MENTORING AND CO-LEARNING

DONCREST OPTION ASSOCIATE TEACHER MENTORSHIP PROJECT

PROJECT CO-ORDINATORS
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OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

➤ To improve the mentorship of teacher candidates by exploring tools and components of mentoring new teachers
➤ To develop a community of learners comprising experienced associate teachers, new associate teachers, and teacher candidates
➤ To encourage associate teachers and teacher candidates to enter into reflective dialogue, where common goals, common language, and shared understanding are the cornerstones of the relationships

STAGES OF THE PROJECT

■ STAGE ONE: Common Language, Common Strategies
The initial stage of this project began in 2002, the first year of the Doncrest Elementary Option, a cohort of teacher candidates situated in Doncrest School, York Region District School Board. Drs. Jackie Eldridge and Barrie Bennett conducted a self-study looking at the effectiveness of placing teacher candidates with associate teachers who had been in-serviced by faculty members on similar instructional approaches (Bennett & Rolheiser, 2001). That research looked at the impact of collaboration between school-university partners who are learning, improving, and integrating the same skills, strategies, and tactics. The inquiry clearly indicated that a common language and strategies are critical in developing an effective partnership and that feedback is more valuable and applicable when these attributes are in place (see Eldridge & Bennett, 2004).

■ STAGE TWO: Focus on Mentorship
As a result of the information we collected, and our ongoing need to refine and improve our own practice, we extended our previous research with our field partners by creating the second stage of this project — the mentorship of associate teachers. The current project engaged nine associate teachers in two half-day workshops where they were trained in effective mentoring strategies. In addition, we provided them with opportunities to explore their instructional repertoires in order to increase their confidence as role models for our teacher candidates. We also wanted our associates to develop a group relationship that was collaborative and committed to teacher growth.

During the workshops, associate teachers examined sample lesson and unit plans, observed and critiqued video-taped lessons, and explored ways of providing feedback within an inclusive community context. As university-based facilitators, it was important for us to create a community among our associates that was safe and nurturing. Our purpose was two-fold: we wanted them to feel free to have a voice, and we wanted them to understand the importance of similarly creating a safe place for their teacher candidate(s). Tribes (a process for building inclusion and community [Gibbs, 2001]) was initiated during the workshops, enabling the associates to share in an inclusive professional learning community.

DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Data were collected through pre- and post-surveys of the participants in the study. In addition, we conducted informal interviews and held focus group sessions. During the workshop sessions, the researchers made observational notes and examined anecdotal submissions by the associate teachers. These artifacts included a mentorship poster entitled “This Is Me” and a self-reflection on leadership. The surveys, artifacts, and observation

THE PROJECT IN BRIEF

This project extended a research program introduced in the first round of school-university partnership projects that showed the benefits of placing teacher candidates with associate teachers who had been in-serviced by university faculty members on similar instructional approaches. The second stage of this project extended our focus on helping new teachers by zeroing in on supporting associate teachers in their mentorship role. The current project engaged nine associate teachers in two half-day workshops where they were trained in effective mentoring strategies. In addition, we provided them with opportunities to explore their instructional repertoires in order to increase their confidence as role models for our teacher candidates. We learned that most felt comfortable modeling instructional strategies but wanted to learn more about mentorship in order to make the teacher candidates’ experiences safe and meaningful.
notes were examined and analyzed for patterns, commonalities, and any changes over time.

As we examined the ways in which associate teachers viewed their role, we saw some interesting trends. In the pre-survey, all respondents indicated that their responsibilities included: giving feedback, modeling, directing, and giving advice. Through professional development activities and the post-survey, we noticed the associates now included on their lists: support for teacher candidates’ strengths and needs, guiding planning and assessment, and becoming active members in a learning community. The latter was one of our initial goals as we hoped to enable our participants to learn from each other in a community of reciprocal learning (DuFour, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

We asked associates to identify their strengths. The commonalities among the participants proved to be quite interesting. The associates indicated that their experience, communication, flexibility, organization, understanding, and reflective natures allowed them to be strong mentors for teacher candidates.

1. Mentoring Should Start in Preservice While mentorship has traditionally been viewed as a relationship established between a new teacher and an experienced one, it is our opinion that this association actually takes many forms and that it begins before the teacher candidate leaves the faculty of education. McCann, Johannesa and Ricca (2005) believe that new teachers benefit from a broad network of contacts with peers and external resource people, as well as former associate teachers. As such, we believe the Doncrest Option mentorship relationship supports this notion. Given that many of our students will take positions with the York Region District School Board, we feel that we facilitate a stronger induction program when the process begins in the preservice year while they are learning and before they are hired. As part of the option instructional team, several York Region consultants provide instruction in health and physical education and the arts.

The participants in our study discussed the benefits of creating this mentoring community in preservice. The post-survey results all included comments about the value in continued mentorship and occasions for bringing associates and teacher candidates together. The associates noted that such opportunities for connections is one of the strongest benefits to hosting faculty students. They also pointed out the need for teacher candidates to become part of an induction program once they are hired. Mentors are “investors,” not just tenants in our preservice program as well as in a school and education system. Catherine Brighton (1999) found that beginning teachers frequently feel isolated and unsupported. She states that the expectations and scope of the job overwhelm them and that there is a huge disparity between initial teacher preparation and expectations for the job. It is hoped that through our continued mentorship relationships that we can work together with the Board’s induction team and follow our graduates into their first year, thereby helping to reduce the number of teachers leaving the profession in their early years.

