars claim that true mentors provide high career and psychosocial support. In contrast, others recognized that additional support is needed for the mentee's success, such as coaching sponsorship, networking, and role modeling (Dominguez, 2017). Furthermore, Ragins et al. (2017) concluded that mentoring satisfaction depended on the quality of the psychosocial or relational functions offering opportunities for mutual learning, growth, and discovery.

Given the complexity of the organizational environment, we acknowledge that a single mentor cannot provide all the guidance, exposure, and opportunities essential to managing current educational, job, and leadership challenges effectively. In educational settings, individuals receive mentoring assistance from many people at any time, including teachers, advisors, counselors, senior colleagues, peers, family, and community members. Therefore, the hierarchical one-to-one mentoring paradigm has shifted. The mentee has changed from being a passive receiver to becoming an active learner; the mentor role has evolved from being an authority to becoming a facilitator of learning; and the learning process has changed from mentor-directed to self-directed and from face to face to multiple and varied opportunities and configurations (Zachary, 2009). Most important, the focus of the relationship has changed from the transfer of information to the co-creation of knowledge through critical reflection (Dominguez, 2017).

The reciprocal nature of mentoring has been explored as a critical element for establishing high-quality mentoring relationships. These relationships are not just mutually beneficial; in high-quality, reciprocal mentoring relationships, members experience a strong emotional attachment to each other and their relationship; they develop trust through a process of disclosure and authenticity; they increase their emotional intelligence and relational savvy; and members give support to each other based on their needs because they care for the well-being of their partner, not because they expect something in return (Kram, 2008; Kram & Higgins, 2009).

In PK-12, one-to-one, hierarchical mentoring relationships have been extensively studied, indicating positive outcomes in youth's social and emotional

development, academic performance, and behaviors. However, this approach has insufficiently addressed school disparities and educational attainment due to the lack of qualified mentors, volunteer mentors' attrition, power differentials, and scarcity of mentors from underrepresented populations. Group and near-peer-mentoring approaches, designed for the establishment of mutually beneficial partnerships among middle-/high-school students and pre-service teachers, have yielded increased positive outcomes in school connectedness, social and emotional development, improved academic attitudes, and community engagement for youth, as well as increased understanding of students and the community and changed attitudes toward teaching for pre-service teachers (Harwood & Radoff, 2009).

Reciprocal mentoring relationships alleviate issues in teacher education and the work environment by increasing pre-service teachers' self-confidence, engagement, sense of belonging, and perception of being valued and respected. In studying graduate residencies, Paris (2010) concluded that reciprocal mentoring assists the development of pre-service teachers by pairing two skilled professionals with complementary skill sets and needs, increasing the likelihood of both parties acting as mentor and mentee since they have something valuable to offer the other. Reciprocal mentoring initiatives also convey a commitment to the teachers' success and leadership development by "*including purposeful mentoring activities, assigning committed mentors, and providing a periodic assessment of the mentoring arrangements positions the principal as a catalyst for the realization of teacher professional competence*" (Tillman, 2003, p. 233).

In this chapter, we showcase three examples of mentoring initiatives supporting the learning, growth, and development of students and teachers, in which the reciprocal nature of the relationships positively affected the lives of their participants.

In the first case, Witmer and Wimer present a middle school program created to decrease the incarceration likelihood of underrepresented youth by pairing Black men with sixth-grade students. While the program follows a hierarchical approach, a serendipitous outcome develops when novice and seasoned mentors learn from each other by sharing their life experiences and engaging in community-building activities. In the second case, Witmer addresses the reciprocal nature of near-peer mentoring relationships among white college student mentors (pre-service teachers) and middle/high-school mentees from underrepresented backgrounds, in which both mentors and mentees engage in cross-cultural relationships resulting in increased cultural competence, awareness of unconscious bias, and inequities for the pre-service teachers and positive attitudes toward a college education for the mentees. Finally, in the third case, Cowin explains an innovative, pure-reciprocal mentoring initiative in which aspiring educational leaders (in-service teachers) participate in co-mentoring circles. The structured design of the program has raised the leadership opportunities of 76 aspiring leaders in the past 7 years.

Case Study: Serendipitous reciprocal mentoring effects on Black male mentors

Miriam Marguerita Gomez Witmer and Jeffrey W. Wimer

Educational disproportionality is a significant factor contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline, which promotes structural and systemic discrimination, resulting in certain groups of students being more at risk for prison. Black male students are issued more behavior referrals from teachers than other races. The Brotherhood is a middle-school mentoring program designed to address this disproportionality. Twelve Black men from the community, ages 24–62, agreed to serve as mentors to 13 Black males in one middle school. A control group ($n = 34$) was formed from the Black males who did not receive mentoring and attended two other middle schools in the same district. The two primary intended goals of the mentoring program were (1) mentees will progress successfully from sixth grade to seventh grade, and (2) mentees will have an increased sense of self-confidence and empowerment by the end of the program. These explicit objectives are protective factors that mitigate the disproportionality. Black male mentors provided authentic mentoring. Many mentors were raised in the same community as the mentees and shared similar experiences. Two groups of mentors emerged organically seasoned and novice. Some seasoned mentors are pillars of the community who have mentored some novice mentors. Novice mentors reported that they benefited from the seasoned mentors' wisdom and life experiences. The seasoned mentors reported that they appreciated the novice mentors' ability to relate to and gain trust with the mentees. This serendipitous effect resulted in reciprocal mentoring.

