

Examining Community-Based Mentoring Experiences for Pre-Service Teachers: Positive Outcomes and Challenges

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Abstract

Previous studies indicate that practicum experience is essential for pre-service teachers to develop understanding of effective teaching, professional identity, and culturally responsiveness. However, it is possible that first-year pre-service teachers are not ready to teach in a classroom with as many as 30 students which could present overwhelming issues in behavioral management problems, instructional design, and assessment. Instead, a one-to-one mentoring experience could be considered as a supplementary practicum experience for beginning pre-service teachers. The current study examines the implementation of a community-based mentoring experience for first-year pre-service teachers who were enrolled in a teacher education program at a state university in the southeastern United States. Data were collected through an internet-based survey administered to 54 pre-service teachers. The findings include the positive outcomes and challenges of the mentoring experience. Future directions of the mentoring experience to promote the professional development of pre-service teachers are also discussed.

Keywords: First-Year Pre-Service Teachers, community-based mentoring experience

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At the authors' university, elementary education pre-service teachers are enrolled in a teacher education program, which is five-year program with a dual emphasis in elementary education and special education leading toward a master's degree. Within the program, pre-service teachers are required to take content courses and pedagogy-related courses. In addition to fulfilling course requirements, they also engage in a field experience in elementary schools during each semester.

The community-based mentoring experience is a practicum requirement for first-semester pre-service teachers who are enrolled in the teacher education program. The partnership between the state university and the surrounding elementary schools is meaningful. In addition to providing several elementary schools and after-school centers with desired mentoring services, it also benefits the first-year pre-service teachers. Each pre-service teacher is paired with one or two students who attend the after-school program and with whom they will meet twice a week (i.e. two hours per week) for 12 weeks. Each pre-service teacher will conduct a 60-minute mentoring session consisting of 40-minute mathematics activities with the paired student(s) and 15-minute literature activities that he or she designs. At the end of each mentoring session, pre-service teachers are required to reflect on the mentoring experience. While engaging in the community-based mentoring experience, pre-service teachers are also enrolled in a methods course which focuses on content knowledge and pedagogy for teaching mathematics in an elementary classroom. Based on the knowledge and skills gathered from the course, pre-service teachers plan the math activities and book activities that they will implement with the student(s). Suggestions are provided by course instructors and site coordinators on the activities pre-service teachers plan to implement in each mentoring session.

Literature Review

Practicum, or field experience, has been shown to be an indispensable part of a teacher education program no matter what form of experience it undertakes (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). Studies have indicated pre-service teachers consistently perceived the practicum experience as an important stepping-stone to real teaching (e.g., Grudnoff, 2011) when beginning teachers will be faced with complexities and demands of a teaching job.

Previous research has examined practicum experience across the country (Clift & Brady, 2005) and noted that the practicum experience could influence the development of pre-service teachers' self-efficacy and professional identity. As Cooper and Olson (1996) noted, the beginning pre-service teachers' professional self was not yet substantive but could be constructed through field experience by interacting with real students. Similarly, Hong (2010) also found the practicum experience is instrumental in helping pre-service teachers develop their self-identity as a teacher.

Besides promoting self-identity as a teacher, practicum experience has also been found to positively influence pre-service teachers' professional development. It enables pre-service teachers to apply knowledge and skills that they have acquired in pedagogical courses and content-related courses into authentic settings. Darling-Hammond (2006) emphasized that the most impactful teacher education programs would require pre-service teachers to spend extensive time in the real classroom observing in-service teachers and immediately apply the effective teaching strategies with students. Moreover, the practicum experience would enable pre-service teachers to be more culturally responsive. Teaching in a culturally responsive way has long been one of the greatest challenges facing teacher education programs in the United States (Burant & Kirby, 2002; Zeichner, 1996). In order for pre-service teachers to view cultural diversity more positively and be prepared to teach a culturally diverse group of students, it is

necessary that they have many opportunities to interact with individuals who share different backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1994). By interacting with students from various backgrounds in the practicum experience, pre-service teachers will also be able to learn how race, socioeconomic class, and gender could affect a youth's decision-making and development. This knowledge and experience in turn serve the student teacher well when he or she teaches a group of culturally diverse students.

