

As Mentoring Flourishes, So Does the Intern

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Abstract

All university counselors-in-training complete internships under a “qualified” veteran. With a “swim or sink” mentality, an enthusiastic/competent student can be reduced to an insecure and discouraged intern, because supervisors don’t have essential mentoring skills. Beliefs and attitudes are acquired/internalized during internship and veterans influence this experience and ensuing attitudes profoundly. Without quality mentorship, interns may perceive themselves ill suited for the profession. Simply put, when mentoring flourishes, everyone benefits.

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Many state credentialing institutions require university school counselors in training to complete a 600 hours internship in public schools under a “qualified” veteran in order to receive K-12 licensing. During internships, interns must learn to transfer textbook theory and skills learned in the controlled environment of the university to real-world practice. The fieldwork training of a school counselor is the most critical time of their education, and many demands are made on these university students, both from their educational institutions and from the school sites in which they perform the internships. For the majority of these interns, they are entering the real world of counseling for the first time and find the challenges more complex than they ever dreamed of while studying in their university programs. Some of those challenges are related to the fact that today’s students are facing problems not even imaginable a decade ago.

Gold (1996) noted that when novices enter a new environment and culture, imprinting occurs. Beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes are acquired and internalized as innate patterns during this critical time (p. 588). Without a doubt, the mentoring provided by the members of the school staff influences the initial experience of the counseling intern and her or his ensuing attitudes in profound ways. Mentors can go a long way toward making the job of learning and doing, the essential aspects of an internship, easier to bear, thereby increasing the intern’s competence and ultimately job satisfaction (Stansbury & Zimmerman, 2000). Without the right type of guidance, by the right type of veteran counselor, university interns may perceive themselves ill suited for the profession.

Many veteran school counselors work tirelessly and sincerely to assist university interns as they shape and refine their self-images as school counselors in terms of their competence, performance and effectiveness with children. *But some do not.* Upon entering the school site for the first time, most interns quickly realize that the mentor counselor to whom they are assigned can be a much more valuable asset than all the well intended professional classroom activities designed for them in their counselor education programs. Due to the perceived “sink or swim” mentality, it can be disheartening for university faculty to witness an enthusiastic and competent student reduced to an insecure and discouraged intern over time, because the veteran school counselor assigned to guide and supervise him or her, does not have the essential qualifications to mentor.

Since interns and universities often do not have a voice in the mentoring match, because counselor themselves volunteer or the school districts select the “qualified” counselor, it’s imperative to move beyond the standard selection criteria of experience, location, and necessity and examine what constitutes quality mentoring, since one bad experience can profoundly affect the course of a career. The highest priority of all the stakeholders in the induction of interns should be to find those veteran school counselors who are professionals in both theory and practice. What does that look like? Who should be mentoring the novice school counselors? Strategies like affirming, caring, listening, acceptance, modeling, questioning, and reflecting are touted in the literature as very important qualities for a successful mentoring relationship.

Are quality mentors born or developed? This is a tough question to answer, but it is important for veterans themselves to start identifying the characteristics of a quality

mentor before they sign up to do the critical job of training a university school counseling intern. A qualified veteran counselor who possesses all the right mentoring qualities can make all the difference in the training of an intern. And mentoring, when it works well, can be a powerfully positive professional experience for *both* intern and mentor. Many mentors have found the close personal and professional relationships, which they developed with their university interns, as one of the most satisfying aspects of their careers. Simply put, when mentoring flourishes, so does the intern.

Defining a Quality Mentor

Healy and Welchert (1990) asserted that true mentorship cannot be defined adequately and ought not to be violated by “crassly quantitative research” (p.18). Many researchers agree, and the point of greatest agreement in the literature on mentoring is that there is not one clear definition of who or what makes a quality mentor. Giebelhaus, (1999) discussed the origin of the term from Homer’s classic poem *The Odyssey* and characterized the mentor as an experienced and wiser person entrusted with the growth of a novice. However, what seems to be implicit is that because every mentor brings a distinct and personal perspective to the relationship, and the contexts in which the site supervision takes place are so unique and varied, the role should not be rigidly defined.

Because temperament and personal circumstances differ, one intern may need more emotional support, whereas another might need more procedural support. Thus, supplying a qualitatively distinct description is complicated, since each assigned mentor ought to be defined by the needs of the mentee and perhaps should remain distinctive. What is important to acknowledge is that the veteran counselor assigned to supervise the intern is the central resource for a counselor in training. Having an experienced counselor

to turn to for answers ranging from how to organize a group-counseling lesson to how to file a child abuse report can profoundly influence a beginning counselor's experiences from "baptism by fire" shock to opportunities to ease into the role gracefully.

Characteristics of a Quality Mentor

Just as difficult as providing "the" definition of a mentor, is listing the characteristics and qualities that constitute an effective mentor for school counseling interns. Just because mentors are good with K-12 students doesn't necessarily qualify them to mentor and guide graduate students. This paper identifies those mentoring characteristics essential for the training of university interns. This, in turn, might cause introspection on the part of some veteran counselors before they volunteer to induct and mentor an intern into school counseling profession.