Purpose and objectives of the mentoring program

School-to-prison pipeline is a term that acknowledges that because of structural, systemic, institutional, and societal barriers that foster inequity, inequality, racism, and other forms of discrimination, certain students are destined for prison (Milner et al., 2019). Research shows that the U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world. While the U.S. represents 5% of the world's population, it accounts for roughly 25% of its prison population, and incarceration is disproportionately distributed across the population. People of Color (African American, Latino, and Native American) make up about 30% of the U.S. population but account for approximately 60% of the prison population (The Sentencing Project, 2017). Furthermore, a Black male in the U.S. has a one-in-three chance of going to prison in his lifetime.

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discrimination, resulting in certain groups of students being more at risk for prison. In this case study, the school district identified that sixth-grade Black male students were issued more behavior referrals from teachers than other races. “The Brotherhood” is a middle-school mentoring program designed to address this disproportionality.

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Mentoring context

Black male mentors provided authentic mentoring. Many mentors were raised in the same community as the mentees and shared similar experiences. Two groups of mentors emerged organically seasoned and novice. Seasoned mentors are older, have a historical understanding of the Black experience, and are seen as wise. Some seasoned mentors are pillars of the community who have mentored some of the more novice mentors in the past. Novice mentors are typically younger and closer in age to mentees.

Recognizing that multicultural education is an evolving process, participants’ voices and experiences must be addressed. To provide a space for this work, a focus group with the mentors was conducted ten days after the death of George Floyd. Nine mentors and four school personnel (i.e., Assistant Superintendent, Community Liaison, Home-School Coordinator, and the Principal from School C) participated. Three interview question prompts were provided to the participants before the meeting using a naturalistic case study inquiry approach (Merriam, 1998). The questions were as follows: (1) How are you feeling? (2) How do we respond to the mentees considering what is happening with the Black Lives Matter protests? (3) What is next?

Video and audio of the meeting were recorded using the Zoom platform. Audio responses were then transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word. Each participant’s transcribed responses were analyzed using a content analysis open-coding procedure to identify emergent themes. Data were organized according to each interview question to identify patterns (Glaser, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Analysis revealed two significant themes from the mentors: minority stress (Meyer et al., 2008) from recent lived experiences and the promotion of social activism as a strategy for societal change.

Minority stress refers to the conflict with the social environment experienced by members of stigmatized minority groups. These stressors can affect the mental health of everyone in the community. The shared

lived experience of the Black Lives Matter protests happening in the mentors' and mentees' neighborhoods created symbiotic relationships between mentors and mentees. Mentors were asked to think about what they, as 12-year-olds, would need to hear to help them process these events. Changes in the curriculum were the outcome of this focus group, and the mentoring program became more cohesive.

The new shared vision from the focus group unified the seasoned and novice mentors. Seasoned mentors often talked about respect in terms of older people deserving respect automatically. They reported that they learned different ways to establish relationships with mentees from novice mentors. For example, novice mentors believed that respect must be earned and can be earned in different ways. The seasoned mentors gained an awareness of the novice mentors' approaches to building relationships with mentees. More entry points to communication with mentees regarding social media, music, and contemporary issues allowed the novice mentors to relate to their mentees and the seasoned mentors to witness other ways to meet them where they are. Rather than seasoned mentors only offering their own opinions and giving advice, they recognized that mentoring is about meeting the mentees where they are and knowing what they need. Reciprocal mentoring emerged between the seasoned and the novice mentors.

Infrastructure, organizational support, and communication plan

Twelve Black men from the community, ages 24–62, agreed to serve as mentors to 13 Black males in one middle school. A control group ($n = 34$) was formed from the Black males who did not receive mentoring and attended two other middle schools in the district. The program coordinator facilitated mentor–mentee sessions and provided a handout to the parents about the goals of each session. The mentor liaison was a staff member in the school who had direct contact with the mentees daily, and this position was critical to the success of the program. The home-school coordinator in the school was paramount in ordering food, reserving rooms for each session, and communicating with the families. Families who attended the sessions received information about the content of each session and resources to help their sons meet the program's goals.

Recruitment, selection, and matching strategies

The school district Equity Design Team offered information sessions at local faith-based organizations and used word of mouth within the school district to recruit mentors. Interested mentors then attended a

mandatory four-hour mentor training. The school district paid for the mentors to get their clearances and paid mentors a stipend for their participation for one academic year; however, because of COVID-19, all mentors agreed to work with their mentees beyond the original end date.

