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Mentorship of Today's Special Educators

I appreciate the support and guidance of my mentor. Being in special education, my mentor has helped me greatly understand the IEP process and helped me understand how to fill out forms, follow timelines, etc. My mentor has helped me develop lessons and activities that support the needs of my students. The most valuable component of the [induction program] is having a mentor who understands the special education field.

—Elementary special education teacher of a multigrade, multilingual, cross-category, self-contained classroom

Chapter 1 Topics, Activities, and Tools

- Mentor's Work
- The Role of the Mentor
- Three Categories of Mentor Assistance
- Activity 1.1. Teacher's Experiences With Mentors

Mentoring conveys preservice learning, experience, and practice to a deeper and more critical level of understanding for special educators. Mentoring facilitates the stages of learning from a conscious incompetence level to a conscious competence level (Revenaugh, 2009). It fosters the special educator's level of understanding from a level of interpretation to and through levels of application, perspective, and empathy. Enhancement of understanding can be accomplished through the mentor's expert modeling and questioning techniques, as well as by directly addressing issues. This influential impact that mentoring has on the teacher's professional development emphasizes the need for skillful mentoring, particularly for special educators working with students in today's schools. In addition to assisting special educators in the rigorous induction process of teaching, assessment, and classroom management, mentoring serves as a bridge for teachers in working with the growing numbers of diverse learners in special education programs across the nation.

The Role of the Mentor With Special Educators

Through reflective questioning, mentors guide special education teachers to resolve implications of their own biases and to focus on student achievement. The instructional, facilitative, and collaborative opportunities, as well as the resources that a mentor is able to provide, help in developing linkage between the teacher's background experiences and that of the students he or she teaches. A watchful eye and ear of a skillful mentor observe and listen for teacher attention, teacher tone, student talk, and student participation. A mentor focuses on instructional strategies and teaching methods that are connected to the experiences and prior knowledge of students and then uses entry points with the teacher to develop thoughtful processes, helping to ensure that learning is equitable for all.

Mentors are an asset in providing sources and support to help teachers develop community resources that aid them in connecting to and learning about the cultures of the school and surrounding community. Because special education teachers rely heavily on parent input as team members for their children's Individual Education Programs (IEPs), credible community resources provide access to information that assists teachers in communicating with families and facilitating family involvement. As teachers plan for conferences, IEP meetings, transition meetings, and ongoing communication, reliable community resources are invaluable.

When special education teachers have made reference to their mentors, descriptors such as the following have been mentioned: *empowering, inspiring, validating, knowledgeable, understanding, and supportive*. Ultimately, the mentor's role is to facilitate the attainment of professional teaching standards. The path for each teacher is varied and dependent on copious factors; therefore, the mentor needs to be flexible and fulfill numerous roles. Functions mentors perform include the following:

- Making suggestions
- Advising
- Helping
- Informing
- Consoling
- Listening
- Sharing awareness
- Processing
- Collaborating
- Communicating
- Modeling
- Observing
- Advocating
- Leading
- Facilitating

This work is accomplished in varying formats, resulting in a multifaceted role for the mentor. These roles fall into three general categories: students, curriculum, and professional duties. Figure 1.1 provides examples of situations in the different categories.

Figure 1.1 The Multifaceted Mentor's Role: Students, Curriculum, and Professional Duties

<i>Students</i>	<i>Curriculum</i>	<i>Professional Duties</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observe student behavior with specific focus and provide teacher with recorded data • Collaboratively analyze student work • Administer tests • Provide a variety of assessment tools • Help design rubrics for behavior and content areas • Help develop student goals based on assessment results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboratively plan lessons and units of study based on grade level and English Learner (EL) standards • Find and provide content resources • Observe instruction and facilitate reflection and determination of next steps • Provide information on differentiating instruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate communication between teacher and administration, parents, paraprofessionals, and specialists • Facilitate self-assessment and goal setting based on teaching standards • Advocate for teacher with administrators • Help plan and organize for parent communication • Assist in developing system and schedule for communicating and

(Continued)

Figure 1.1 (Continued)

<i>Students</i>	<i>Curriculum</i>	<i>Professional Duties</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help develop student behavior plans • Help in developing classroom management system • Assist in developing classroom student profile • Help with understanding of characteristics of categories of disabilities • Share ideas for instructional strategies, accommodations, and modifications to meet student needs • Assist in developing a student schedule for mainstreaming into general education classrooms • Help design, organize, and set up classroom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model lesson that includes conferencing before and after • Organize classroom visitations to veteran teacher classrooms • Facilitate contacts between teachers at different sites for joint activities • Help prioritize and determine ordering budgeted materials • Brainstorm ways to communicate with general education classroom teachers and develop a communication system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • planning with paraprofessional(s) • Participate in events such as transition meetings, IEP meetings, parent conferences, and schoolwide events • Assist in determining school and community resources • Provide organizational tools for organizing and scheduling needs of IEP timelines • Assist in writing IEP reports and completing forms • Brainstorm ways to maximize teacher time and workload by assigning tasks to paraprofessionals and possibly students or parent volunteers • Provide examples of organization, agenda, and handouts for Back-to-School events

Activity 1.1

Teachers' Experiences With Mentors

The following activity can be used to add structure to the conversation between mentors and special educators. This exercise is designed to initiate a discussion with the goal of establishing a meaningful relationship.

Write your responses to the following questions. Be prepared to share your reflections with your mentor at the next meeting.

1. What have been your experiences with mentors?
2. What are the qualities of your mentors that have been the most beneficial to your growth and development?
3. What are the qualities of your mentors that have been the least beneficial to your growth and development?

Effective mentorship relationships should include the following components:

1. Ongoing formal (structured) and informal (naturally occurring) mentorship opportunities
2. Careful screenings of assigned mentors for compatibility with special educators; variables such as background experiences, gender, race, language, and family status should be taken into consideration

Summary

As a mentor listens to the special education teacher's reflections, he or she becomes aware of the individuality of the teacher, understands when the teacher is stuck, and moves toward communication to assist the special educator in viewing his or her practice from a different perspective. In addition to being flexible, mentors need a "repertoire of supports" in order to change hats, moving fluidly from a consulting role to an instructional role, a collaborative role, or a facilitative role (Achinstein & Athanases, 2005). This continuum of support opens doors of opportunities for the mentor to do more than transmit knowledge. In response to our culturally rich and linguistically diverse classrooms, mentors are facilitators of knowledge transformation (Achinstein & Athanases, 2005). This practice can support special educators in the development of their roles as transformative change agents in the culture of the school and community as well as their lives as educators. The teachers grow in their accomplishments and become leaders as their relationships develop, just as the model of the mentor-teacher relationship develops through the mentor's supportive and skillful work.

References

- Achinstein, B., & Athanases, S. Z. (2005). Focusing new teachers on diversity and equity: Toward a knowledge base for mentors. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 21*, 843-862.
- Revenaugh, K. (2009). Learning how to learn: Step-by-step stages. *Fast Track Tools*. Retrieved August 11, 2011, from <http://www.fasttracktools.com/pdf/Learning%20How%20To%20Learn%20Step-by-Step%20Stages.pdf>