



Mentoring

in a PDS Program: What's in It for Me?

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The role of mentor is crucial to the success of a Professional Development Schools program, and the personal and professional benefits are clearly identifiable.

Many preservice teachers are reaping the benefits of participating in the hundreds of Professional Development Schools (PDS) created by school-university partnerships. The PDS model builds on the traditional, often isolating, student teaching experience (Clark 1999; Teitel 2003). Through extended field experiences in collaborative partnerships, PDS programs provide opportunities for teacher preparation, staff development, research, and enhancement of student learning (NCATE 2001).

The positive impact of PDS experiences on preservice teachers and their effect on student learning is well-documented (Aldrich 2001; Cobb 2000; Levine 2002; Teitel 2003). However, veteran educators are plagued by a nagging question: "In addition to the desire to 'give back' to the profession, what's in it for the mentors?" As PDS programs increase in number, the body of research must be extended to include the benefits for the traditional cooperating teachers in the new mentoring structure within the participating schools (Book 1996).

The Role of the PDS Mentor

The demands on a PDS mentor are great. Preservice teachers are assigned to mentors with little input from mentors in the matching process. Each mentor then is required to spend an academic year with the assigned future teacher. Typically during the first part of the year, mentors work with PDS students two to three days per week in pre-student teaching activities. PDS students gradually assume the role of the teacher as they prepare to take full responsibility during the student teaching semester in the second half of the year.

Shepherding a PDS student all year is not an easy task. Being a good mentor requires the veteran teacher to provide patient explanations of school culture and

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procedures, offer countless hours of feedback, and give up a significant portion of his or her teaching assignments for the year. Yet, regardless of the hard work required, many dedicated professionals volunteer to be PDS mentors. One must assume that these mentors are benefiting from their efforts.

The role of the mentor is critical to the success of PDS programs. In her analysis of 20 case studies on the collaborative processes involved in PDS programs, Rice (2002) identified 12 themes as being important to the success of the PDS; nearly half of these focused on the mentor teacher and his or her capacity to develop relationships and communicate effectively. If PDS programs are to grow and evolve, universities and schools must make the case that mentorship is not only a professional responsibility, but also an experience that can benefit the mentor in numerous ways.

Description of the PDS Programs

A study conducted by the authors aimed to look at the PDS experience through the mentors' eyes. East Stroudsburg University (ESU) in Pennsylvania, where the study was conducted, has two PDS programs—one for graduate students and one for undergraduates.

A local middle school houses the graduate student program, which has been in place for the past six years. In the first semester, participants enroll in five graduate education courses—four that meet at the middle school with a team of professors, and one subject-specific methods course on the university campus. During their initial two days a week on-site, students spend approximately half of each day in the field with the mentor, who is a member of an interdisciplinary team, and the other half with professors in an on-site classroom. Students also spend a full week in November teaching their mentors' entire schedule to better prepare them to assume the role of teacher in the spring semester.

The undergraduate program, entering its third year, is housed in a different district's high school and middle school. Students take three education courses on-site as well as the subject-specific methods course and other university requirements on campus. They also are paired with a mentor for one afternoon and one morning a week for intensive clinical experiences prior to student teaching with the same mentor.

The Study

All mentor teachers were interviewed individually for approximately 30 minutes. The interviewers followed an agreed upon protocol and asked seven questions.

1. Why did you volunteer to serve as a mentor in a PDS?

2. What did you assume would be the responsibilities and benefits of being a PDS mentor?
3. Has serving as a PDS mentor satisfied your expectations? In what way?
4. How would you describe your relationship with your PDS student during the fall semester?
5. Has your relationship with your colleagues been impacted by serving as a PDS mentor?
6. What would you say to a colleague who is considering becoming a PDS mentor?
7. If you served as both a PDS mentor and a cooperating teacher, how were the two experiences similar? Different? Which type of experience engendered a deeper relationship?

The 14 high school teachers and 11 middle school teachers interviewed had participated in the PDS program for at least two years. Of these, ten mentors also had been cooperating teachers in the more traditional, one-semester student teaching program. After analysis, the mentors' responses regarding their PDS experiences were organized into four categories: logistics of the PDS program; impact on mentors' relationships within the school; impact on the instructional process; and impact on the professionalism of the mentor.