All sixth-grade Black males in the middle school were invited to an orientation meeting. Communication was sent home to parents, who then permitted their sons to participate. A speed mentoring activity, where mentees rotated around the room to engage with the trained mentors, was used to help make the mentor–mentee matches.

Training and educational opportunities for mentors and mentees

Mentors participated in a four-hour training, which included goals of the project, support for building relationships, an overview of the curriculum, and data about the demographics and developmental levels of the mentees. Mentees also participated in an orientation session, and if they were interested in the program (all but one agreed to participate), parents also attended an orientation meeting. Mentors were given the *Critical Mentoring* (Weiston-Serdan, 2017) book to read and use as a resource. The mentees all received and read *We Beat the Streets: How a Friendship Pact Led to Success* (Davis et al., 2006).

The initial curriculum topics included:

- Building Our Community/Manners
- Power of Your Belief
- Making Good Choices
- Career and College Exploration
- Self-Esteem, Self-Advocacy, Self-Efficacy
- Black History
- Social Media and Our Reputation
- Celebration and Preparation for Summer Mentoring Activities
- Trip to the African American Museum in Washington, D.C. (families welcome)

After the lockdown from the pandemic and George Floyd's murder, the curriculum was modified in response to the needs voiced by the mentees and the mentors. These changes included:

- Local African American Heritage and History
- Growth Mindset
- Career Exploration
- Black Lives Matter/Social Activism

- Power of Public Speaking
- Police Officer Panel
- Celebration/Community Networking/New Middle School Building
- Black Military Veterans
- *Choices*: movie and discussions

Strategies to monitor and support the relationships

Strategies to monitor and support the relationships included cohort meetings every other week. The original curriculum was designed to meet the mentees' needs and capitalize on the mentors' areas of expertise. Five mentors presented part of the sessions; for example, there were two sessions about Black military veterans and local Black history.

Formative and summative evaluation

Formative and summative evaluations of the mentoring program and the mentoring relationships were conducted throughout the program. Formative check-ins with mentors were done at each cohort session. At the end of the pilot program, mentors participated in exit interviews over Zoom. They provided feedback, and the researchers identified emerging themes and presented that information to the school district. At the end of each semester, the researchers assessed the mentees' grades, attendance, and the number of discipline referrals.

Funding of the mentoring program

The school district funded the program coordinator's position and the clearances for the mentors and provided all the operational funds for meals. The district also purchased the *Critical Mentoring* books for the mentors and the *We Beat the Streets* book for the mentees.

Sustaining the mentoring program and plans for the future

A final report of this one-year pilot program was presented to the school district, and recommendations were made. The mentoring program prepared mentors to maintain mentoring relationships beyond the one-year pilot program. Some, but not all, matches are still meeting regularly without formal programming. There are plans for expanding this model to a new middle school in the same school district serving sixth-grade Black females.

Outcomes and lessons learned

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests after George Floyd's murder significantly impacted the program. Even

though the cohort mentoring sessions had to move to a remote format, the mentoring program still met regularly. A plan was developed with mentors and school personnel to support the mentees and their families best. It became clear that the Black male mentors also needed support during this time of racial unrest in the country.

Meeting online was a real challenge for many reasons. However, the school provided the mentees' families with pizza delivery, and the check-ins became even more critical as some families were experiencing food insecurity. Mentorship needs to be adaptive and clearly respond to the mentees' needs, so the session curriculum changed in response to those needs. For example, one mentor suggested a photovoice project that all mentors and mentees could do to mark who they were at this time in history.

Novice mentors reported that they benefited from the seasoned mentors' wisdom and life experiences. The seasoned mentors reported that they appreciated the novice mentors' ability to relate to and gain trust with the mentees. This serendipitous effect resulted in reciprocal mentoring, which unified the mentors to create a stronger bond.

Case Study: Color of Teaching Mentoring Program: cultural awareness as a reciprocal mentoring outcome

Miriam Marguerita Gomez Witmer

The Color of Teaching Mentoring Program (CoT) addresses a national disparity between teachers and students of color. The mission of CoT is to recruit and retain students of color in the field of education. Trained college student mentors serve middle- and high-school students interested in becoming an educator. The percentage of education majors of color is low, so often, White females make up most of the mentors in the program. The mentees in the program are mostly all students of color who attend nearby urban schools. The mentors often have yet to gain significant previous experience working with ethnically diverse students who have different lived experiences than them. College mentors participate in training addressing cultural competence and unconscious bias; however, they learn much more from first-hand experience working with their mentees of color. The mentors report that they learn so much from their mentees and that, as future teachers, this is very beneficial. The cultural mismatch that exists initially often dissipates as the mentors learn more about their mentees' lives. The mentees report that they learn much about college life and how to access resources and advocate for themselves from their mentors. This reciprocal mentoring effect has great potential to support more equitable learning environments for all

students, particularly students of color because these White pre-service teachers are learning about cultural differences and inequities that exist in the education system directly from their mentees.