Practicum experience was viewed as a key part of teacher preparation program, and Clift & Brady (2005) suggested exposing pre-service teachers to practicum experience early in a teacher education program. However, for first-year pre-service teachers, it is possible that teaching in the classroom with as many as 30 students could be intimidating. The experience of mentoring a smaller group of students could perhaps serve as a comfortable transition to teaching a classroom of students. Moreover, pre-service teachers could have a similar experience as they will have in a real classroom as they can be faced with similar issues as managing negative behavior, acquiring students' prior knowledge, designing instructional activities, and assessing students' knowledge. Finally, the mentoring experience can prepare the first-year pre-service teachers to be more culturally responsive to diversity and view it in a more positive way.

Little research has been done to examine the efficacy of a community-based mentoring experience for pre-service teachers. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to examine the community-based mentoring experience for first-year pre-service teachers by focusing on the positive outcomes and challenges of the mentoring experience, with the goal of improving the experience for pre-service teachers. The study was designed to answer the following four questions:

- What positive outcomes has the community-based mentoring experience achieved?
- What challenges does the community-based mentoring experience face?

- What are some good practices in implementing the community-based mentoring experience?
- What future directions should the community-based mentoring experience consider to promote the professional development of pre-service teachers?

Methods

As part of an effort to examine and improve the community-based mentoring experience for pre-service teachers, an internet-based survey (see Appendix) was conducted at the end of each semester during its implementation for two semesters in order to elicit first-year pre-service teachers' perceptions of the experience. First-year pre-service teachers who participated in the community-based mentoring experience were selected for participation in the survey. A minimum of three attempts was made to contact each non-respondent. Overall, the response rate was $28/80 = 35\%$ for the fall semester and $26/45 = 57.8\%$ for the spring semester. The overall response rate for these two semesters was $54/125 = 43.2\%$.

The survey consisted of several statements. A five point Likert scale was used for participants to reflect their perceptions toward the statements. Strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree were used on the scale. Participants were encouraged to elaborate upon their choice from the Likert scale. In addition to the Likert scale questions, open-ended questions were asked allowing participants to input comments. Participants' responses were validated for consistency and completeness. The data analysis followed Creswell's (2013) guidelines for data analysis in qualitative research:

Step 1. Organize and prepare the data for analysis.

Step 2. Read or look at all the data.

Step 3. Start coding all of the data.

Step 4. Use the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people as

well as categories or themes for analysis.

Step 5. Advance how the description and themes will be represented in the qualitative narrative.

Step 6. A final step in data analysis involves making an interpretation in qualitative research of the findings or results. (p. 247)

Thematic analysis was used to search for repeated patterns or themes in responses to the open-ended questions. Survey findings are organized in the next section, along with some verbatim quotes from participants.

Results and Discussion

Overall Perceptions of Mentoring Experience

The community-based mentoring experience is a positive experience according to pre-service teachers' responses to several Likert scale questions. As seen in Table 1, 68.5% of respondents believed the coursework assignments are generally "do-able" in field placement.

Table 1

Frequency data for pre-service teachers' responses to the statement "On the whole, my coursework assignments are generally "do-able" in my field placement"

Response	%	N = 54
Strongly Disagree	3.7%	2
Disagree	5.6%	3
Neither Agree nor Disagree	22.2%	12
Agree	55.6%	30
Strongly Agree	12.9%	7

Table 2 illustrates that 66.6% of the respondents were getting the support and flexibility

from course instructors as they worked out problems of practice in the field.

Table 2

Frequency data for pre-service teachers' responses to the statement "I am getting the support and flexibility from my course instructors as I work out problems of practice in the field. Explain your response"

Response	%	N = 54
Strongly Disagree	5.6%	3
Disagree	7.4%	4
Neither Agree nor Disagree	20.4%	11
Agree	48.1%	26
Strongly Agree	18.5%	10

As seen in Table 3, 68.5% of the respondents believed site coordinators valued the work they were doing with students.

