Meaningful Mentoring: A Source of Hope in Elementary Classrooms in the Mississippi Delta

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The purpose of this paper is to highlight a multi-year mentoring partnership between teachers in a public elementary school in the impoverished Mississippi Delta and faculty members at the University of Mississippi. Features of this partnership, such as implementing job-embedded professional development, developing side-by-side collaboration, and utilizing data to build a culture of literacy contributed to increased academic outcomes for students as well as improved attitudes and use of evidence-based instructional approaches among teachers. End-of-year state test scores and teacher surveys served as outcome measures. This information is intended to spur others to invest in mentoring partnerships between school districts and universities or colleges with the intent to empower teachers and cultivate future leaders.
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Introduction

In the heart of the Mississippi Delta, haunted by abject poverty, overall academic achievement has been dismal for years. When living in an isolated rural area, poverty has a cancerous effect on a child's life experiences, school quality, academic success, health, and overall wellbeing (Schreuder, 2010). These bleak odds leave little hope that children of poverty

can escalate themselves to a greater life without help from a critically important unit: school. A high quality education is the only hope for a child from poverty to escape the confines of the environment in which they live (Schreuder, 2010). Defying the insurmountable odds, one particular elementary school in this region has notably succeeded in making tremendous gains in student achievement by changing teachers' literacy instructional practices through meaningful mentoring partnerships.

Justification for Use of Mentoring

According to the Alliance for Education, "there is a growing consensus that the single most important factor in determining student performance is the quality of the teacher" (2004, p.3). However, students of color in rural, high-poverty schools are more likely to have less experienced, unqualified, or uncertified teachers than their more affluent peers (Carroll, Fulton, Doerr, 2010). Furthermore, many schools in poverty-stricken areas operate on a dangerously thin budget and struggle to attract and retain effective teachers, leaving little funds for quality professional development or improved curricular materials. As a result, "children who live in poverty in rural settings appear to be at particular risk for reading failure because of a lack of access to services and a lack of access by their schools and teachers to state-of-the-art professional development opportunities" (Vernon-Feagans, Kainz, Amendum, Ginsberg, Wood, & Bock, 2012, p.103). When professional development does not address individual teachers' and students' needs, there is a lack in job-embedded support and relevance, which ultimately accounts for a disconnected teaching staff (Croft, Coggshall, Powers, & Killion, 2010).

Analogous to the children who live in rural isolation, teachers in rural schools often work in isolation where they are removed from collaborative discussions with their peers and professional learning that is specific to their context (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004; Carroll et al., 2010). In fact, it is estimated that teachers spend approximately 93% of their workday in isolation, completing professional duties and working with their individual students with little to no support (Carroll et al., 2010). With the odds stacked against them, schools in rural, high poverty settings must reinvent the traditional workshop approach to professional development in order to invest in preparing and equipping teachers with the knowledge, skills, and resources they need in order to maximize student potential. Teachers are the driving force behind students' academic success and every child deserves a learning environment that is stimulating and full of opportunities for learning. In order to provide an environment that fosters students' academic success, partnering underprepared teachers with an expert mentor capable of providing job-embedded support provides a valuable source of collaboration based on teachers and students' individual needs.

Development of a Mentoring Partnership

A school in the Mississippi Delta decided to forge a partnership to truly change students' life trajectories. The school's leaders believed that an effective teacher in every classroom was vitally necessary in order to bolster student achievement. Because most children from the Mississippi Delta region live at or below poverty level and rarely leave their community, their view of the world is infinitely small. The demographics of the partner school in this region indicate that 92% of the students are African American. Also, 93% of the students enrolled at the

school live at or below the state of Mississippi's poverty level. Unfortunately, when students from low socioeconomic families attend underachieving schools with underprepared teachers, their learning environment is not likely a conduit for success (Hernandez, 2011; Schreuder, 2011). Since changing the socioeconomic status of students is unlikely, the focus must be on supporting the teachers and improving instructional practice. The school's administration contacted the Center for Excellence in Literacy Instruction (CELI) housed in the School of Education at the University of Mississippi to provide professional support for their teachers through mentoring.

