What Educators Need to Know About Mentoring

Diana Whitton & Del Siegle - Editors

If I have seen farther, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants.
– Sir Isaac Newton

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Implications for the Learning Environment

Educators need to consider a variety of educational experiences as they develop programs to meet the diverse needs of students. Mentorships are a flexible way to develop individual talents and interests outside the regular curriculum and timetable. Mentoring is a strategy which can complement classroom teaching.

The term mentor is derived from Greek mythology when Odysseus entrusted his son, Telemachus, to the care of his wise advisor, Mentor. Mentor assumed the role of guiding Telemachus into young adulthood in his father's absence.

A mentor is an expert in a field who may assist a child with his or her understanding in an area of common interest. Mentorships are not traditional student-teacher relationships, but equal partnerships forged in guided learning. A mentor and student interact on a one-to-one basis to develop a plan to integrate skills and knowledge to meet the needs, abilities, and desires of the student.

The educational mentoring relationship may focus on an academic or creative area chosen to capitalize on the student's interests and enthusiasm. The work undertaken in a mentoring situation is not the regular curriculum; it can be an extension of it, as well as an area of interest unrelated to school curriculum content.

Prior to beginning the mentoring program, a school planning team should identify a coordinator for the program, define the roles of mentors, and develop a program plan which includes staff awareness training, possible funding resources, criteria for student and mentor selection, and feedback and evaluation procedures. The individual mentoring relationships should be developed with an underlying set of goals that have been agreed upon by each mentor and mentee. The role the mentor plays in developing the specific goals of a mentoring situation varies. Thus, throughout the mentoring experience, regular feedback needs to be collected to determine the compatibility of the relationship and the progress that is being made to agreed upon goals.

Three broad stages of development occur in the mentor relationship. *Stage One* involves defining the student's interest and finding areas the student would like to pursue. It is imperative that this first step is undertaken slowly and develops as the bond between the mentor and mentee grow. *Stage Two* is the development of the necessary skills and strategies to undertake the high-end learning that will be completed at *Stage Three*, which may be an original piece of research or in-depth investigation of a topic. Mentors can provide a level of content sophistication for student projects that is impossible for a local school system to offer.

Interaction between the two participants is determined by the needs of the student and does not necessarily need to be limited to personal contact. The rapidly expanding electronic communication options now available in many schools afford students easy, inexpensive access to experts at a variety of locations through the use of telecommunication and computer systems.

Practicing professionals in the community, retired people, older students, and university faculty should be considered as possible mentors. The mentoring relationship is a creative and an open-ended one. It depends upon a truthful interchange between the mentor and the mentee. Successful mentoring allows the student to leave the relationship with not only increased knowledge, but also a valuable personal contact and a realistic image of the professional's role in the field.

Topic Notes

- The goal in any mentoring process is the combination of practical experience and intellectual challenge for the mentee through the cooperation of the school, family, and mentor.
- The benefits of a mentor relationship for a student are both personal and academic. The relationship encourages students to pursue their interests at advanced levels.
- Mentoring programs expand the options available for students by utilizing community resource people to share content beyond the conventional classroom curriculum.
- In a 22-year study of 212 young adults, E. Paul Torrance found that those who worked with mentors completed a larger number of years of education and earned more adult creative achievements than peers who did not have mentors.

References

Reilly, J. M. (1992). *Mentorship: The essential guide for schools and business*. Dayton, OH: Ohio Psychology Press.

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