Table 3

Frequency data for pre-service teachers' responses to the statement "My site coordinators value the work we are doing with students"

Response	%	N = 54
Strongly Disagree	1.9%	1
Disagree	3.7%	2
Neither Agree nor Disagree	25.9%	14
Agree	44.4%	24
Strongly Agree	24.1%	13

As seen in Table 4, 68.5% of the respondents believed their site coordinators lend

support when needed in the areas of managing behavior, preparing activities, or making sure the

pre-service teacher has a student with whom to work.

Table 4

Frequency data for pre-service teachers' responses to the statement "My site coordinators lend support when needed in the areas of managing behavior, preparing activities, or making sure I have a student to work with"

Response	%	N = 54
Strongly Disagree	5.6%	3
Disagree	1.9%	1
Neither Agree nor Disagree	24.0%	13
Agree	46.3%	25
Strongly Agree	22.2%	12

Positive Outcomes of Mentoring Experience

In response to the question "My greatest learning from this field experience is" in the survey, several positive outcomes have been reported by the pre-service teachers. To summarize, five positive outcomes were reported including: learning to plan activities and accommodating students' interests and needs; developing behavior management skills; learning to build a relationship with mentees; developing disposition and skills required in teaching; and developing passion and motivation for teaching. Many positive outcomes of the mentoring experience for first-year pre-service were demonstrated in their responses to the survey questions.

Pre-Service teachers learned to plan activities and accommodate mentees' interests and needs.

Many pre-service teachers believed their greatest learning from the mentoring experience

was to be able to create lessons and activities based on students' interests and needs. First-year pre-service teachers were paired with a mentee with whom they had not worked before. It is not an easy task for them to get an idea of the mentee's knowledge and design lessons and activities accordingly. One pre-service teacher came to the understanding of the experience:

Tier 3 instruction, in the sense of one-on-one teaching, is hard. Not only do you have to establish a connection with a student, but you also have to accommodate activities for the specific needs of that student. You can have something planned that you think will go well to find out that the student doesn't find it interesting at all.

A few other pre-service teachers shared similar ideas including, "My greatest learning from this experience" is "how to create lessons that would be engaging so that my mentee would not refuse to do them"; "how to create engaging activities that relate to my mentee's funds of knowledge"; "trial and error with activities. What works with some students and what does not work with others"; "How to deal with a student who is very behind in school"; "I am learning how to teach certain math concepts"; "It also helps with understanding how students learn/the different ways that are helpful for them to learn material"; "drawing from their likes/experiences to create and select activities".

Pre-Service teachers developed behavior management skills.

At the beginning of each semester, many first-year pre-service teachers had struggles with behavior management. They found the mentees being easily distracted, sleepy, or even uncooperative. Pre-service teachers also talked to the course instructor and site coordinators to seek support in behavior management. As the semester went on, it was observed that the negative behavior occurred less frequently based on site visits and session notes. Many pre-service teachers believed their greatest learning from the experience was developing behavior management skills, which is seen in responses such as "my greatest learning from this

experience” is “how to problem solve quickly when the student is having a bad day or refusing to do work”; “how to work with students who are in bad situations”; “how to manage behavior thoroughly”; “learning how to manage difficult and uncooperative behavior”; and “I learned how to plan, and deal with a student when they aren't doing exactly what you want them to do”. Not surprisingly, pre-service teachers still had concerns with behavior management with tough mentees even after a semester, but continued to seek improvement.

Pre-Service teachers learned to build a relationship with mentees.

All pre-service teachers were able to form a good relationship with their mentees, which could be seen from their session notes and site observations. A good relationship is essential for the teaching and learning process. Several pre-service teachers reported their biggest achievement from the mentoring experience was learning how to build a relationship with their mentees. Building a relationship with a student can take a long time. One pre-service teacher came to some understandings of building a relationship with a student:

You won't always connect with students right away, or not all students are as open to adults. While all of my peers were connecting with their mentee, I was not. Then one day, my mentee told me that he liked me, he said he was happy that I always came to help him. That made me happy too.

Another pre-service teacher shared a similar idea:

I have learned to build a relationship with an individual student through my field experience. It has not always been easy; my student has often grown frustrated with me as I try to teach her new mathematic skills that are challenging. Overall, I believe I have built a positive relationship with my student and now recognize the incredible value in having relationships with my students on an individual basis.