After learning of weak language arts scores on the Mississippi Curriculum Test, second edition (MCT2), and observing largely whole-group reading instruction and minimal student interaction, the principal and literacy coach worked with the CELI staff to help further pinpoint areas of literacy instruction that needed attention in order to effectively meet the needs of students. CELI staff and the school's leadership team diagnosed areas in which improvement could be made in the language arts classrooms of individual teachers, with the ultimate goal to change teacher practice and increase student achievement, primarily measured by the MCT2 language arts scores at the end of the year. Additionally, CELI sought to build teacher capacity by linking theory and evidence-based pedagogical approaches to actual classroom practice through the mentoring process, where proper support and feedback are paramount. While the school did not have any first year teachers, many of the teachers admittedly felt like novice teachers in regards to teaching literacy. Because the majority of students were coming to school with limited language and literacy skills, many of the teachers felt a sense of urgency to better address students' needs but felt ill-equipped to do so, leaving CELI staff no time to waste.

In order to change teacher practice so that engaging, literacy-rich learning environments flourish, CELI utilized a form of cognitive coaching, similar to cognitive apprenticeship. This style of mentoring allows the mentor to support the teacher in developing their techniques and to become more metacognitive through the exchange of ideas with the mentor. Mentors must exude literacy content knowledge in addition to being able to model and assist teachers in their efforts to implement evidence-based instruction (Garmston, Linder, & Whitaker, 1993; Leonard, 2002; Matsumura, 2012). Utilizing this type of mentoring builds on "teachers' existing strengths while expanding previously unexplored capacities" (Garmston, Linder, & Whitaker, 1993, p. 57). Stanilus et al. (2011) note the use of such mentoring reduces teacher turnover, increases job satisfaction, and changes teachers' practice, as well as promotes student learning (2011).

Guiding Principles for Mentoring Partnership

Similar to the five-step process for performance coaching designed by Podsen and Denmark (2007), CELI took several steps to successfully address the responsibilities and initiate a successful mentoring partnership. To adequately meet the needs of the teachers, CELI mentors established three responsibilities to drive the mentoring process: 1) build teacher capacity to change practice; 2) utilize side-by-side collaboration to reduce professional isolation and to build a mutually beneficial working relationship between mentor and mentee; and 3) review data in order to identify next steps in the mentoring process.

Teacher Capacity

To build teacher capacity, CELI first presented foundational literacy content knowledge in order to change literacy instructional practice. Many of the teachers at this school considered themselves novice learners in regards to effective literacy instruction; therefore CELI mentors focused on building content knowledge to establish a literacy block that incorporated reading, vocabulary, writing, language arts, and spelling instruction. Specifically, CELI staff provided teachers with professional support on topics such as planning for literacy instruction, utilizing small-group differentiated instruction, incorporating literacy work stations, using the core basal program more effectively by incorporating a variety of texts, and conducting teacher read-alouds to incorporate higher-level questions.

Side-by-Side Collaboration

As teacher content knowledge increased, the next step in the mentoring process involved taking the new knowledge to the classroom level, using side-by-side collaboration to demonstrate how instruction would look within a teacher's specific classroom. From modeling and thinking aloud to providing specific lesson plan exemplars, the CELI mentors and their mentees were in constant communication about the elements of success and areas of weakness related to instructional decisions. While a small number of teachers felt threatened and were initially resistant to change, CELI mentors took care to ensure rapport and trust were established through collaboration and encouragement, never evaluation.

During this phase of the mentoring process, the mentees practiced the newly designed lessons and strategy instruction in their own environment without the worry of being evaluated or judged. While the purpose of the mentoring partnership was to ultimately improve student achievement, CELI mentors were fully focused on building mentees' confidence by providing reassurance in order to facilitate long-term change in instructional habits and practices, thus improving the quality of instruction students receive. The mentoring process involved providing mentees with immediate, useful feedback related to their instructional attempts and progress. By providing objective, timely, nonjudgmental feedback related to the mentee's attempt to implement a new instructional practice or strategy, the mentor emphasized her commitment to help the mentee grow and thrive by encouraging risk taking and providing necessary support to reinforce the desired change. Additionally, the CELI mentoring process required mentors and mentees to agree upon and prioritize instructional goals and tasks. By involving the mentee in the decision-making process, the mentor helped to secure mentee commitment and participation because the mentee had a voice in the process. Allowing mentees to be involved in setting instructional goals and designing the action plans for accomplishing these goals proved to be a critically essential component of the mentoring process.

Identifying Next Steps

After the first year of the partnership, the CELI staff and school leaders evaluated various data to isolate and narrow the focus for the upcoming academic year. Based on this process and based on state test results for student growth, the school leaders and CELI staff identified a very specific area of weakness that was common across all grade levels: vocabulary achievement. As a result, vocabulary instruction became the priority for the 2009-10 school year. Building on the previous year's work, CELI organized whole-group professional development sessions around

vocabulary instruction for teachers in grades K-2 and 3-5. During these monthly sessions, teachers were provided the research base and content knowledge to explicitly and strategically address the vocabulary needs of students. To build on these sessions and to ensure application of content knowledge, mentors followed the same principals above by providing weekly classroom-based support through modeling instruction, co-teaching, observing instruction and providing feedback, and engaging in honest conversations regarding how vocabulary instruction should be implemented.

