

The Importance of Mentors as Educational Leaders in Induction Programs

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The Kansas City Residential Internship Program (KCRIP) was created in 2002 to address the teacher shortage they were experiencing in the Kansas City, MO, school district. Although designed and implemented with the best of intentions, the program failed to prepare interns to teach in an urban setting. According to Flynn and Nolan (2008), mentors “(1) ease the transition of new teachers from preparation to practice, (2) reduce teacher attrition, (3) help new teachers become more effective earlier on in their careers, and (4) increase job satisfaction” (p. 173). As seen through narrative intern accounts, the mentors failed to provide the necessary support to prepare the interns to work in the urban setting of Kansas City, MO.

Program Description

The KCRIP was designed to support interns in their transition from college seniors in teacher education programs to certified teachers in the urban district of Kansas City, MO. All of the interns were housed in a central location within the community they would serve. The interns worked under the leadership of a designated mentor, who was assigned to work with them for a full year. The first semester of the year, the interns worked for the district with the title of “emergency certified” teacher. They held that title until December, when they completed the classroom hours for traditional certification. Typically, pre-service teachers—not involved in

this program—complete an internship under a certified teacher working within a classroom together, and the process is referred to as “student teaching.” The KCRIP model used building mentors instead and allowed the interns to function solely within their own classroom with the support of the building mentor, who was responsible for several interns. This model was selected primarily to save money for the financially struggling district. Interns staffed a classroom for the entire year and earned half a year’s salary. This plan not only benefited the district by filling a teacher slot but saved money as well. Starting the second year of a two-year contract, the interns received a full salary according to the district pay scale. This model was designed to benefit the interns, as those selected were granted income while completing the final components of their teacher training. The internship replaced traditional student teaching, offering an additional cost savings to the intern. Participants in the KCRIP were also guaranteed employment for two full years and supplied with a mentor to help them with the transition into the classroom. The final component to the benefits package was that the housing was included for the interns.

Participant Selection

The interns were selected through formal applications of college seniors in teacher education programs. The interns came from all over the state of Missouri, including both private and public institutions. The selection process occurred every two years, and in the year 2007–08, the year the research on the program took place, the intern demographics were as follows on the 19 students accepted:

Intern Participants’ Race	Percentage Represented in the 2007–08 Group
African American	15
Caucasian	68
Hispanic	11
Native American	6

Gender	Percentage Represented in the 2007–08 Group
Male	32
Female	68

Mentor Selection

According to Villani (2006), mentor selection and matching should be done based on a number of things. A good mentor is

- positively disposed to serve colleagues’ growth,
- culturally competent and proficient,

- secure enough to value the different and evolving skills,
- committed to promoting reflection,
- generous and willing to share resources and ideas,
- a lifelong learner,
- an effective communicator.

The mentors from the KCRIP were selected from the teaching population that was already employed by the Kansas City, MO, school district. Interested teachers volunteered to fill the role of a mentor and were accepted if they had been in the district for a minimum of three years. Because the mentors didn’t have their own classrooms during this program, their entire responsibility was to work with the interns in their classrooms. Each mentor was assigned to work with several interns within one building; the average number of interns that any given mentor had to work with was three. When the matching of interns and mentors occurred, location was the only variable that was considered. Grade level, interest, and teaching style were not considered.

Strengthening the KCRIP Mentoring Program

According to the guidelines constructed by Missouri’s Department of Education, the mentors of the KCRIP were functioning as classroom leaders. However, according to the interns participating in this study, there were many difficulties. Selection process, as well as a number of specific suggestions for activities, emerged as the key themes in the data.

First of all, the mentors should have been selected based on a specific set of leadership standards. The Missouri standards are specific and require an individual to be highly skilled to qualify for the mentor role. In short, mentors should be masters of the content being taught, have strong skills associated with building classroom communities, and be excellent communicators. These specific skills should have been considered during the selection of the mentors.

In addition, according to the compiled data from the study, including intern responses, the role of the mentor was unclear:

- ... some of us don’t really understand what their job is.
- ... what are they supposed to do for us?

Mentors should have a specific daily agenda that is structured around the interns’ schedules to allow for equal distribution of the mentors’ valuable time. This schedule would allow the interns to know when they would have support in their classrooms. According to the study on the KCRIP, the mentors’ time spent within the classroom needs to focus on the following areas:

(1) Modeling quality, reflective teaching practices by presenting lessons on a regular basis.