Pre-Service teachers developed dispositions and skills required in teaching.

The community-based mentoring experience also allowed the first-year pre-service teachers to cultivate dispositions and skills that are needed in the career of teaching. In response to the question “my greatest learning from this experience”, one student wrote “communication skills and listening techniques.” Other responses revealed students learned to be more patient, reactive, and always prepared their experience interacting with their mentees. Responses included, “Be flexible and keep trying”; “With children, you really never know what to expect, so it is important to be prepared for any given situation”; “Being patient and allowing students to make mistakes and then identify them and solve them on their own. I am very quick to jump in when something isn't right or if my mentee answered a question wrong. But I have learned that kids need to be able to work independently and figure out their mistakes”; “I have definitely been learning patience with my mentee and that not everything will go according to plan, but I still have to work through whatever is happening”; “How to think on the fly with my student. As things will not go according to plan all the time, and this is good practice for the randomness, a classroom can give”.

Pre-Service teachers developed passion and motivation for teaching.

Finally, the community-based mentoring experience motivated the first-year pre-service teachers to be passionate about the career of teaching. One pre-service teacher reported, “My greatest learning from this field experience is realizing that teaching is something I really want to do.”

Challenges of the Mentoring Experience

Although the community-based mentoring experience achieved the abovementioned positive outcomes, challenges do exist that need to be addressed. Some patterns emerged among responses to the question, “If you have the opportunity to change one thing, what would it be?”

There were four challenges associated with this experience: the connection between the methods course and field experience needs to be strengthened; lack of communication and consistency among all stakeholders; schedule and duration of the community-based mentoring experience; and alternate forms of mentoring experience.

The connection between the methods courses and field experience can be strengthened.

The methods courses are designed to offer pre-service teachers content knowledge and pedagogical expertise to increase the success in their practicum experience and future teaching career.

Among responses to the statement “My field experience gives me the opportunity to explore strategies and theories that I am learning in my coursework” (see Table 5), it was found that some pre-service teachers were able to apply what they have learned from methods courses with mentees. They claimed to have been able to use what they learned from child development and family and community involvement, educational practices/development, sample lesson and activity ideas, teaching strategies, strategies such as active listening and good communication skills and interpersonal strategies, as well as common mistakes that students make and the reason behind them, knowledge on how children act and the reasons as to why they act these ways.

However, pre-service teachers also claimed that many of the strategies that they had learned are classroom-based rather than one-on-one. They perceived a lack of discussion in strategies related to teaching an individual student. The pre-service teachers found it difficult to think of activities that the mentees would like to participate in and would enjoy doing. More instruction and guidance on one-on-one teaching theories and strategies may be helpful in the future.

In addition, strategies in methods course are very general. The strategies could be too

advanced to be applied especially when the mentees have problems with basic concepts. Admittedly, to accommodate all the grade levels and all content knowledge in a weekly methods course would be impossible. Therefore, pre-service teachers need to modify the activities and teaching strategies if necessary. Suggestions on how to modify these lessons and activities could be helpful.

Additionally, more instruction should be given to prepare pre-service teachers in addressing an array of emotional and behavioral issues that mentees could display. Although many pre-service teachers found what they learned in methods courses to be helpful, they also found it difficult to apply the strategies they have learned when the mentees simply did not want to participate no matter how engaging the approach. Pre-service teachers felt pressured to deal with behavioral issues especially at the beginning of the experience. More strategies for dealing with behavior problems can be shared in methods courses. More support could be provided by site coordinators as well.

Table 5

Frequency data for pre-service teachers' responses to the statement "My field experience gives me the opportunity to explore strategies and theories that I am learning in my coursework"

Response	%	N = 54
Strongly Disagree	0%	0
Disagree	16.7%	9
Neither Agree nor Disagree	14.8%	8
Agree	53.7%	29
Strongly Agree	14.8%	8

Communication and consistency among all stakeholders can be improved.