Diversity

Mentor counselors should be sensitive to all areas of diversity, particularly culture and gender. Socialization can be hindered if the intern is exposed to a limited range of practices, views, and expectations. The broadest possible exposure to diverse people and situations can facilitate assimilation into the profession. Even though research findings are varied in term of conclusions on cross-ethnic, and cross-gender mentoring relationships, the role that diversity issues could play in the internship is a significant area to examine.

Quality mentoring should go beyond the biases and stereotypes that *all of us* carry. One thing is certain: mentors should address their conscious and unconscious stereotypes and biases, particularly if interns are of a different ethnicity than themselves so that potential barriers are not created for the intern. Interns of historically marginalized

groups may have different needs and expectations from their assigned mentor. Welch (1993) suggested that matching mentees with mentors of the same ethnicity can offer added benefits, especially with people of color. However, this may not be possible in all cases.

Gender beliefs and stereotypes, along with their behavioral expectations, may also influence an intern's conduct in response to and relationship with the mentor. Several research studies on mentoring have implied that same-gender interaction may be more personally and professionally compatible. One study showed that females were overly sensitive to critical feedback, and as a result, males "watered down" the feedback. It was suggested that some male mentors may be disinclined to provide the critical advice necessary to a female (Welch, 1993). Another study by Nelson and Holloway (1990) illustrated men's socialized need for power, and women's socialized need to defer. Women have been found to favor relational learning (Kerka, 1998) and females may have less need than males to dominate their subordinate (Gilbert & Rossman, 1992). This can be a problem if power differentials are used to dominate or control the intern. Evidence from these studies indicated that school districts might be wise to consider the issues of cross-ethnic and cross-gender mentor counselor when matching mentor to intern.

Critical Inquiry and Reflective Thinking

In the past few years, there has been resurgence in promoting critical inquiry and reflective thinking to help *all* school counselors think about and analyze what is working and what is not in their practice. Realizing how significant this type of analysis is, mentors should persevere in assisting interns with in-depth critical inquiry into their practice. It is only when a mentor demonstrates a willingness to willingly subject his or her own

counseling to analysis and open discussion with the intern that intern will be encouraged to do the same. A mentor should know how to combine support and challenge in ways that empower the intern's ability and willingness to engage in reflection. The mentor's role should change from that of advice giver and problem solver to a questioner, listener, and model for reflective thinking.

Boreen, Johnson, Niday, and Potts, (2000) discussed how valuable it is for a mentor to reflect with the mentee. The "thinking about thinking" they referred to, can move an intern from knowing how to act like a counselor to being a counselor. This means consistent and concrete feedback from the mentor needs to be scheduled into the intern's workday. It is clear that a mentor who practices and models critical inquiry and reflective thinking will be of greater value to the intern. As Powell (2003) asserted, we cannot take someone to a place that we have not been to ourselves.

Genuine Dialogue and Active Listening

A quality mentor should be able to effectively engage in genuine dialogue, which encompasses good listening skills. Giving the intern a quick answer to a problem does not coach the intern into a deeper understanding. Effective mentors know that thoughtful dialogue takes time, but it is time well spent. Genuine dialogue between the mentor and intern should be a common search for understanding and empathy. "Dialogue is open-ended; that is, in a genuine dialogue, neither party knows at the outset what the outcome decision will be" (Noddings, 1992, p. 23). Even if an intern is hesitant to analyze his or her counseling performance, an effective mentor should be able to instigate genuine dialogue. Even when it's impossible to affirm some of the intern's ideas, quality mentors with good questioning skills, combined with candor and humor can be valuable

for the beginner. Encouraging the intern to ask questions, both concrete and abstract, is important. By creating and asking questions that help the intern to develop critical skills to scrutinize their own counseling style is fundamental to the process.

Powell (2003) believed that too often supervisors of counselors have images of themselves as omniscient “therapeutic wizards” and this may inhibit genuine listening to those “under them.” Sometimes interns just need a sounding board, someone to listen to them. When listening is the goal, it should be the priority. Bell (2000) insisted that mentors should listen with a mission, and be so crystal clear about the other persons’ meaning that it becomes a “copy and paste” execution from the one brain to another. Powell advocated silence in supervision, much like the therapeutic technique, the stillness that leaves space for the individual to emerge. Being genuine and asking the critical questions and then giving the gift of a listening ear are great hallmarks of any good counselor in any field, and sometimes mentors in their supervisory role forget to practice this skill with their interns.

Nonjudgmental and Accepting

A quality mentor should be nonjudgmental and accepting of the intern as a person, separate from the role of counselor-in-training. Powell (2003) reminded those who are training counselors to remember the old adage; people *don't care how much you know until they know how much you care*. A mentor recognizes the talents and enthusiasm the beginner brings to the school. The intern under a mentor counselor’s guidance should feel supported, not judged. The goal of a mentor should not be to impart his or her own opinion, but to stimulate minds and accept, even affirm, the intern’s own ideas and individuality and show respect for numerous perspectives. Within ethical and legal boundaries, a flexible, open-minded mentor encourages his or her intern to experiment and take risks.