Program Logistics

When asked how they became involved in the program, one-third of the mentors said they had been "volunteered" by their supervisors or principals. The appeal for most was a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. The opportunity to "give back" to the profession often was cited as a rationale for participating. More concrete inducements served as additional incentives: flextime; being released from some professional development activities; and state-mandated, professional development credits. Mentors also cited added benefits, such as thank-you notes, gifts, and celebratory social events provided by the university.

All participants indicated enthusiastically that they would serve as PDS mentors again if asked. Some teachers expressed a need to take a yearlong leave from the PDS program, but stated that they would want to rejoin the program after that one cycle. Some wanted this break to recharge their batteries; some wanted their classes back so that they could practice implementing new instructional strategies—ones they may have learned from their PDS mentees. Though they knew the necessity, they did not like giving up "a piece of your class when you have a student teacher."

Another issue regarding the program structure was the process of pairing mentor teachers and PDS students. Several mentors noted the importance of being a good "match" with their PDS students. This

sentiment is reflected in the research on co-teaching and teaming, in which the need to match the personalities of teachers often was cited as a requirement for a successful experience (Cook and Friend 1995; Fisher, Frey, and Farnan 2004; Thousand and Villa 1995). The matching process at ESU, which has evolved over time, begins at the university where professors gather information from prospective PDS students through interviews and an autobiographical writing assignment. The building liaison and PDS coordinators facilitate the matching process using personality and background as key elements.

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Despite the best efforts of the university and the schools, sometimes there were mismatches. This, however, did not mean that the mentor had a negative experience. One mentor, for instance, was assigned a much older student teacher. In this experience, the mentor was "forced to grow professionally and personally." He had to become more vocal in expressing his professional opinions to someone older than himself, particularly when he needed to correct the mentee.

Impact on Relationships

Middle school mentors reported that serving as PDS mentors enhanced their relationships with other members of their grade-level teams who were also PDS mentors. In a five-member team, for example, the presence of at least three PDS mentors was reported to "add significant value" to team discussions. "I am closer to PDS mentors than other faculty members" was a common response among these teachers. Also, those interviewed indicated a "change in culture" within their departments or teams because of the increased opportunities to discuss pedagogy and the continuous flow of questions about student learning and best practice.

Those mentors who had served as both a PDS mentor and a traditional cooperating teacher favored the PDS experience because it allowed them more time to become familiar with their mentees' strengths and weaknesses prior to student teaching. They also were able to help mentees become more familiar with the culture—community norms, district and building expectations, and logistics. By the time student teaching began, their relationships and conversations were more collegial. In addition, the mentees in the PDS program had more opportunities to develop relationships with other professionals within the school community. A mentor reported that her relationship with her mentee had developed from one of a teacher to a coach to a colleague. Another revealed, "I feel I have become a member of a co-teaching team."

One caution surfaced. Mentors stated that they needed to have time alone as well as with their peers. A mentor compared the PDS experience to the song "Me and My Shadow." In response to this need, university faculty made it clear to all participants that they should have some time for themselves during the school day. They were advised not to spend 100 percent of their time in their assigned pairs, but rather to allow for free lunch periods and opportunities for preservice teachers to meet and compare notes. Specific times, during mentors' planning periods, were designated for discussion of instructional issues with mentees.

Impact on the Instructional Process

Many mentors indicated that, because they had a preservice teacher in their classrooms for most of the year, they felt the need to "always be on." As noted by some mentors, it meant "I would have to model a variety of strategies and activities," and "I was always mindful of best practice." While this feeling likely contributed to stronger instruction in the classroom, it also may have contributed to mentors' stress levels and their desire to take a leave from the program for a year. However, several mentors indicated that being a "super teacher" every day and every class period was not always desirable or possible. They believed that being themselves and having both stellar and mundane days would illustrate to their mentees that not every lesson would be outstanding every time.

Both mentors and mentees benefited from discussions about pedagogy held in and out of the classroom. One mentor's response—"It is a great opportunity for professional growth"—was representative of many. Most mentors indicated that they had experienced a "mutual learning effect" by observing their preservice teachers. Comments such as the following were common:

- "A benefit for me is being able to fine-tune what I am doing."
- "I spend more time changing my lessons because of what I learn from my student teachers."
- "You improve your own teaching when you help others improve."

These types of responses seem to support the findings of Ross (2003), who concluded that mentor teachers value a relationship that allows reflection and discussion of their practices and those of their mentees.