Another challenge is maintaining effective communications among all stakeholders who were involved in the community-based mentoring experience: pre-service teachers, site coordinators, and course instructors. Survey responses indicated that site coordinators and instructors were generally helpful. However, there was a lack of consistency among all parties, which made the experience disorganized and confusing for pre-service teachers. One pre-service teacher felt, “we were getting a lot of conflicting instructions about our practicum from our teachers, professors, and the site coordinators.” For some pre-service teachers, practicum expectations were obscure and confusing. Therefore, there appears to be a need for increased communication among pre-service teachers, course instructors, and site coordinators. The practicum needs to be more organized and structured. It needs to be assured that the leadership of the practicum is aligned so that the practicum experience will be more organized and less stressful for pre-service teachers.

Schedule and duration of the mentoring experience can be adjusted.

Pre-service teachers’ perceptions of the schedules and duration of the mentoring experience were also examined (see Table 6). Pre-service teachers who had work obligations thought it would be helpful to choose what times/locations the mentoring experience could occur. They expected more options regarding times to go for the mentoring experience. A few pre-service teachers indicated more time was needed to implement both the math activity and the literacy activity. Some indicated one hour was not enough, especially when mentees needed extra time to grasp a concept or had behavioral problems. The following responses elaborated on these points: "Sometimes one hour feels like it passes by slowly while other times it goes by too fast. It does give us a good amount of time to incorporate activities without feeling mentally burned out"; "On some days, I feel like I run out of time. On others, I feel like we finish early! I

think it all depends on the discussions my mentee, and I have based on the materials and activities I bring". It is also noteworthy that the issue of insufficient time could come from the lack of planning from the pre-service teachers. It might be hard to adjust the length of time and frequency of the mentoring experience, since it also needs to be based on the elementary school's plan. However, pre-service teachers can plan more thoroughly for the activities based on mentees' prior knowledge and interests.

Table 6

Frequency data for pre-service teachers' responses to the statement "I feel like one hour is enough to meet the expectations of both my site coordinator and my course instructors"

Response	%	N = 54
Strongly Disagree	1.9%	1
Disagree	18.5%	10
Neither Agree nor Disagree	27.8%	15
Agree	40.7%	22
Strongly Agree	11.1%	6

Alternate forms of mentoring experience can be considered.

Many pre-service teachers felt pressured to cover the expected amount of activities in a one-hour session. Since the duration of the experience cannot be easily changed, more flexibility could possibly be given to pre-service teachers. Instead of engaging the mentees in two mathematics activities and one reading activity for all sessions, pre-service teachers can have options to do other forms of activities with their mentees, for example, group activities.

Pre-service teachers also indicated the challenge to assess the mentees' prior knowledge.

Pre-assessment was helpful in assessing some prior knowledge of the mentees. Some pre-service

teachers indicated their desire to learn what the mentees were learning in class and offer homework help to the mentees. In this way, pre-service teachers can have a better idea of what the mentee is learning in class. One pre-service teacher said:

Knowing what the students are learning in the classroom to be able to incorporate those practices with the mentorship. I understand that the mentors are supposed to be their own guides in teaching the mentees and expanding the knowledge that is presented to each student, but knowing the content that they are learning in the classroom to help their regular teachers with understanding of concepts (which is what we are learning in our math classes) would be greatly beneficial for us and the teachers. This extra time with the students can be allocated in a way that we can help the mentee to develop a firm base understanding of the mathematics that they are learning in the classroom.

These practices can be very helpful in determining mentees' prior knowledge and they can be piloted in future mentoring experience. Classroom observation could also be helpful in facilitating pre-service teachers in developing behavior management skills and designing effective instructional activities.

Some Practices in Mentoring Experience

In the survey, the efficacy of some practices in the mentoring experience were also explored. Those practices include common hour training and the bus ride that happened before the mentoring experience.

Common hour training.

Common hour was offered to the pre-service teachers at the beginning of the semester to provide an overview of the courses and the practicum experience. As seen in Table 7, about half of the pre-service teachers found the common hour training helpful. One pre-service teacher responded, "I think that it was important for us to see the facility and have things explained to

us, such as where to sign in, where the supplies are located, and what the general procedures are.” Other pre-service teachers have similar responses.

