Successful Mentor Matches: What It Takes to Ensure a Positive Mentor/Mentee Pairing

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Abstract

This chapter is dedicated to finding the most successful strategies and tools for positive mentor-teacher/teacher-candidate matches. While the tools have remained much the same throughout the years, they have become more sophisticated and potentially virtual. The importance of mentoring in teacher preparation cannot be underscored, and the match between current and potential teacher is of the utmost importance. This chapter examines the significance of a positive and successful mentor/mentee match and what it takes to get to that status.
Overview

Successful mentoring matches improve both student retention and student engagement at all levels of educational endeavors. During the author’s tenure with Access to Student Assistance Programs in Reach of Everyone (ASPIRE), she personally saw both successful and detrimental mentor/mentee matches and experienced firsthand the struggle and challenge that comes along with creating matches that are beneficial to both parties. Lucia (ninth grade), for example, was a young lady besieged with family problems, including a father in jail and a mother addicted to heroin. No one thought Lucia would amount to anything, and no one urged her to continue her schooling after high school or even to participate in her current scholastic situation. Lucia was matched with a connected community member who was retired and had both the time and ability to widen Lucia’s world and show her that her options included anything she wanted. By the time Lucia graduated, she had raised her GPA two full points, was accepted into several prestigious universities, and was offered two full-ride scholarships to state universities. Without her mentor, Lucia would still be living at home taking care of her younger brothers and sisters, without the hope of a future any better than that which her parents experienced.

The ability to make a successful mentor match is the key to stories like Lucia’s. This chapter examines several proven mentor/mentee strategies and looks ahead to innovative ideas and approaches that may provide an even stronger and more successful match. Gone are the days when mentors and mentees were matched based on availability or gender preference. At this point in time, mentor matches need to take into account much more.

Review of the Literature

Each student’s success depends on his or her role models and mentors, for without that guidance, the student is left with little to aspire to (Bell & Treleaven, 2011). A positive match between student and mentor benefits both mentor and mentee and creates an atmosphere of trust, respect, and guidance. Successful mentor/mentee matches allow both mentor and mentee to grow and learn, giving both parties the ability to mature to a new level of understanding and changing them both for the better.

Proponents of mentoring argue its merits on the basis of a paradigm Zey-Ferrell and Baker (1984) coined, the “mutual benefits model” (p. 83), which speaks to the idea that “investing some teachers with the special titles, resources, and obligations of mentorship will more readily assure various individual and institutional benefits.” Individual mentors “will receive public acknowledgment of their accumulated knowledge, skill, and judgment,” while “novice teachers will receive support that mediates the difficulties of the first years of teaching” (Warren, 1990, p. 299). To make the match even more beneficial, Warren (1990) mentioned the idea that “career opportunities in the occupation will be enriched. And schools, restructured to accommodate new teacher leadership roles, will expand their capacity to serve students and to adapt to societal demands” (p. 300). Other benefits for teacher candidates include “developing collegiality, networking, reflection, professional development, support and assistance, and personal satisfaction. Additional benefits for mentees can include higher rates of retention and promotion, higher success rates in receiving external research grants, higher publication rates and better perceptions” (Gardiner, Tiggemann, Kearns, & Marshall, 2007, p. 427).

So far, this chapter has been looking at positive matches and matching strategies, but there is another side to explore as well. Negative mentor matches are a real possibility and much has been written on the effects a negative mentor/mentee match has on both parties. According to Spencer (2007), six prominent factors contribute to the expiration of mentoring relationships: “(a) mentor or protégé abandonment, (b) perceived lack of protégé motivation, (c) unfulfilled expectations, (d) deficiencies in mentor relational skills, (e) family interference, and (f) inadequate agency support” (p. 331). All of these, with the exception of both (e) and (f), can be turned into positive experiences simply with a positive mentor/mentee match. Grossman (1999) found similar issues with unsuccessful matches.

Integration into the Student Experience

The use of mentor teachers has long been viewed as a necessary and vital part of the teacher preparation experience. Goering (2013) noted the importance of mentor teachers in English, while Mcaleer and Bangert (2011) spoke to the need in the field of mathematics. Goering opted to focus on face-to-face mentoring in the classroom, also sometimes known as co-teaching, dual teaching, or pair teaching, while
McAleer and Bangert took the route of online mentoring to aid in teacher preparation. Both have been shown to be extremely successful, and both are valid options in the current environment. The important part is the match itself. A teacher candidate who is in a classroom with a mentor teacher who is not involved or is not actually doing much mentoring is going to be far less successful than a candidate who has a “virtual” mentor who is involved and can model appropriate teaching skills from a separate location.

The beauty of mentoring is that it can be done in a variety of ways, utilizing an assortment of mediums and in a multiplicity of settings. Mentoring student teachers is not an easy or small task, however, and both the mentor and mentee must be prepared to follow through the duration.