Mentors have to determine whether to caution against certain tactics or give permission to try new strategies even though failure might result. The key is to remind a new counselor that they didn't fail, but instead the strategy did.

Effective mentors should have their own vision of counseling, and help interns shape their own unique perspective. Interns should not be required to imitate or duplicate the methods of experienced counselors. Sometimes differences in counseling philosophies can create barriers between the intern and mentor, but difference of opinion can coexist. Mentors should not require interns to behave as they would in a particular situation. Rather, a quality mentor should ask, "What would you do in this situation?" This is what the students under the care of a school counselor will need to think about as well, and this modeling could have real-life benefits for children.

It is important to remember that the very process of mentoring requires a certain degree of judgment, but it should not be the primary interest of the process. "Right" and "wrong" are sometimes unavoidable, and even useful. However, a mentor's caring attitude should lie at the heart of every judgment and evaluation of the intern's practice. If a person feels accepted, it's easier to receive criticism and direction (Noddings, 1992). Mentors who are transparent about their weaknesses, support their interns without judgment, and then model vulnerability about their own shortcomings have the potential to communicate hope and optimism to the trainee.

Trust, Safety, and Tough Love

Mentoring interns into the profession of school counseling is a commitment that must be grounded realistically and sometimes the mentor may have to practice tough love and confront the intern. All efforts to deal with negative situations involving the intern's

practice should be partnered with exploration of what could have been done differently. A quality mentor will know how to create a safe and trusting place so that the intern comes away unscathed, but has learned the lesson. Interns need someone they can trust not only to “tell it like it is,” but also to guide them.

Interns should be allowed to stumble occasionally while they learn, but there might come a time when intervention is necessary. During these situations, mentors should create an ambiance of “I value you and want to help you improve.” Mentors should model positive responses to potential negative situations. Calabrese (1996) asserted that an effective mentor will support without rescuing so that greater capability, and not dependence develops. “Rescuing is a negative concept for both the rescuer and rescuee” (Lasley, 1996, p.66) and mentors in a parent role can be dangerous. With trust as the basis of the relationship, mentors can give interns a safe place to practice and implement the skills learned in their university programs with minimal risk.

There isn’t always an easy way to point out areas of weaknesses, but quality mentors should always demand quality from their interns. Good mentors can make their mentees believe that they can always reach idealistic goals with an encouraging and cajoling manner that never produces shame (Calabrese, 1996). Delgado (1999) used the phrase “compassion with a critical eye” as a motto that good mentors should live up to. “Compassion” is used because veterans are working with human beings, and “critical eye” because mentors have the knowledge and the expertise to point out weak areas. Thus, it is crucial for mentor counselors to communicate the certainty that their intern is capable of transcending present challenges and of achieving great things in the future.

Strong Supervisory Skills Without Evaluation

Are mentor counselors supervising or mentoring? Sometimes at the end of the whole internship experience, these roles cause confusion. Tensions can arise over the issue of evaluation even though it is common practice for school district mentors to provide the intern's university with an evaluation of performance. Researchers studying the mentoring process tend to encourage separating the process from the evaluation. In theory, the mentor as *mentor* should go beyond the evaluative role of supervision. Interns may well hesitate to approach their mentors with real problems or weaknesses, if they are aware that these same people may later evaluate their performance negatively. And many mentors themselves strongly dislike the written evaluation process. Even though the literature is clear that a mentor should not assume the role of administrator, written evaluation is required as part of many state standards. Consequently, it is good practice for mentor and intern to go over the evaluation criteria at the onset of the experience and periodically review the criteria necessary to receive a "passing" evaluation during the internship period. This way, there are no surprises at the end, and the process promotes good communication between the intern and the mentor counselor during the internship period.

Conclusion

Finally, an array of social, cultural, and political changes during the last two decades has presented new challenges to the profession of school counseling. It should not be a stretch to recognize that during this critical time of induction, more care should be invested into training of interns as they are unquestionably our most valuable commodities. Many are concerned that lack of autonomy and professional input is

increasing for school counselors, and the pressures of meeting national standards, ameliorating severe student issues, both academically and emotionally, and the strain of this accountability, may cause even less job satisfaction and more attrition. When school district mentors fail to address the unmet needs of their university interns, potentially excellent school counselors may not be able to establish a strong foundation for a successful career. Veterans should thoughtfully volunteer their services to mentor this next generation of school counselors. If mentors take the job seriously, the field has more chance to attract and retain caring and faithful counselors who can cope in the complex and challenging nature of the profession. When seeking supervisors for school counseling interns, the following qualities should be uppermost in the mentor's mind: diversity; critical inquiry and reflective listening; genuine dialog and active communications; nonjudgmental and accepting; trust, safety, and tough love; and strong supervisory skills without evaluation. The "sink or swim" mentality that has historically been a part of the training must be changed. Hopefully that mind set can be replaced by creating an environment in which caring and support can flourish.

When both mentor and intern are genuinely dedicated to teaching and learning, the ensuing respect and admiration is inevitably conveyed to their K-12 students. As much as our interns deserve a caring, supportive mentor to guide them through their internship, the children on every campus deserve it even more. Simply put, when mentoring flourishes, everyone benefits.

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