The other half of the pre-service teachers were not quite as satisfied with the common hour training and also offered suggestions for improving it. To summarize, the training can be more organized. A more thorough explanation can be provided on what was expected during the mentoring experience. Again, it was indicated that there was an inconsistency of information among site coordinators and university coordinators. More communication and structure can be established to overcome this issue in future.

Table 7

Frequency data for pre-service teachers’ responses to the statement “The common hour practicum training was valuable to my experience as a mentor”

Response	%	N = 26
Strongly Disagree	0%	0
Disagree	38%	10
Neither Agree nor Disagree	15%	4
Agree	42%	11
Strongly Agree	4%	1

Bus ride.

In the second semester when the mentoring program was running, a bus ride was included to facilitate the pre-service teachers developing a better idea of the mentees’ background. Pre-service teachers went on a bus ride before the first mentoring session. The bus ride was designed to give pre-service teachers an idea of where the mentees live and learn. For the bus ride question, out of 26 respondents, the majority of respondents (81%) would

recommend keeping the bus ride as a part of practicum training.

Respondents who were in favor of this practice believed that the bus ride, “was a crucial part in helping us know what to expect when we began mentoring as well as giving us an idea of where to go on the first day”; “was extremely helpful to have the bus ride and tour of the facility prior to our first session because it prepared us better and helped us get accustomed to the setting before the day we initially worked without mentees. It was beneficial because otherwise it would have felt like being thrown into an unfamiliar situation and we would have been even more lost than we already were”; “It really helped me understand where these children are coming from.”

Other pre-service teachers offered suggestions on the duration and form of the ride. A few pre-service teachers felt the bus ride was rushed and disorganized. They did not have enough time to walk around the neighborhood and get acquainted with the school. They believe more time should be dedicated to the bus ride. If a pre-service teacher was running late, it would be stressful relying on a bus. It is suggested carpooling can be another option to offer pre-service teachers the same experience.

Limitations

Survey-based research has inherent limitations. For instance, pre-service teachers who responded to the survey might have certain characteristics to cause bias of the results. While efforts were made to elicit responses from participants, a higher response rate to the survey is preferred. Future research could use a wider variety of data collection methods to complement the findings from survey data. One other data collection method could be interviewing pre-service teachers, site coordinators, and other stakeholders of the teacher education program.

Conclusion and Future Work

Through this study, the researchers sought to provide information about the positive outcomes of a community-based mentoring project for first-year pre-service teachers. The study

also explored the challenges faced by the program as it prepares elementary education teachers. This study provided valuable information and also future directions for the implementation of community-based mentoring experiences for first-year pre-service teachers. The abovementioned findings indicated that first-year pre-service teachers have gained some positive outcomes from the community-based mentoring experience, while challenges do exist. Some good practices can be maintained such as the bus ride and common hour training. Actions can be taken to improve the communication among stakeholders and strengthen the connection between the methods courses and the practicum experience.

Appendix: Survey Questions

1. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1= strongly disagree, and 5= strongly agree, rank this statement: On the whole, my coursework assignments are generally “do-able” in my field placement.
2. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1= strongly disagree, and 5= strongly agree, rank this statement: I see a strong connection between what I am learning in my courses and what I am learning and doing in my field experience.
3. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1= strongly disagree, and 5= strongly agree, rank this statement: I am getting the support and flexibility from my course instructors as I work out problems of practice in the field. Explain your response.
4. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1= strongly disagree, and 5= strongly agree, rank this statement: My field experience gives me the opportunity to explore strategies and theories that I am learning in my coursework. Explain your response.
5. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1= strongly disagree, and 5= strongly agree, rank this statement: My site coordinators value the work we are doing with students.
6. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1= strongly disagree, and 5= strongly agree, rank this statement: My site coordinators lend support when needed in the areas of managing behavior, preparing activities, or making sure I have a student to work with.
7. Explain your response.
8. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1= strongly disagree, and 5= strongly agree, rank this statement. I feel like one hour is enough to meet the expectations of both my site coordinator and my course instructors.
9. A question you should have asked me on this survey is: _____
10. My greatest learning from this field experience is: _____

11. If you have the opportunity to change one thing what would it be:

12. Any additional comments.

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