Proven Practices, Examples, and Results

Following is a look at proven practices that have been successfully utilized in the past ten years. Big Brothers Big Sisters is perhaps the most well-known mentoring organization and has years of research and proven success. The Big Brothers Big Sisters of the North Bay developed the acronym “MATCHES” that succinctly summarizes the organization’s theory (Park and Porter-Burns, 2014). M is represented by several things including motivation and mentor training. A includes the assessment interview. Teamwork and trust are part of T. C comprises commitment, communication, consistency, confidentiality, and compatibility. H is slightly more important when making mentor matches with younger children—healthy boundaries. E has to do with expectations of the experience, and S is perhaps the most important part—the continued success of the match.

Taking into account the actual personality and behavioral styles is of the utmost importance when making successful mentor matches. Daresh and Playko (1992) found that four basic styles exist which can successfully be utilized to describe individuals and then for matching purposes. The importance of this was found in Piper-Hall’s (2015) research as well. All six of her research participants found that the most successful mentoring relationships occurred when personality and behavioral styles between mentor and mentee were similar.

The first style Daresh and Playko (1992) found was supportive: “This style demonstrates a high degree of respect for interpersonal relations. Individuals who possess this style try to minimize conflict and promote the happiness of everybody. Some people see the supportive style as accommodating and friendly, while others might view it as wishy-washy.” Those who are supportive tend to behave in whatever way may be needed to please others, but this may leave them frequently overcommitted. Supportive types are highly people-oriented individuals who will generally rely on others to give directions about how to get tasks done.

Next comes the directive style, which includes those who love to run things their way. These people are viewed as highly businesslike and efficient by some, and as threatening and unfeeling by others. “These people want to make sure that the job gets done, and they get impatient with lengthy descriptions about effective process.”

The third style, facilitative, is composed of people who “tend to get involved with people in active, rapidly changing situations.” They are seen as socially outgoing and friendly, imaginative and vigorous. Some view this style as dynamic and energetic, while others perceive the same behavior as highly egotistical. These individuals tend to be viewed as highly creative people who are also likely to generate ideas with little practical follow-through or concern for details.

The fourth and final personality/behavioral style is the scientific, which places substantial emphasis on problem solving and conceptual skills. Individuals portraying this style “tend to want much data before they make any decisions. As a result, they are viewed by others as methodical and thorough, although this behavior might frustrate some who look at their behavior as too slow.”

Going back to Big Brothers Big Sisters, the organization has seven “Principles of Matching” (Park and Porter-Burns, 2014, slide 3). The first is perhaps the most important and time-tested success piece. “Invest thoughtfully in the interview process.” In the North Bay chapter of Big Brothers Big Sisters, they have fifty-three interview questions for mentors and mentees, which allow them to really get a good idea of who they are dealing with (Park & Porter-Burns, 2014). For mentor teachers, the process is altered by the fact that candidates are often placed wherever there is an open location. That being said, the mentor teacher should still be invested in the match and wanting to impart wisdom and knowledge for his or her mentee.

In a perfect world, each teacher preparation program would have the following staff, dedicated to maintaining successful mentor/mentee
aspects of mentoring programs, starting with matching and continuing with follow-ups, check-ins, and possible interventions, if need be. Depending on the size of the district, institution, university, or school, this could be a full- or part-time person. Piper-Hall (2015) stringently suggested having this person focus only on the mentor matches. If a person is employed part-time as a mentor director and part-time in another position, the mentoring part of the equation can be quickly eaten up by the non-mentoring part. For the matches to be successful, someone needs to have his or her eye on the progression of the relationship from beginning to end.

As North and Sherk (2015) noted, there may be many people who collect information on those that enter the program, but there should be one person who assumes responsibility for making a particular match. “This is usually a match coordinator or similar position. This person’s responsibility is to gather all the information you have, examine the needs” (slide 8), find a compatible mentor teacher, and monitor and guide the matching process through to the end. “Obviously, this person will not be able to do this effectively if his time and energy are diverted elsewhere. . . . The last thing you want to do is make matches hastily and without proper consideration.”

Conclusion

Student retention and engagement are imperative in student success and achievement. Mentoring is a successful tool when working with students and professionals of all ages. But negative mentor/mentee matches do not provide the positivity the student needs to succeed. Programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters have proven tools and results that have been in place for decades, but it is time to develop more innovative and advanced tools for programs/schools/organizations to use in the educational realm. There are many established strategies when creating a match, and now the mentor matching has caught up to the digital age and there is a plethora of software options on the market to ensure matches are successful. Whether via software, questionnaires, matching meetings, or other tools, the important thing to remember is that a well-thought-out and implemented teacher candidate/mentor teacher match will lead to a successful teacher in the future.
References


Author Biography

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