Purpose and objectives of the mentoring program

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 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 U.S. Latinx students comprise 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).

The purpose of the CoT is to recruit and retain students of color in the field of education. The program is specifically designed to address the disparity between the number of students of color in the nation versus the low number of teachers of color. Representation and advocating for the teaching profession matter. One Black female mentor in the program noted, “*Representation is key to diversity that suits all students with different backgrounds and conditions. As a student of color, I find it difficult to find a mentor that looks like myself and could provide similarities in experience.*” Her observation articulates one of the fundamental issues with the lack of diversity in the teaching profession and the need to recruit more teachers and mentors of color.

Mentoring context

While the mission of CoT is to recruit and retain students of color in the field of education, most of the mentors are White females, which is consistent with the number of white teachers in the northeast geographical region. Mentees attend urban schools that provide 100% free and reduced lunch to all their students. Middle-school and high-school students in the program have either been nominated by a teacher, guidance counselor, or administrator, or themselves or their parents request enrolment.

The predominantly White female mentors also hold leadership positions in the organization. Given that the mentors predominantly come from suburban or rural areas, many have yet to gain experience interacting with people of color living in urban areas. CoT allows them to mentor students of color and learn more about their lived experiences, which may impact them as developing teachers.

While the primary purpose of the CoT Mentoring Program is to educate the mentees about college life, goal setting, and pursuing an

education degree, the mentors also learn from their mentees. The following mentors' testimonials garnered from survey data express this reciprocal effect:

One White female mentor stated, "CoT has given me resources and experience learning about different cultures. This has made me a better all-around person and given me the tools to continue to grow."

When asked about what she learned by being a mentor in CoT, one White female shared, "I have learned what it means to be a role model, to plan and organize with others in mind, how to communicate effectively, and above all, show kindness to all."

One White female shared the following when asked if CoT has impacted her perspective on students of color and, if so, how. She wrote, "Absolutely! I come from a predominantly white school district, and it opened my eyes to coming to [CoT] and seeing the extensive and beautiful celebration of diversity. Thanks to CoT I have learned how amazing it is to listen to peoples' stories and learn how to have a conversation despite not being a student of color." She also said, "I am more educated on the topic and importance of diversity and can share it with my friends and family so we can address people properly and include all." This insight demonstrates the power of reciprocal mentoring and how this mentor's perspective has changed, and her awareness may impact her future students of color.

When asked about what impact being an officer has had, a White female mentor said, "Being an officer in color of teaching is the greatest honor and the best thing to brag about. I feel so lucky to have meaningful conversations with people who aren't like me but accept me. I never get tired of hearing peoples' stories and watching them bring everyone together." Having opportunities to learn about different cultures is important for pre-service teachers who can impact societal views and behaviors regarding respecting all people.

Another White female shared, "I learned to listen to others' stories. I also learned to appreciate people from other backgrounds and advocate for change." She also noted, "CoT has taught me more about students of color and the different barriers these individuals face that I, as a white individual, have not had to face." CoTs impacted her "Being involved helped me see the gaps in our current education system. It has opened my eyes to other students and their experiences in education. CoT has taught me to advocate and be part of the change." These realizations have clearly motivated this mentor to be a culturally responsive teacher who will fight for equity for all her students. To be knowledgeable about cultural expectations and differences is one thing but being motivated to take that knowledge to action is another. In this way, this mentor can be part of the solution to the racial divide that exists in our society.

Even though culturally relevant and sustaining mentoring is discussed during mentor training, sometimes the White mentors unknowingly engage in microaggressions and need to be made aware so that they can learn not to make the same mistakes in the future, especially in their future classrooms. Creating a safe environment where mentors and mentees can have honest conversations can help everyone to be more equitable and culturally sensitive. All mentors are encouraged to reflect on their unconscious biases honestly and ask questions that will help them grow as culturally responsive teachers. The mentoring program is more robust if everyone can share their honest feelings and learn from each other.

Infrastructure, organizational support, and communication plan

Brochures and applications are given to all middle-school and high-school guidance counselors in the urban schools participating in the program. Parental consent is secured, and mentees complete an information/interest form which is used for matching them with a mentor. This three-tiered mentoring program begins with 7th–12th grade students securing a trained college student mentor. Cohort meetings of mentors and mentees occur twice a month during the academic year. Trained college mentors can get matched with faculty mentors as well. In this way, the college student can be both a mentor and be mentored, providing more mentoring support and an opportunity for more reciprocal mentoring. Open and honest communication is key to building a safe and validating environment for everyone and allowing everyone to grow together.

