

# **A University and Community-Based Partnership: After-School Mentoring for Low-Income Youth**

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## **Abstract**

This article describes a university and community-based partnership that provides after-school mentoring for low-income youth participating in neighborhood park programs. Mentors are students enrolled in ED 310 Social Foundations of Education, a junior-level teacher education course at Minnesota State University, Moorhead. The mentees are youth ages 9 to 13 years who participate in after-school programs sponsored by a local non-profit agency and city recreation and police departments. Three important outcomes for the ED 310 students include understanding how the contextual variables of race, socioeconomic class, and opportunity can affect youth's decision-making and development; learning how to plan and implement a community-based service project; and realizing the difference an adult can make in the lives of youth. The youth participating in the program learn that their community cares for and values them, that they can enjoy participating in an after-school program with university students, and that they can make contributions to the community. The community benefits greatly from having its youth served through the mentoring program. Through these efforts the community stakeholders learn that the university can be a trusted and committed partner when it comes to meeting the needs of the local community.

Key words: mentoring, community-based programs, university partnerships, low-income youth, teacher education, risk and protective factors, service learning, collaboration.

## Introduction

I thought that the carnival was a great activity for the mentor program. My group of girls had a lot of fun and participated in almost all of the activities. They especially enjoyed the face painting—when we, the mentors, let the mentees paint our faces! I think the greatest part of this activity was when one of the girls made the comment, “They are doing this for us?!” It really made these girls feel important and I thought that was really great.

Amber- ED 310 Student Mentor

This article describes a university and community-based mentoring project intended to provide authentic, participatory, and meaningful learning for teacher education students enrolled in ED 310 Social Foundations of Education and supply the surrounding community (i.e., Moorhead, Minnesota, a small Mid-western city of 30,000 residents) with needed after-school mentoring services for its youth. Students enrolled in ED 310 Social Foundations of Education at Minnesota State University Moorhead (MSUM) are at the junior level in their teacher preparation program, mostly White, and from middle-class families. The youth receiving mentoring are boys and girls, ages 7 to 13 years with most in the 10 to 12 year range. About 75% of these youth are Hispanic, Native American, or African American. These youth, who typically exhibit numerous risk factors, live in one of three low-income neighborhood areas in the city and regularly spend after-school time at a neighborhood park site. Each semester ED 310 students are matched with youth who either self-select or are selected by park site leaders to participate in the mentoring project. Mentors are encouraged to meet and get to know their mentee’s family so they can better understand this individual in the context of the community in which he or she lives.

Mentors and mentees spend 1-2 hours together per week over the course of a 15-week semester. However, some mentors choose to spend additional time during the semester and some continue mentoring after their ED 310 semester is completed. To ease the discomfort associated with the ending of mentoring relationships, ED 310 students begin talking about the final mentoring meeting a few weeks prior to the last visit. This strategy has been largely effective, although sometimes separation problems do occur. As evidence that mentoring relationships are enjoyable and meaningful, many of the mentees are involved in new mentoring relationships each semester. In a survey given to the Fall 2002 mentees (n= 37) and mentors (n=37), 94% of the mentees reported being glad they had a mentor, while 90% of the mentors reported being glad they had a mentee. Obviously, both groups enjoy the mentoring relationship.

Mentoring activities take place at the park site or in the community and include

helping with homework, playing cards and board games, making sidewalk chalk art, attending university sporting events, working on art projects, playing outside, skating and sledding, touring community sites (e.g., pet shop, radio station), visiting university departments and displays (e.g., art exhibits), completing community service projects, and just talking. Most of the decisions about what to do during the mentoring time are mutually agreed upon by the mentor and mentee. However, many times mentees ask to visit the mentor's university or a place they have not been in the community (e.g., mall). Almost always these requests are honored. ED 310 students indicate that about 60% of the mentoring time is spent at the park sites.