It would have been helpful to have some alternative to “best practice” teaching. This sounds strange, I realize, but so many of the methods I learned in college are just ineffective without strong management skill (or with the students I have), and you don’t really know what to fall back on. I learned about cooperative learning strategies and assumed that students would be engaged in learning with the use of these strategies. I never learned what to do if they weren’t engaged. I think there is also a separate category of classroom management that applies specifically to urban teaching, and I need to know it!

Because the interns participating in this project had not had the opportunity to student teach, they desperately wanted to see lessons modeled by the mentors. They expressed wanting to see content being delivered by a teacher leader, someone with experience. They wanted to be given specific strategies to try with their students. They wanted pedagogy modeled so they could emulate the behavior. In addition, if the mentor scheduled regular times to “substitute” within the mentees’ classroom, the intern could build her/his professional “toolbox” by watching other quality teachers in the building. Reflection could follow the observation and then there would be material to discuss during the daily meetings between the mentor and mentee.

(2) Providing daily feedback on lessons presented by the interns, including positive aspects of the teaching performance, as well as statements of constructive criticism.

I’ll talk about problems ... usually it’s troubleshooting, which I guess is kind of bad. I guess we never really celebrated the successes that I have had. Most of the time we talk about my students’ behavior and academic ability. I am just trying to do these things right ... that is pretty much what we talk about.

The interns felt that most of the time spent with their mentors was used for discussions that focused on student behavior and classroom management. They reiterated that they wanted written feedback about their lessons as a way to be proactive with their students instead of reactive.

(3) Being available to manage independent work time for the students in the classroom so the interns have time to reflect on their teaching immediately following the lesson delivery.

From my experience as a teacher educator, I have found that successful teachers need the opportunity to think

about the lessons that they presented—an opportunity to brainstorm what was successful and what needed to be modified for the next lesson. They need time to struggle with complex feelings and situations. This could be made possible if the mentor was prepared to teach the following lesson or supervise independent student work. The reflection by the intern could then be used as the springboard for the end-of-the-day discussion between the mentor and mentee.

(4) Be available for discussions about classroom management and other issues that arise throughout the day.

The problem is that first of all, I am firm. I am what would be considered a mean teacher to students when they are “acting a fool” in my class. I have gotten into my students’ faces, yelled, and slammed my hands on the desks. These are examples of the things I see happening in my school, and none of those things seem right or effective to me. I use a firm and loud enough voice, and I am firm in sticking with a punishment once it’s been delivered. I don’t know what else I can do.

It was apparent through discussions with the mentees that they felt that their mentors were attempting this component of support. However, it became obvious that the discussion was always “free flowing” and didn’t focus on specific educational and managerial topics that should have been discussed. Mentors spent a great deal of time listening to the interns’ frustrations; however, what the interns desired was specific strategies to use with students when there were behavior issues. The interns appreciated the fact that the mentors listened to their “venting” but were still left feeling helpless about what to do with the students who misbehaved.

The Current Program

In 2009, the KCRIP program was discontinued in favor of the Teach for America program to address the teacher shortage in the district. Many of the former interns working in the district to finish serving their contractual obligations fell victim to the “reorganization” that occurred shortly thereafter. Although a few of them remain in the district, the majority of them have moved on in their careers.

I have had the opportunity to keep in touch with one of the interns through Facebook over the years. “Katelyn” is no longer in urban education but is still in the field of education. She is working as a media specialist in a K–6 school in Colorado. She is happy to have had the experience that the KCRIP provided but is happy to be focused on a different area of education now.