Three-fourths of the mentors reported adding new instructional strategies to their teaching repertoires. The opportunity to be exposed to the latest educational research also was mentioned as having a positive impact on the mentors' teaching. "I saw theories being translated into practice," was a frequent statement by mentors. Mentors sensed that student achievement in their classrooms was increasing because of their refined techniques, though no comparative data have been collected from the ESU program. The question of whether the expansion of the mentors' instructional repertoire has a direct effect on secondary students' academic achievement needs to be the subject of a quantitative study. This research would support studies that have focused on whether PDS programs correlate with increased student achievement (Fisher et al. 2004; Levine 2002).

Impact on Professionalism

Most mentors indicated a heightened sense of professionalism as a result of participating in the PDS program. One reason they had agreed initially to serve as PDS mentors was because they had supportive mentors in their own preservice programs. The need to "give back because of people who had helped me" was a theme that threaded through 12 of the 25 interviews.

One mentor recounted that he had grown professionally from having a difficult preservice teacher who had a variety of problems in the classroom. This mentor was forced to explore effective change strategies, modify conference styles, and learn to become more directive with his teaching cues. In the end, he had to admit that he had not been successful in helping the preservice teacher improve; yet he had gained valuable insights and had grown from the experience.

Conclusions

Serving as a PDS mentor is an intense, gratifying, and professionally rewarding experience. The commitment is one that all teachers interviewed for this study would repeat if given the opportunity. All those interviewed

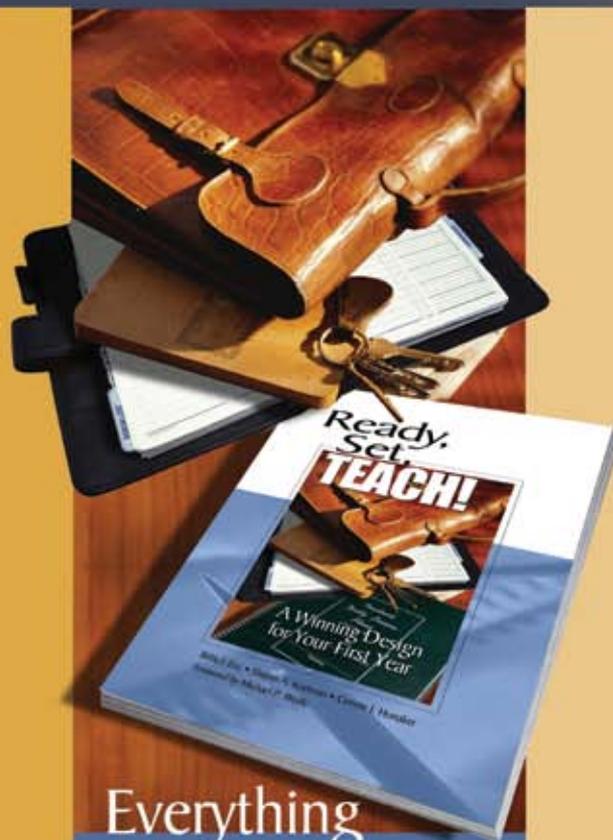
indicated that serving as a PDS mentor provided them with the opportunity to be more reflective about their own practice, even if their mentees experienced difficulties. In addition, all mentors agreed that having “another set of eyes” in their classrooms was a benefit to their students’ learning. Mentors unanimously agreed that having an additional semester to get to know their preservice teachers and to acclimate them to the culture of the school made the student teaching experience a richer and more satisfying learning experience for all involved.

Being a PDS mentor can be a demanding job and, for some, one that should not be assumed every year. However, as the teachers in this small qualitative study suggested, the answer to the question “What’s in it for me?” is that there are several rewards that make taking on this professional obligation worthwhile. Mentors expand their knowledge of teaching, become exposed to current trends, establish stronger relationships with their peers, and give their classes over to student teachers who are well-prepared to step in and assume the role of the teacher. From the mentors’ perspective, a PDS program not only prepares the next generation of teachers, but also has a significant impact on the mentors’ own teaching.

While limited in scope, this study’s conclusion that the role of the mentor is critical to successful PDS programs suggests that other studies are needed. The role of the mentor is rarely a research focus. However, studies that link PDS mentor participation with changed instructional practices, a more reflective approach to teaching, or student achievement will make a more compelling argument that mentorship is not just a professional obligation, but an activity that will improve the educational process. ■

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