In addition, special events are provided, including seasonal parties, campus carnivals, ice-skating, bowling, and going to movies and restaurants. As coordinator, I plan these events with help from student assistants. The mentoring project is a collaborative effort between the ED 310 class, the Moorhead Healthy Community Initiative (MHCI), a non-profit agency whose mission is to support and advocate for its community's youth through asset building, the city's recreation and police departments, community service organizations, and local businesses.

## Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework provides a theoretical basis for the after-school mentoring project. It includes the following five elements:

1. In order for learning to be rich, deep, and thoughtful it needs to be authentic, meaningful, and participatory. This is particularly true in the preparation of teachers.
2. In order for teacher education students to view diversity positively, and as result, be better prepared to teach in communities rich with diversity, they need numerous opportunities to interact with individuals whose life stories are different than theirs in terms of race, class, and opportunity (Ladson-Billings, 2001).
3. The majority of youth who are surrounded with protective factors are more resilient to the negative effects of risk factors (Benson, 1997).
4. One of the most important protective factors a youth can have is a significant relationship with a caring and concerned adult who accepts them unconditionally, thus, the emphasis on teacher education students mentoring youth (Werner, 1994).
5. Including many stakeholders in community-based initiatives positively changes the dynamics due to the diversity of thought brought to the initiatives by these individuals. This change provides for greater depth and breadth, which is needed to solve complicated and contextually rich prob-

lems (e.g., supporting and advocating for youth who experience several risk factors and few protective factors in their lives).

## **Mentoring Project Outcomes**

### **Outcomes for University Student Mentors**

For the ED 310 students participating in this project, they learn how contextual variables such as race, socioeconomic class, and opportunity affect a youth's decision-making and development. One student in particular came to some important realizations regarding his thinking about race: "I was really nervous and I know this sounds a bit naïve, but I come from a small farming community and I haven't had many experiences with black people there in my sheltered life." Although nervous, he indicated that he knew this experience would benefit him, stating, "I figured my mentoring experience would be good for me" and later in describing a football game at the park site said, "I learned that people of all ages and races could get along. I came from a very different life than these people so it was interesting for me to see." Additional evidence that many ED 310 students achieve this outcome is noted by 90% of the Fall 2002 mentors indicating that because of the mentoring project, they now better understand how race, class, and opportunity affect a youth's decision-making and development.

This project also provides the ED 310 students with opportunities to better understand how risk factors (e.g., poverty) and protective factors (e.g., success in schools) shape and surround the lives of youth. In dramatic fashion, one mentor reported, "I really don't understand how anyone could ever deny that the environment in which you grow up has a huge impact on your development. Just spending time at the trailer park site you see how abuse, neglect, oppression, and the surroundings can change how a child sees the world."

In addition, ED 310 students learn how to plan and implement a community-based project, such as the one they are participating in while enrolled in ED 310. Learning about the positive influences adults can have on youth is yet another important outcome for the teacher education students. One student reported, "I saw the importance of being there for these kids. They looked up to us and loved to imitate us." Another mentor shared this same idea: "I can't begin to tell you how much this experience has made me want to become a teacher even more. I like being a positive influence in a child's life." And yet another mentor revealed that she had learned about the positive influence an adult can have on youth, saying, "I was surprised when she came right after I called. I learned that being there for someone really does make a difference." Ninety-five percent of the Fall 2002 mentors reported learning about the positive influences adults can have because of their participation in the mentoring project.

## Outcomes for Youth Mentees

For the youth being served by this project, one of the most important outcomes is realizing that after-school time can be enjoyed with their university mentors. This is important because after school (i.e., 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.) is a time that many youth make unhealthy or dangerous decisions (Newman, Fox, Flynn, & Christenson, 2000). When asked about the mentoring program, these mentees certainly indicated that it was important to them and they enjoyed time with their mentor:

“Made me feel special when my mentor helped me with my work.”

“I really enjoyed spending time with my mentor.”

“We both love playing ultimate lightning and we were both good at basketball; it was always fun.”

“What I liked was going to the movie with my mentor.”

“My mentor made me feel special, she was really nice to be with.”