Recruitment, selection, and matching strategies

College students are invited to join the CoT Mentoring Program at campus organization fairs and class presentations made to education majors. Word of mouth on campus also draws some potential mentors to learn more. CoT is an approved student organization, so mentors interact and collaborate with other student organizations on campus. College student mentors are then required to submit clearances and participate in mentor training, after which mentors can be matched with mentees enrolled in the program.

The biggest recruitment event for mentees is Teacher Ed Day. High-school students take a tour of campus, hear from an inspiring keynote educator of color, participate in a roundtable discussion with mentors and other local educators of color, eat lunch in the dining hall, and interact with a panel of college students representing a variety of student organizations on campus. After the event, high-school students can request an application.

Training and educational opportunities

All mentors participate in a mandatory 2.5-hour training which includes an overview of best practices in mentoring, details about the mission and goals of the CoT Mentoring Program, stages of mentoring, required paperwork, and culturally responsive practices (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Mentors and mentees are invited to present at academic conferences and participate in community service opportunities. These experiences help mentors and mentees gain confidence, strengthen relationships, and practice-building leadership skills.

Another primary goal of the mentoring program is to support the retention of education majors. College student mentors have opportunities to participate in professional development, like conducting research and speaking at academic conferences. The mentors also take leadership positions and get experience organizing Teacher Ed Day. In addition, they organize a Scholastic Book Fair to raise money to purchase a new book for every child in a designated elementary school.

Strategies to monitor and support the relationships

Mentors are responsible for contacting their mentees weekly, via text or phone, to attend as many cohort meetings as they can with their mentees and have another individual meeting with them once a month. Mentors are asked to submit a record of how often they have met with their mentees at the end of each semester and a brief report about the general topics they discussed during their meetings. These data are then used to design the curriculum for the next semester to meet the mentees' needs. At each mentor meeting, mentors share how everything is going with their mentees, and if support is needed, it is given immediately.

Formative and summative evaluation

Each semester all the officers in the organization talk about what went well and what changes they would like to see to strengthen the program. Collecting feedback from all mentoring constituents is vital to a deeper understanding of the program's mission so that it can be more effective (Clutterbuck et al., 2012). Mentees are also invited to share feedback and recommend future activities for the mentoring cohort meetings. Since 2010, the program coordinator has collected data on the number of students who matriculate to the college and the number of students who earn their college degree and teacher certification. To date,

43 high-school students involved in CoT have matriculated to the host university, and approximately 81 college students who participated in CoT have graduated with their teaching certificates. Thirty-eight college students have engaged in high-impact practices (research or speaking at academic conferences), and two undergraduate students in CoT have published a paper for a conference proceeding. All these outcomes support the recruitment and retention of students of color.

Funding of the mentoring program

CoT is funded through grants and support from the Dean of the College of Education and Human Services, both education departments at the college, and a partnership with the local urban school district. As more school districts partner with the program, they will also be asked to support CoT financially.

Sustaining the mentoring program and plans for the future

CoT is a student organization on campus, so in-person events were not permitted for a year because of COVID protocols, but the officers used Zoom to continue to meet. Now that organizations are allowed to meet on campus again, mentees have been engaging at a much higher rate. The mentoring program continues to grow, and now seven other school districts are requesting mentors for their students, so the program is expected to grow exponentially in the next few years. Many school districts see this as a “grow your own” program that will help them address the nation’s teacher shortage crisis.

Outcomes and lessons learned

Regarding reciprocal mentoring, the mentees learn about college life from their mentors, and the mentors learn cultural awareness from their mentees. Creating a safe space for the mentors and mentees and helping them to build trust can foster reciprocal mentoring. Many mentors report that they learn a lot from their mentees, and in this case, reciprocal mentoring could have a long-lasting effect on the mentors who are also pre-service teachers. This experience may help the pre-service teachers be more culturally responsive to their future students, which could be a valued outcome that impacts students of color who may feel supported and validated enough to pursue careers in education.

Case Study: Empowering one another: leadership lessons learned in co-mentoring circles

Kathleen M. Cowin

Co-mentoring circles offer aspiring PK-12 school leaders a safe, supportive, professional community to learn how to lead with others uniquely situated to understand today's challenges of PK-12 school leadership. Circle members co-mentor each other through a structural approach that focuses on "*collaboration, shared decision making, and systems thinking*" (Kochan & Trimble, 2000, p. 20) and through "*reciprocal teaching and learning*" and examine issues of power within their mentoring relationships (Mullen, 2005, p. 25). Key to collaboration is a focus on systems thinking approach, whereby participants recognize the complexity of issues and take time before acting to use thoughtful inquiry and reflection. Co-mentoring circle members focus on mutual respect, appreciation, and attentive listening, in which the listener holds a space where the speaker can hear their ideas without interruption or advice-giving (Center for Courage and Renewal, 2022; Gibbs, 2006) and deep reflection (Arredondo-Rucinski, 2005; Rodgers, 2002). There are usually 12 or fewer participants in the circle, which is held within the internship seminar in a graduate-level leadership certification program. Establishing a safe, supportive, trusting, and professional co-mentoring circle takes several formation meetings. The circle is not a place for complaining, though empathy is often extended among the circle participants when listening to issues voiced by circle members. Over 76 interns have participated in co-mentoring circles over the past seven years, giving overwhelmingly positive assessments, with some circle members still meeting independently after program completion.

