

Intern Mentoring

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Traditionally, programs of teacher education have placed co-operating teachers in a supervisory position over their student teacher charges. In this role, they have exerted a powerful shaping influence. (Evertson, 1990). Critics of this arrangement (Goodlad, 1990; Cochran-Smith, 1991; and Stanulis, 1995) have argued that this role is in conflict with the principles of collaboration, reflection and student self-direction that are leading reform in teacher education.

In contrast, new programs of teacher education and professional development (Darling-Hammond, 1996) stress a more collaborative approach that encourages students to become more involved in classroom decision making. Since the early 1980's, mentoring has become the preferred model for much professional preparation in business as well as in education. It recognizes the changing demands placed on workers and professionals in the workplace and the need to prepare people to play a greater role in decision-making in their respective institutions.

Mentoring can be seen as a process of guiding students, as opposed to the more strictly evaluative role of supervision (Stanulis & Graham, 1995). Mentoring involves a collaborative relationship that accepts expanded participation of the student teacher in curriculum and instructional decisions. It serves as an opportunity for student teachers to become more fully acquainted with the complexity of the job and to participate as equals in thoughtful, professional conversation about teaching and learning.

In contrast to this, the role of the supervisor fits in with a more hierarchical structure. The co-operating teacher/supervisor's job, then, is to determine if the student is meeting certain pre-established standards of teaching performance.

In the following article, three MET Teachers reflect on their role as mentors during the final semester of the program.

Description of Program Position

The role of the intern mentor in the MET program has undergone some revision since it was first conceived. Originally, the idea was that the MET students would take over the mentors' classrooms during a fourth semester of paid internship. This plan would give the teachers who had been working with students in the third, or practicum semester, the chance to work on a number of school-related

and professional development projects, in addition to providing guidance to their assigned MET students. Unfortunately, funding was insufficient to allow this to happen on the scale that the planners had hoped for, and a more modest plan was put in its place. This plan allows for teachers to apply for the position of intern mentor in the spring semester. Four are selected.

These positions are funded by the MET program and mentors hold the rank of adjunct University of Hawai'i faculty. Applicants apply formally for this position and are interviewed by a panel of university faculty, school faculty and MET students. Their main responsibility is to provide support and guidance for the MET students during their internship. They visit the interns in the classroom, share their expertise and material, offer advice, suggest ideas and generally offer support. In addition, each mentor is required to pursue a professional development project that they have formulated and presented as part of the selection process.

The semester-long mentoring experience is an important opportunity for professional growth. By providing support for fledgling teachers, mentors begin to see the classroom and teaching in a new light and this helps to deepen and broaden their professional understanding. Thus, the role of mentor presents them with a new set of challenges as teachers. They must deal with problems arising from unfamiliar contexts and they must establish new relationships with fellow professionals in these new settings. They must also learn to work with teachers in other schools and construct their professional lives in relation to university faculty and administrators at the schools where the MET students have been assigned intern positions. In addition, they must learn to work collaboratively with other mentors in the intern mentor team. Also, there are opportunities to gain professional renewal through university coursework and curriculum development work.

The mentor program also creates some classroom openings for four MET students. The vacated positions are generally taken over by the student who completed the pre-internship practicum in that classroom, although this is not automatic or guaranteed. (Each of the four positions is open to any student in the cohort). Nevertheless, this arrangement usually offers children in these classrooms, the benefits of a smooth transition from one semester to another without the disruption often experienced when a new teacher takes over. A further benefit is that the intern is able to continue

instruction in the classroom without interruption. Finally, MET students who have the chance to continue with the same class of students are able to gain one full year of experience in one classroom—a rare and beneficial opportunity for student teachers.

A conscious effort in the MET program is made to avoid making the intern mentor position into the same as the clinical supervisor in traditional teacher education programs. Emphasis is placed on building upon the collaborative relationships that students and teachers have developed during previous semesters. Mentor teachers, therefore, are expected to work closely together to define and reflect upon their new position.

One aim is to sustain constant growth in the conceptualization of the position and each year, the new mentors learn something about the job from the teachers who worked in the position the year before.

The role of the COE faculty changes somewhat, too, during the internship semester. Their function is to work with the mentors and interns and provide some professional development support to the group of mentors. Mentors and faculty meet regularly and discuss issues and problems related to the MET students. They clarify the task of mentoring to each other and support the mentors' professional development projects.

Roles and Routines

In this section we would like to describe the internship semester as we experienced it. Naturally, the work of each mentor differs considerably in details but the general outlines of the job remain the same for all.