Evidence from survey responses made by the Fall 2002 mentee group reveals that many of the youth achieved this important outcome. Ninety-four percent of mentees reported feeling special when with their mentor, while 100% reported feeling better about themselves because of spending time with their mentor. Moreover, looking forward to and enjoying time with one’s mentor was indicated by 90% of the mentees.

Two additional outcomes for the mentees are they learn the community cares about and values them (90% of mentees reported achieving this outcome) and they can make real contributions to their community through service projects mutually designed by them and their mentors. One requirement of the mentoring project is to complete a service project. Some projects are completed within one episode, while other projects take two or more episodes to complete. For example, mentors and their mentees are matched with an elderly person from the community to play a game or just enjoy time together.

When asked about the importance of the mentoring project for the mentees, a neighborhood park site leader responded, “The youth gain a feeling of being important and special. They have someone to talk to who is interested in them because they thirst for attention. The mentoring program maybe the only time they get one-on-one attention.” The MHCI After-School Coordinator reinforced these conclusions: “It is important for these youth to be influenced by positive adults; many don’t receive this type of influence in their homes.... This influence is provided by the ED 310 mentors.” Halpern (1992) agrees with these ideas by suggesting that “after-school programs [have come] to be an important part of the social fabric of low-income communities” (p. 216). As part of this social fabric, after-school programs provide security, participation in organized activities, access to adult relationships, and academic tutoring. Without these supports, many youth

in low-income communities would find it even more difficult to overcome obstacles created by poverty and dysfunction. This is certainly true for many youth participating in the ED 310 after-school mentoring project. Ultimately, we hope the program provides “each individual with the care . . . that comes from belonging to a community, whether that community comes from the family, school, or after-school program” (Lagermann, 1993, p. 455).

### Outcomes for the Community

Through this mentoring project, the community at-large becomes more aware that a variety of community groups care about its youth and are willing to work together to help these youth develop positive assets in their lives. This cooperation can result in the community gaining the positive benefits of having its youth mentored. Since Moorhead began community-wide after-school programming in 1995, a 50% reduction in juvenile crime has occurred (S. Hohnadel, personal communication, September 9, 2002).

The ideas of community networking and cooperative outreach as means to resolve community-based problems are also emphasized in this program. These ideas are modeled throughout the project as evidenced by the demonstrated cooperation existing between the ED 310 students, the MHCI, city recreation and police departments, community service organizations, and local businesses. An example of this networking and cooperation is seen through the variety of funding sources contributing to the project: grants from the university and MHCI, along with donations from community service organizations and local businesses. This type of networking has been referred to as “building connections across socializing systems” (Benson, 1997, p. 113) and is reported to be a necessary and critical ingredient for creating successful community-based youth programs. Another example is the mentor training provided for the ED 310 students by the MHCI. Two more examples are the neighborhood park site buildings that are provided by the city’s recreation department, and the staff and materials that are provided by the city’s recreation and police departments and the MHCI. Through these collaborations the community stakeholders learn that the university can be a valuable, interested, and committed partner when it comes to providing for its constituents. In sum, it is hoped that these community relationships result in stronger “webs of influence” (Price, Cioci, Penner, & Trautlein, 1993) for the youth participating in the mentoring project. Strong webs of influence, that is, consistent values and abundant connections between family, school, and community, are thought to result in young people who demonstrate healthy development and positive decision-making.

The MHCI After-School Coordinator revealed the power of these community relationships when she indicated that these relationships “set an example for the

community to see how, when the community works together, positive outcomes result.” She went on to state how important it is “to make the community aware that several community groups who care about kids are willing to work together to help them develop positive assets in their lives.”

### Challenges to Achieving These Outcomes

Although the mentoring project is usually successful in achieving the previously identified outcomes, challenges do exist that need monitoring and attention. One challenge that typically occurs in about 1 out of 30 mentoring relationships is a personality conflict. If the mentor and mentee cannot resolve the conflict with help from the park site leader and myself, a reassignment is made. Facilitating the service project also presents challenges in scheduling and in matching interest with community need. Two additional challenges that disrupt mentoring relationships are the high mobility rates of some of the youth, and ED 310 students who drop the course after mentoring assignments are made. Another ongoing challenge is maintaining communication between all those involved in the mentoring project: ED 310 students, youth and their parents/guardians, myself, park site leaders, and all the other community stakeholders. Being aware of these challenges is a good first step in working to resolve them. Trust, understanding, and thorough planning are also essential ingredients for helping relationships work smoothly.