2. Mentoring Needs Support We concluded that it is imperative to support our associate teachers in their mentorship of teacher candidates. To do so effectively we realized that we needed to assess their needs. In the pre-survey, we asked the participants to indicate what they would need or desire in professional development as a mentor teacher. Many indicated they wanted to learn new or hone already existing instructional strategies to model for teacher candidates. They emphasized the need to clearly understand the lesson and unit planning strategies and the tools our teacher candidates were utilizing in their university program. Finally, they wanted to have clear exemplars of struggling and exemplary teacher candidates with possible action plans and support examples to use. The pre-survey information was extremely helpful for planning our second workshop. As a result of the work within our newly formed learning community, our mentors helped us to develop a package with rubrics, exemplars, lesson planning guidelines, unit plan overviews, and guidelines for supporting and assessing at-risk and highly successful teacher candidates. This package will be shared in the 2005–2006 academic year with all associates. The study participants also agreed to become mentors for new associate teachers in the next academic year.

We also wanted to evaluate our success in mentoring our associate teachers so we asked them if the workshops were helpful. All participants indicated that the workshops and support allowed them to be confident in their mentoring of teacher candidates, as well as other teachers who wish to take on the role. They felt that they had become more reflective practitioners and that they had more tools to help their teacher candidates.

3. Mentoring Takes Time We are aware that two workshops are hardly exhaustive. We realize that associate teachers will need more mentoring on how to be effective associates. In our post-survey, some of the respondents indicated they still need additional professional development. They also felt that teacher candidates needed to clearly understand professionalism in respect to teaching. Frukholm and Meyer (1999) found in their study on mentorship that teacher candidates have a difficult role in the teacher preparation process. It is a critical transition point in their lives. Although they are still students themselves, they are expected to perform like professionals.

Respondents all felt that more time was critical for the mentoring process to be successful. Indeed, Macintyre and Hagger (2005) noted two factors that limit the benefits of mentoring: the quality of the match between mentor and mentee and limited time. Shank (2005) found that time allows for mentors and mentees to engage in spontaneous conversations and collaborative problem solving. This relationship is called a “flow of collaborative energy” (p.17).

One interesting aspect in terms of what associates felt they still needed was more information on current instruction and philosophies in certain subjects (i.e., the arts). It is our intention to continue to provide professional development for our associates so that our partnership and the mentorship of future teachers will be strengthened. Our ongoing planning includes expanding the project to subject fields; i.e., in the first year, focusing on literacy and numeracy so that all participants, associates, teacher candidates, and students benefit from new initiatives and understandings. The subject-focused work would include instruction, content, and assessment.
IMPACT
We believe that this mentorship project benefited all stakeholders. The pupils in our associate schools were able to experience two teachers, the associate and teacher candidate. As such, the children could see the pair effectively communicating and working closely in an inclusive and supportive culture. Our teacher candidates were mentored by well-informed, caring, and supportive associates who had a clear vision and well-defined goals for the reciprocal relationship with their mentees. The associates all indicated that they experienced professional growth from learning in a community of mentors who share similar goals for the future of our profession. They were also very excited about the package developed through this project for all associate teachers. In addition there were benefits for the York Region District School Board because they now have a bank of trained mentors, a deeper connection between OISE/UT and their new induction program, and they have the potential for hiring new teachers who have had the benefits of working with associates who are skilled in varied motivational approaches. This aligns with their focus on “Instructional Intelligence,” a system-wide initiative.

IMPLICATIONS
This research project helped further solidify our collaborative school/university partnerships by directly linking initiatives and goals in our teacher education program and the York Region District Schools Board’s vision of induction and mentorship. It also helped to develop a collaborative community of associate teachers who can now become leaders and supports for other associate teachers in the mentorship of our teacher candidates. Mentor teachers play a pivotal role in the development of teacher candidates and by supporting that mentorship process faculties of education can assist in the induction and retention of new teachers. Frykholm and Meyer (1999) propose that mentors provide teacher candidates with support and learning experiences they will need to develop the belief structures and habits of practice that will lead to powerful teaching and learning. Our project has assisted in this process.

NEXT STEPS & NEW QUESTIONS
We have seen many benefits from this research project that we will continue to support and expand. A package of training materials developed by associates will be shared in the new academic year. As well, we will continue to foster the collaborative community with our associate teachers through after-school workshops and regular communication. Wayne et al. (2005) believe that a next step in the mentorship process is for mentors to focus on improving new teacher instruction rather than just providing moral support. Following job interviews by several administrators in the York Region District School Board we received feedback indicating they thought our teacher candidates required a deeper understanding of literacy and numeracy in the elementary classroom. We, therefore, want to look at ways to strengthen our relationships with associate teachers to minimize the disparity between reform in mathematics and literacy presented to teacher candidates in their university courses and the realities of instruction in the classroom. We also want to examine the impact that the newly developed handbook has on all associates and their mentorship of teacher candidates. We will also stay sensitive to other needs our associates and teacher candidates have in order to optimize their professional relationships.

It is clear that new teachers require a great deal of support to be successful and to remain in the profession. It is our intention to continue the journey with our teacher candidates, our graduates and our associates so that we may offer them the guidance necessary to build strength within our partnerships.

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REFERENCES

JACKIE ELDRIDGE and KRISTA WALFORD are Co-ordinators of the Doncrest Option in the Elementary Teacher Education Program, OISE/UT. Jackie and Krista are committed advocates of strong mentoring and other supports for new teachers.