First, as mentors, we had to address a range of differences among the MET students with whom we've dealt—grade level, subject specialization, school assignment and degree of competence. In addition, the MET requirements of the mentors are not rigidly laid out and there is a great deal of flexibility built into the position so that each mentor has a chance to construct his/her work differently and in line with the needs of the interns.

We will begin by outlining some of the more general aspects of this work and follow up with some specific variations and qualifications.

Each of us was responsible for about four to six interns. We visited each intern at least once a week for a few hours. Time was spent observing and participating in the classroom and helping out with activities, when appropriate. Each visit was followed by a person-to-person conversation (if this was not possible for the day, a phone conversation was substituted) to talk over any issues, concerns and/or needs.

The substance of these conferences was summarized in a written narrative from the mentor. When the need arose—a problem with classroom management or with a student—we would spend more time with that student and compen-

sate in following weeks by spending more time with the others.

At midterm and toward the end of the semester we held three-way evaluation conferences that included the intern, intern mentor and university faculty member. Students came prepared for these meetings with a self-evaluation and we prepared our narrative evaluation for each intern after the conference.

We also attended all MET cohort seminars, which all students, both secondary and elementary, were expected to attend. These seminars occurred once a week after school and lasted for three hours. Some seminar time was spent discussing assigned articles or books with remaining time discussing and problem-solving issues of general concern. We also attended university MET faculty meetings twice a month and MET executive committee meetings every month. The remaining time was spent on our professional development projects.

We had a vague idea of what a mentor's position included when we applied for the job. We knew that it would involve supporting the MET interns during their final semester in the program and their first full semester as teachers with a class of their own. We knew too, that an important part of the job was to make visitations and observe them teaching. But as mentors we wished to be less their judges than their guides. We felt that it was important for us to be more like mirrors and let them ask questions about their practice—to encourage them to look within themselves and live their philosophy rather than spout words that others had given them.

Of course, things never turn out quite as they are planned. The experience of being mentor, in some cases at least, differed considerably from how we imagined it would be.

As mentor teachers, we envisioned ourselves as supportive colleagues who had been granted time to help out new teachers. But some of the interns did not play along with these ideals, in the beginning, at least. A few of them reacted as though we were supervisors whose job it was to make judgements about their teaching—a role that we were consciously striving to avoid. They apologized when lessons didn't go well or if kids misbehaved.

At first, there was some discomfort about sharing journals. Dialogue journals depend on a trusting relationship and we were fairly new to some of the students because we had little time to work closely with those who completed their practicum with other teachers. Nevertheless, over time, in most cases we were able to build trust and shift the focus back to the ideals with which we began. *

As the semester progressed, we found it useful to work with the children in each classroom to help transform our relationship with the interns into a more collegial one. For example, we wrote letters to the children and put them in their mailboxes, beginning a semester-long correspondence

that shifted the focus of the visits. We participated in Physical Education activities and chatted with the rascals who had been "timed out." We introduced sign language as a long distance medium of communication and sat beside different students during each visit to learn what crafts they were doing, who was in love with whom, and so on. Knowledge of the students strengths, weaknesses and growth provided needed support for the interns in their teaching.

We made special efforts to attend activities and chaperone field trips. We also tried hard to listen to lessons with a mind to helping children learn. We focused mainly on the children and not exclusively on the intern teacher. In *How Children Fail*, John Holt (p. 22) warns classroom observers that they are likely to miss a lot of what goes on in classrooms because they are too concerned with watching the teacher. We were mindful of avoiding this error. It was also a valuable way to build the mentor relationship that we were striving to achieve. Gradually, the intern teachers came to see us less as representatives of the university and the school district and more as fellow teachers, just ones with more years of teaching experience upon which to draw. Once that transition occurred, it was easier to offer more overt curriculum support without sounding like we were giving prescriptions and making corrections.

In essence, we found that it took time to establish a comfortable rapport with the interns. The mentoring relationship did not come easily, although it was easier to develop with the students who had teamed with us in our classrooms during the preceding semester.

Building trust is an essential first step in creating an open relationship so that interns do not feel uncomfortable when asking for advice, or where mentors can offer suggestions or critiques without appearing overly controlling. In some cases, of course, we had already done this groundwork. It was a lot easier to act as mentors when we were back in our old classrooms working with the students who had teamed with us in the fall.

We also failed to anticipate the nature of our responsibilities in connection with our dealings with the administration at the various schools in which the interns had been placed. Several of these schools were not partnership schools and the administration and faculty were often unfamiliar with the MET program and the specific needs and accomplishments of our MET interns.