Purpose, context, and tensions

Time for mentoring aspiring PK-12 school leaders moving from veteran teachers, instructional coaches, or deans of students to their new role as PK-12 Principal Certification Interns (Interns) is in short supply in today's complex schools. Over the past seven years, 76 Interns have participated in co-mentoring circles during their required Internship Seminar. Co-mentoring circles offer Interns a safe, supportive community to learn with others who are uniquely situated to understand the challenges in today's schools. Co-mentoring circles provide a group of co-mentors to call on without waiting for an assigned mentor to be available. A "Circle" usually has 12 or fewer participants. The focus is to create trusting and supportive developmental relationships.

Interns have unique needs in their internships, with several tensions built into the relationship between the Intern and the school district-assigned Principal Intern Mentor (PIM). The PIM is usually also the Intern's Principal in the Intern's other role as teacher, instructional coach, or dean of students.

One tension Interns expressed is concern over their PIM, seeing them as not knowing how to do something they have been assigned and looking unprepared for leadership. Another tension arises when Interns disagree with how their PIM wants a particular action handled. Even when the outcome of the assigned Internship task seemed successful, if the task was performed differently than how the PIM would have completed it, the PIM may call their performance into question. Yet another tension is that the PIM also serves as a gatekeeper to an Intern's future employment as an administrator, as the PIM is a crucial recommendation writer and reference. An Intern's ability to work collaboratively and collegially with their PIM can be critical to future employment.

Tension also comes from the quality of feedback Interns receive. Often PIMs assign Interns tasks so that the PIM can move on to another task. If the PIM is not present to personally observe task completion, hearsay feedback from others may be used to evaluate the Intern's work. Interns say it would be helpful if their PIM could observe their internship work and provide timely feedback. As their university-based mentor, I wanted to create a safe space to address these tensions, so I created the co-mentoring circle process and have been refining it for seven years.

Program structure

The co-mentoring circle was developed for PK-12 Principal Interns within the context of a university graduate Principal Certification Program. Interns attend the Internship Seminar once a month on Saturdays as a required component of their certification program. Ninety minutes of each required five-hour seminar is used for the co-mentoring circle. There is no organizational or financial support for the co-mentoring circle program beyond using 90 minutes of the monthly Internship Seminar for the co-mentoring circle. There is no recruitment of participants for the co-mentoring circle as they are already students in the Principal Certification Program, attending the required monthly Internship Seminar. There is no matching as the Interns participate as co-mentors to each other within the circle. Communication about the structure of the co-mentoring circle is completed during the Internship Seminar and includes ten components used to form the co-mentoring circle.

Educational opportunities and curriculum description

Interns are introduced to co-mentoring from the work of Kochan and Trimble (2000) and Mullen (2005). Mullen (2005) defines co-mentorship as when “individuals or groups proactively engage in reciprocal teaching and learning and transform power structures to honor egalitarianism” (p. 25). Mullen’s (2005) call for an examination of the power structures inherent in the mentoring relationship is foundational to the work of the co-mentoring circle, as is Kochan and Trimble’s (2000) examination of “collaboration, shared decision-making, and systems thinking” (p. 20). Interns are also introduced to the co-mentoring circle components. See Figure 5.1, which is explained in detail next.

Group agreements

Group agreements (Gibbs, 2006), “attentive listening,” “appreciation,” “no put-downs,” “mutual respect,” and the “right to pass” (p. 71), are our starting points in discussing how we will treat each other. We discuss the agreements by acting out how they might look based on life or classroom experiences. The agreements are reaffirmed each time we meet,