Missouri Leadership Standards

STANDARD	QUALITY INDICATORS
<p>Content Knowledge and Perspectives Aligned with Appropriate Instruction: The teacher understands the central concepts, structures, and tools of inquiry of the discipline(s) and creates learning experiences that make these aspects of subject matter meaningful and engaging for all students.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Content knowledge and academic language 2. Engaging students in subject matter 3. Disciplinary research and inquiry methodologies 4. Interdisciplinary instruction 5. Diverse social and cultural perspectives
<p>Understanding and Encouraging Student Learning, Growth, and Development: The teacher understands how students learn, develop, and differ in their approaches to learning. The teacher provides learning opportunities that are adapted to diverse learners and support the intellectual, social, and personal development of all students.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development 2. Student goals 3. Theory of learning 4. Meeting the needs of every student 5. Prior experiences, learning styles, multiple intelligences, strengths, and needs 6. Language, culture, family, and knowledge of community
<p>Implementing the Curriculum: The teacher recognizes the importance of long-range planning and curriculum development. The teacher develops, implements, and evaluates curriculum based upon standards and student needs.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Implementation of curriculum standards 2. Develop lessons for diverse learners 3. Analyze instructional goals and differentiated instructional strategies
<p>Teaching for Critical Thinking: The teacher uses a variety of instructional strategies to encourage students' critical-thinking, problem-solving, and performance skills, including instructional resources.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Instructional strategies leading to student engagement in problem solving and critical thinking 2. Appropriate use of instructional resources to enhance student learning 3. Cooperative learning
<p>Creating a Positive Classroom Learning Environment: The teacher uses an understanding of individual and group motivation and behavior to create a learning environment that encourages active engagement in learning, positive social interaction, and self-motivation.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Classroom management, motivation, and engagement 2. Managing time, space, transitions, and activities 3. Classroom, school, and community culture
<p>Utilizing Effective Communication: The teacher models effective verbal, nonverbal, and media communication techniques with students and parents to foster active inquiry, collaboration, and supportive interaction in the classroom.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Verbal and nonverbal communication 2. Sensitivity to cultural, gender, intellectual, and physical differences 3. Learner expression in speaking, writing, and other media 4. Technology and media communication tools
<p>Use of Student Assessment Data to Analyze and Modify Instruction: The teacher understands and uses formative and summative assessment strategies to assess the learners' progress, uses assessment data to plan ongoing instruction, monitors the performance of each student, and devises instruction to enable students to grow and develop.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Effective use of assessments 2. Assessment data to improve learning 3. Student-led assessment strategies 4. Effect of instruction on individual/class learning 5. Communication of student progress and maintaining records 6. Collaborative data-analysis process
<p>Professional Practice: The teacher is a reflective practitioner who continually assesses the effects of choices and actions on others. The teacher actively seeks out opportunities to grow professionally in order to improve learning for all students.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Self-assessment and improvement 2. Professional learning 3. Professional rights, responsibilities, and ethical practices
<p>Professional Collaboration: The teacher has effective working relationships with students, parents, school colleagues, and community members.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Roles, responsibilities, and collegial activities 2. Collaborating with historical, cultural, political, and social context to meet the needs of students 3. Cooperative partnerships in support of student learning

Where Do We Go Now?

The basic tenets of the KCRIP were well intentioned and could be altered to be more effective. A program similar to the one created in Kansas City could certainly help other urban districts prepare pre-service teachers to be successful in the urban setting. For example, look at the work that is being done by the New Hampshire Task Force on Effective Teaching. Several of the recommendations that they make support the conceptual framework of the KCRIP. Recommendation number two states, “All new educators receive induction with mentoring for a minimum of 3–5 years to align with New Hampshire certification rules and regulations for beginning and experienced educators” (Boyle, Couch, Cuddy-Egbert, Dunn & Forsten, 2011, p. 14) Recommendation number four states that effectiveness competencies must be the core focus between the mentor and new teacher. And lastly, recommendation number five states that mentor selection must be guided by the effective competencies standards and include ongoing professional development. By following more closely those guidelines proposed by the task force, an effective program, such as the one intended by the KCRIP, could be created to utilize mentors as leaders in program development designed to successfully prepare pre-service teachers to work in urban settings.

In addition, a program similar to this one would benefit from more closely following the state standards designed to ensure quality practice. The state of Missouri has leadership standards in place that would have had a positive impact on the program had they been more closely followed by the mentors in the program.

Lastly, the recommendations suggested from the study of the KCRIP program would “fill out” the guidelines to use when developing a similar program. Despite the shortcomings of the mentor portion of the KCRIP program as outlined here, it is important to keep in mind that this article was only intended to highlight the importance of mentors as leaders within an induction program. The KCRIP was designed to provide a teaching force that was more affordable to a struggling district. In addition, the district

was looking to have teachers in the classrooms that could help students produce higher test scores on standardized tests. The results of those objectives were not addressed in this study, as this study was intended to identify the opinions of the interns on their feelings of preparedness to teach in an urban setting. The program would need to be assessed using different measures to gauge if it was successful on those other points. The use of mentors was only one strategy that the program implemented as a way to support the interns.

It is imperative that mentors model quality teaching practices, provide daily feedback, and are available for discussion about classroom management and other issues that arise throughout the day. Future mentor programs must consider the importance of the role of the mentor when developing a new teacher induction plan.

References

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