As teachers we were comfortable and had established working relationships with our own principals and fellow teachers but the mentor position placed us in a very different role from the supervisory one that most principals and teachers expected us to perform. We found that it was essential to develop clear lines of communication with these principals and vice-principals, to explain the nature of our task and to describe some of the elements of the MET program. We learned that it was good policy to act some-

times as the administrator's gopher. We helped out when we were asked, "Please remind so-and-so to get her such-and-such report done." We were consulted regarding interns' classroom management, their curriculum methods and expertise. We tried to educate principals and teachers when doubts about these practices were voiced. For example, we explained how one student intern's hands-on lessons paralleled and expanded the adopted text's scope and sequence. One of us, at the request of the principal, gave an hour-long presentation to the whole faculty of one school on implementing the writing workshop approach in the classroom. Although it would have been more convenient to go straight to the intern's room when we arrived at a school, we found it helpful always to say "hello" to the administrators when we checked in. This way, we were able to keep on top of problems and facilitate communication with the administration and teachers.

Accomplishments and Opportunities

Our perspective of teaching really grew as a result of this experience. We joined MET faculty at the university in a discussion that expanded our definition of pedagogy and we benefited from the new perspective of the classroom that our work with the interns created.

The collaboration with university MET faculty was stressful in the beginning because we didn't share a similar conceptual understanding. We were now in their world, the language was often unfamiliar and the discussions more focused on ideas. But by becoming immersed in intellectual conversations every week, we came to look forward to these meetings and we welcomed the challenge opened up by our readings and discussions. Gradually, our comfort with this new milieu increased and we began to share a vocabulary with similar meanings and understandings.

As classroom teachers, we often reflect upon our work in the context of our own classrooms. How could this idea have worked better? How could we effectively reach a specific objective?

In seminar discussions and in our interactions with faculty, we began to use the 20 classrooms that we were observing to put things in a wider context. We came to read classroom situations, teaching and learning more deeply and with a more critical eye. We learned the value of developing a critical and reflective outlook which made our understanding as teachers more valuable and reliable.

We read a lot. We read so much material that some of us felt overwhelmed at times. Our persistence, however, payed off in terms of building a richer and shared language of education. It was really a pleasure to have the time to engage in this level of professional reading. In the daily life of a classroom teacher, setting time aside for reading is very difficult. The responsibilities of the classroom consumes all of one's time. Reading the many articles and books was

truly inspiring. This served as a basis for our seminar discussions as well as for our self-reflection.

Another benefit of the semester was the opportunity to get involved in professional discussions. It was refreshing and energizing to be able to discuss intellectual issues and relate them to the classroom. The cohort seminars were the usual vehicle for these conversations, although there were other opportunities, especially in the context of our own collaboration as a team of mentors.

Often, however, the discussions with our students were painful. A few of them were experiencing considerable difficulties in adjusting to their assignments and taking on the responsibilities of the classroom. Thus, at times the sessions became tense. We sensed that not everyone was being heard, or that they were not being as open as they could or should be. At other times, students confessed their frustrations and even threatened to quit. We learned to be good listeners and were reminded of how difficult and complex, teaching can be.

The visitations were of great value in increasing our understanding of schools, classrooms and teaching. They made us aware of the differences in the ways that different schools operate.

We began to see the diversity of school cultures and student populations. One school was innovative and intellectually challenging while others seemed rigid and lacking in vitality. One school seemed to be child-centered and open to change while others seemed to focus on traditional content. We wondered how these differences could arise. And our eyes were opened to the shaping force of distinct school histories that seemed to lie behind the ways that different schools operated.

As we visited each intern, we were naturally pushed to reflect on our own teaching. In effect, we were made to question our own pedagogy and ask ourselves a lot of "why" questions.

When an intern had a curriculum or management problem, we found ourselves looking closely into our own experience and searching deeply for answers. It was very tempting simply to tell the students what we thought they should do. However, we were also aware that this strategy worked counter to the principles of the MET program and was inconsistent with the practices that we hoped our interns would learn. We had to remind ourselves that the interns needed time to think things out and come up with solutions of their own. Our strategy, therefore, was to facilitate, to help "open the door" so to speak, so that the students could come to their own conclusions.

As temporary members of the university faculty, we had the benefit of being able to enroll in university graduate classes without having to pay for the credits. This was a real perk. We could take up to six credits and these did not have to be evening or Saturday courses, thus, we could arrange our schedules to fit these courses in during the day.

Moreover, the change of routine from classroom teaching was refreshing, though this attitude was not unanimous and several of us felt eager to return to the classroom and the children. Nevertheless, we recognized that the opportunity to do something different can be very renewing.