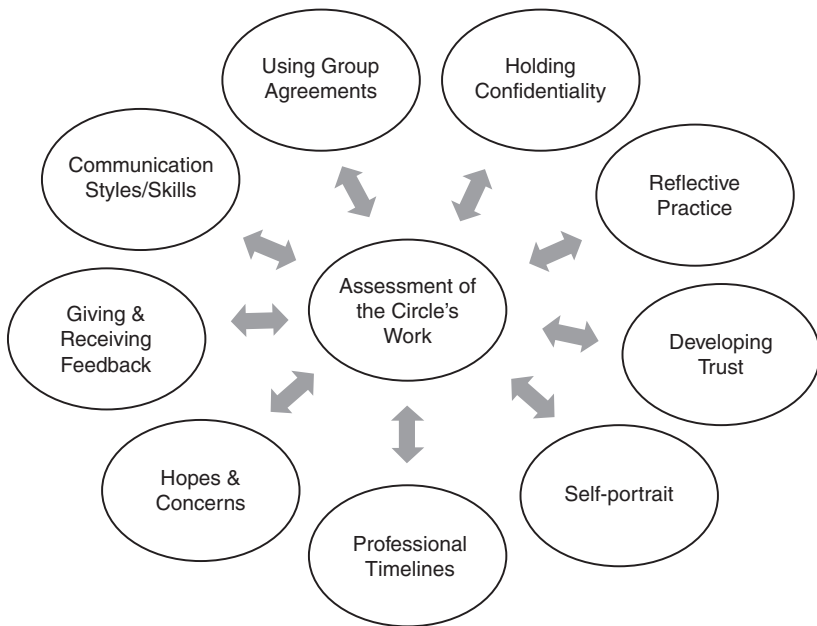


Figure 5.1 Ten components of a co-mentoring circle.

and if there were to be a concern about upholding the agreements, as the facilitator, I would discuss this within the circle until it was resolved.

Confidentiality

Participants agree to hold confidentiality as the standard for circle participation. We conduct self-checks on whether confidentiality is held before each circle begins. We practice a form of deep confidentiality from The Courage to Lead®, called “double confidentiality,” in which only the person who brings up a specific topic can bring it up again.

Trust

Trusting co-mentoring relationships come from study, reflection, and our work together. Participants study and discuss the work of Tschannen-Moran (2007, 2014) and Combs et al. (2015) for practices that build trust. The discussions and activities we participate in provide opportunities to be trustworthy, deepening trust with each other.

Communication styles and skills

Circle participants take a communication self-assessment (Alessandra & O'Connor, 2017, 2018) and study Zachary and Fischler's (2014) model for mentoring conversations. In our co-mentoring circle work, we seek to move our conversations to a level Zachary and Fischler (2014) call “collaborative engagement” (p. 168), in which participants strive to be vulnerable, sharing concerns or fears with each other. This level of conversation can happen if the co-mentoring circle relationships are trusting, and the group agreements and confidentiality are upheld.

Giving and receiving feedback

Giving and receiving feedback is key to the daily practice of a school leader (Sullivan & Glanz, 2013). School leaders give feedback on lessons and on actions taken by staff and students. They must know how to give feedback that neither inhibits the receiver from engaging with the feedback nor unnecessarily engendering anger or hurt. The skills of giving and receiving feedback are practiced in the co-mentoring circle as we offer support and feedback to one another for the issues brought to the circle. We also study giving and receiving feedback from the non-evaluative perspective of a “critical friend,” where we aim to elevate our work (Costa & Kallick, 1993) and not to offer judgments unless requested.

Reflection

A format for written reflection is taught based on the work of Arredondo-Rucinski (2005) and Rodgers (2002). Time is reserved at the end of each circle for silence and written reflection. As a facilitator, written reflections are given to me to read, and I respond to each writer.

“Hopes and Concerns”

This activity continues to build trust among the circle participants by providing time to share hopes and concerns. When conducted face to face, the activity used post-it notes and whiteboard space. Over Zoom, a Google document was created so that participants could complete the activity. Participants anonymously list their hopes and concerns for their internship on the post-it note or Google document. After everyone has had an opportunity to participate, we review the notes. Then, Interns are asked if they see similar ideas listed. Similar notes are put together. Each time the activity has been conducted, the participants have had similar hopes and concerns. When this happens, it builds a further sense of camaraderie.

“Professional Timeline”

Participants make and share a visually displayed timeline in the professional timeline activity. What comes from sharing these timelines, posted to our electronic classroom platform, is the opportunity to highlight areas of expertise. For example, if you know a fellow circle participant with unique education experience and have a related question, you have a ready-made co-mentoring expert.

“The Self-portrait”

The self-portrait activity is completed after establishing trust, confidentiality, and our group agreements. As each participant shares, the conversations are insightful and self-revealing. I conceived the self-portrait activity based on the qualitative methodology of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Participants said they felt a closeness or connection with their circle members after the activity. Written reflection follows this activity.

Here is a snippet of one circle member’s self-portrait, which focused on when her father was critically burned in an accident that destroyed their family business. Her father was airlifted hours away to a trauma center. During the months of her father’s recovery, her mother stayed near the hospital.

For the rest of my life, I will carry in my heart all the kind things people did for our family during such a difficult time. Unfortunately, I will never forget the teacher who sent home a poor progress report for my sister with a written note in red ink, “Return with parent signature.” I was furious when she showed it to me. I thought everyone knew my mom was sitting by my dad’s bedside ... while he recovered. This teacher even had to turn past the spot where my dad’s shop had been to get home each day. As I have worked with families experiencing trials and tragedies over the years, I have remembered how this felt and have done my best to help them feel cared for and supported. Whether through tragedy or triumph, every student and family should feel wholly cared for and supported by the school.