Impact of Partnership

Student Achievement Growth

Evidence of the impact of this fruitful partnership can be seen in several different areas. First and foremost, student achievement on Mississippi's statewide language arts exams increased in a significant way by moving students from the bottom categories of achievement to the top. In 2009-10, 88% of Dundee's 4th graders scored proficient, up from 16.2% proficient in 2007-08. In 2009-10, no Dundee students were in the minimal category. In 2011, the school was designated as a "star" school, the highest designation of achievement based on the Mississippi school accountability model. Also, the school was named a distinguished school by the National Title One Association in 2010, being recognized for their remarkable efforts in closing the achievement gap.

Student Vocabulary Growth

Another area of increased student achievement is related specifically to vocabulary development. Due to these students having few opportunities to engage in reading outside of school, bolstering students' exposure to books and time for reading was an important aspect of strengthening oral, listening, and speaking vocabularies. To further emphasize vocabulary development, the school chose to focus on word count and set goals related to word count as a part of the school's Accelerated Reader (AR) program. While typical AR programs focus on "points," this school emphasized word count because of our goal to increase students' exposure to vocabulary. Research supports that wide reading has the potential to expose readers to new vocabulary to increase the number of words in a reader's lexicon (Allington, 2013; Cunningham, 2005). According to the AR diagnostic report for the school, the school's twenty-seven 4th graders read 10,057,587 words by the end of March 2011 at an 85% accuracy rate. This word count is significantly higher than the 4,784,743 words read by 25 students during the previous school year with the same accuracy rate.

Teacher Professional Growth

In addition to student achievement growth, teacher knowledge and capacity increased during this vital partnership. Based on the final reports prepared by the mentee participants, the mentees provided many positive comments related to their improved knowledge and ability to deliver effective literacy instruction. The mentees stated that the program helped them to understand their role as a teacher, to implement more effective workstations, to differentiate instruction, and to manage the classroom more effectively. The mentees also stated that the most

beneficial parts of the program were the partnership of the mentor, the resources made available by the mentor, and the assistance that the mentor provided. One mentee stated, "The mentoring program helped me to better my reading and literacy instruction." When asked what they would do without the mentoring program, mentees stated that they would not have all of the wonderful resources that CELI provided. When asked what the most beneficial part of CELI mentoring program, the mentees identified having someone to talk to and support them as the most beneficial aspects of the mentoring program.

Final Thoughts

The mentoring partnership increased teachers' knowledge and changed their practice so that students had strong learning opportunities. Utilizing their new understanding of literacy content knowledge, teachers provided students with explicit instruction and engaged them in conversations that fostered strong oral language development. As a result, classrooms were full of interaction and learning was engaging and literacy rich.

Several mentee statements pinpoint the purpose and power of the mentoring process in changing teacher practice. Mentee one stated, "my mentor has helped me implement wonderful teaching strategies and ideas that I will take with me throughout my teaching career. This mentoring program provided activities for my students, both small group and whole group." This statement reinforces the notion that building teacher capacity benefits teachers and students (Carroll et al., 2010; Podsen & Denmark, 2007). Another statement made by a mentee documents how collaboration and communication are essential to a successful mentoring partnership (Croft et al., 2010; Sailors & Price, 2010; Stanulis, Little, & Wibbens, 2011). Specifically, the mentee stated: "My mentor made a positive impact on my teaching. I couldn't have made it without her." Lastly, a mentee's comments relay the importance of trust and continued support in a nonthreatening environment in order to have success in a mentoring partnership (Podsen & Denmark, 2007; Stanulis et al., 2011; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2012) by stating: "I was thankful to have someone there with me that wasn't worried about everything that I did wrong but was there to help me become a better and stronger teacher." With stronger, more knowledgeable teachers, these poverty-stricken students have a better and more realistic chance of defying the odds.

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Article Citation

Sheils, A. P., & Rutherford, A. (2014). Meaningful Mentoring: A Source of Hope in Elementary Classrooms in the Mississippi Delta. *Florida Association of Teacher Educators Journal*, 1(14), 1-8. Retrieved from http://www.fate1.org/journals/2014/sheilsandrutherford.pdf