Having time to think about teaching, become revitalized and learn new ideas for the classroom is both personally and professionally rewarding. The ultimate beneficiaries have been our children. We returned to school refreshed and ready to try out new ideas.

The financial support for trips to conferences on the mainland that the MET program provides is another source of professional development that several of us were able to enjoy during the internship semester. Perhaps, it was more enjoyable because we could do this without having to write lesson plans for substitutes. The conferences gave us much to think about: lesson ideas to share with both our interns and our children, ideas for changing the school structure and ideas that helped to widen our horizons about what education is about. We returned in high spirits, ready to share what we had learned and eager to try new things.

Overall, the semester gave us the chance to think more objectively and in a more detached way about our own practices as teachers and their impact beyond the classroom. It helped us to ask larger questions of ourselves.

All of us recognize that the semester and our work as intern mentors has helped us to grow both professionally and personally. We have a better grasp now of how to do things differently and think things through differently. The experience has helped to change our perspective and we now feel less isolated in the classroom. We have a better understanding of the culture of the school and the nature of teaching. We wish that every teacher could have experienced the opportunity that we had.

Lessons Learned

Despite the considerable benefits of the program, the nature of the internship as an experience for the MET students and the opportunities built into the intern mentor position, there are areas that need to be improved.

Communication between the university and the mentors was often inadequate and information about meeting times was often unclear. Usually, information got to us by word of mouth and this led to many misunderstandings. A solution would be to assign a monthly rotation where one mentor at a time would be responsible for gathering information and relating it to the other mentors.

The shortness of the experience is also a problem, though it would be hard to do anything about it. By the time we had learned the essentials of the job and learned how to work comfortably together for our seminars, it was almost February. The university schedule, of course, ends in May. This could be improved, however, in future teams, by

building collaborative relations between the mentors before the semester gets under way. Another recommendation would be to initiate a more thorough effort to help new mentors learn about the job from their predecessors.

The role of the university faculty support person as both seminar facilitator and ex-officio intern mentor is also a critically important one. In our situation we were very fortunate in working with a professor who helped us to question and look critically at what we saw going on in the classroom and in schools. She was passionate about thinking about teaching, and the readings she provided about peer evaluation generated a myriad of issues to gnaw on. She was a wonderful facilitator of our discussions and brought out the voices of the mentor teachers who might otherwise have felt intimidated by the presence of three other COE faculty members. She helped us to deepen our understanding in ways that we might not have been able to experience if we had been left to our own devices, or if someone less knowledgeable about informed critique had facilitated the seminar.

The pressure on the intern to conform is also an area that should be recognized and steps taken to alleviate it. This is a sensitive task for the intern mentors and requires support at both the program and at the school level. We are referring here to subtle pressure to conform exerted by personnel at the schools to which our students are assigned. As teachers, this is familiar enough territory, but for our students who have been encouraged to explore new curriculum and instructional methods, it presents a new and threatening situation. This state of affairs is exacerbated by the fact that many of our students are placed at schools that are not familiar with the purposes of the MET or with its philosophy. Pressure comes not only from administrators, but also from department heads, teachers next door, resource teachers like Chapter I, SLEP and SPED teachers, and even parents. In some ways, these are part of the normal pressures of teaching but it is all the more difficult for unempowered student teachers to deal with these problems and there is great risk here for conflict between entrenched values of traditional teaching and the ideals of the program.

One of the most important roles of the mentor is to provide encouragement and help create a climate where they can try out their ideas free from these pressures. We found ourselves saying to the interns, over and over, "You're doing the right thing," "Your instincts are good!" "You're giving the kids what they need." "They'll do fine next year." "They'll score well on the test."

At the other extreme, it was also important to reassure the students that it was okay sometimes to choose to use the "easy" traditional practice, as long as they knew why they were making that decision—either to relieve the outside pressure to conform or to take a breather while preparing for the next battle. We can't expect new teachers to be innovative all the time. We believe that it is important, therefore, to

keep the principals at these schools more informed on the MET program and of the purposes of the internship semester.

Conclusion

We enjoyed the mentor experience. Some of us even considered that we might want a career in a similar kind of preservice or probationary teacher support position. But how could we be in a position like that and still try out new ideas with our kids in the classroom? How could we argue practices and philosophy with other teachers if they were thinking that we were only saying these things because we were no longer in the classroom. We have gained a lot, and so did the interns that we mentored. We also understand the attraction for teachers to leave the classroom, to go "up" and accept different roles. But by the end of the semester, we found ourselves observing the intern students and thinking, "That's a good idea! I'll have to try that in the fall." And we started to look forward to our return to the classroom and all the new things that we'd be able to try out with our next group of students.

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