(Unnamed participant, 2021)

The work of the circle

After these components have been addressed and the activities completed, the circle’s work addresses what Interns want to discuss. An agenda is created by Interns sending me their agenda topics. An example of one agenda topic: How to address the issue of shortages of substitute teachers. Beginning at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, substitute teachers, often retired teachers, were notifying school districts that they could no longer continue to substitute. This left school districts with critical shortages of substitute teachers. These shortages had school leaders scrambling to use the staff who were present to cover for absent teachers. Complicating the issue was the Contracted Bargaining Agreement requirements for preparation/release time for certified teachers. Our circle discussed how to deal with this issue, with all participants sharing ideas from their expertise and experience and using this co-mentoring information to create new ways to address the issue. See Box 5.1 for other examples of agenda items.

Box 5.1 Examples of co-mentoring circle agenda items from interns

- Substitute teacher shortages combined with Collective Bargaining Agreement requirements
- Classroom management curriculum and practices for students returning for face-to-face instruction for the first time in over a year
- Complying with mask-wearing requirements for students and staff
- Managing quarantine of students who test positive for COVID-19

- Managing records for vaccination requirements
- Managing school levy campaign public events with community members who are protesting in attendance
- Communicating about master schedule changes with students, families, staff, and community stakeholders
- Communication among the school leadership team (with assistant principals, counselors, school security, and primary school office administrative support members)
- Informal and formal evaluation of teaching practices
- Classroom walk-through protocols and recording forms
- Responding to TikTok challenges posted on social media
- Supporting staff through grief and loss

Formative and summative evaluation

Time is given at the end of each circle for oral and written reflection and formative assessment of the circle's work. Circle participants discuss their reflections and formative assessment, and, as a facilitator, I read the written reflections and formative assessments. If issues come up from these reflections or assessments, I address them individually or with the whole circle. In this way, we monitor our co-mentoring relationships. Written summative assessments are conducted at the end of the semester and when Interns complete their Certification Program. These summative assessments have been overwhelmingly positive (76/76 responses), with all Interns affirming the co-mentoring they received in the circle.

Sustaining co-mentoring circles and lessons learned

Through the thoughtful assessment of the participants, presenting at conferences, publishing about the process, and discussing it within my department, I continue to receive feedback that continues to help refine future co-mentoring circles.

Co-mentoring circles can be used in a variety of settings. I have successfully used this process with Principal Interns and Assistant Principals and have discussed using it with medical practitioners. I recommend that future mentoring program designers consider a co-mentoring circle approach. Start with developing group agreements and confidentiality among all participants and then continue to assess the group processes and outcomes to affirm trust is growing. It may seem counter-cultural in today's fast-paced work environment to take time to talk about how you are going to be in a relationship with one another. Still, I have found this time provides rewards of deeply supportive, long-lasting co-mentoring relationships. I hope others will try co-mentoring circles and continue to discuss their experiences.

Chapter conclusions and summary

This chapter's cases highlight the reciprocal mentoring process, outcomes, and design. In the first case, reciprocal mentoring emerges as a serendipitous outcome among mentors participating in a hierarchical, one-to-one mentoring program. In this program, a community of practice arises by artificially creating the proximity of people with shared interests and goals while addressing critical societal issues. Shared lived experiences among mentors offered the opportunity for dialogue in helping their mentees cope and reframe life-threatening events. The exchange of ideas and shared values among seasoned and novice mentors enhanced their learning, changing their communication styles and modifying their perspectives and approaches in attending to their mentees' needs. Elements of design and structure, such as having a program coordinator, a mentor liaison, and minimum school-based space, provided the needed resources for the program to flourish. Training and educational opportunities for mentors and mentees, a set curriculum, and shared readings increased the likelihood and quality of dialogue, learning, and satisfaction that resulted in relationships continuing beyond the boundaries of the initial program.

In the second case, a near-peer mentoring program for pre-service teachers and middle-/high-school students enhanced cross-cultural communication among mentors and mentees. The relative closeness in age, and the low power differentials, increased the opportunity for reciprocal mentoring. The mentor quotes show that these highly motivated and committed educators are open to learning from their mentees with humility. Their caring nature contributed to changing and improving the educational environment. A well-planned recruitment strategy, training opportunities in culturally responsive practices, continuous monitoring and support, and data collection provided the infrastructure to improve and expand the program to other school districts, increasing the feelings of respect, validation, and support for so-needed incoming educators.

In the third case, unique design elements are in place to offer co-mentoring circles for aspiring PK-12 school leaders in which reciprocal mentoring flourishes. Through the implementation of a theory-based curriculum with grounded but shared agreements, a collaborative process based on explicit values, professional facilitation, and accountability measures, this program provides evidence of effective reciprocal mentoring practices to support our educators and improve their working environments.

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