### Best Practices for Partnerships

The ED 310 mentoring project models “best practices” in implementing and sustaining community-based partnerships. Three elements of this “best practice” are service learning, collaboration with community partners, and viewing youth as multi-dimensional.

#### Best Practice: Service Learning

Service learning is a type of participatory pedagogy emphasizing student learning of specific course goals through solving community-based problems. Typically, students work together in small groups and reflect upon what they learned and what was accomplished. Jacoby (1996), writing in *Service-learning in Higher Education*, defined service learning as a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address *human and community needs* together with structured opportunities *intentionally designed* to promote student learning and development. *Reflection* [italics added] and reciprocity are key concepts in service learning (p. 5).



The mentoring project satisfies Jacoby's definition of service learning because it is a participatory and hands-on type of learning that attempts to meet existing *human and community needs*, that is, youth lacking meaningful relationships with adults. In the Moorhead community in 2002, 86 youth needed mentors, 66 of which were males, and at the county level, the majority of youth who needed a mentor waited more than a year for one (N. Weinkauff, personal communication, February 6, 2002). Obviously, these numbers reflect a local unmet need. The scope of the mentoring program is very *intentional* as ED310 students are required to complete a minimum of 15 mentoring hours and a community-service project over a 15-week semester.

*Reflection* is an important component of the mentoring program. The benefits of participating in any experience, no matter how important and appropriate, are greatly minimized without thoughtful analysis of the experience. While participating in the mentoring project, students keep a reflective journal that is regularly used for class discussions. Students make an entry each time they complete a mentoring session. Each entry is dated, includes a description of mentoring activities and what was learned as a result of this participation, and any question or musing that emerged from this participation. In-class discussions require students to reflect on how their mentee's life stories are similar and/or different from their own life stories and how they think the mentoring work relates to their soon-to-be lives as teachers or to the broader socio-political context. An entry from one of the ED 310 student's journal reveals some understanding of different life stories:

I met Mary and she was talking about how she hadn't been able to get her math homework done. I asked her why, and she said it was because she didn't have a ruler. When I think back on it, I probably had three rulers in my house alone and one in my desk at school. Again I was struck with the differences in how Mary is growing up in relation to how I grew up. . . . I was very surprised by how important extended family was to Mary's life. My extended family was not as close as Mary and her family. Mary would pick on me; I didn't realize she was paying close attention to how I would react, then imitate me perfectly. She was treating me like she treated her sister.

Another student also came to some new understandings about herself through the mentoring program: "I knew they didn't have much money but I never expected it to be this bad. I immediately thought about how spoiled I have been throughout my life."

At the end of the mentoring experience, students write about which course goals they achieved through this experience and an explanation of how these goals were achieved. Following this description and explanation, students create a poem or a piece of art that expresses their thoughts and feelings about the experience. For example, some thoughts and feelings could include what they learned that was



important, how they changed, a time they will never forget, or how the experience was not what they thought it would be or wanted it to be.

Service learning in teacher education holds great promise for better preparing education majors for their upcoming lives as K-12 teachers (Myers & Pickeral, 1997). It is pedagogy that “has particular promise in preparing future teachers to motivate and educate K-12 students, because it incorporates authentic [learning]” (p.33). In addition, service learning provides meaningful experiences to learn more about youth and their development, community organizations, change theory, and reflective analysis. Cochran-Smith (1995) added to these outcomes by stating that service learning in teacher education also provides opportunities for students to question their preconceived notions about individuals whose life stories have been affected by negative responses to their racial, cultural, and/or language diversity.

When teacher education students participate in meaningful service learning experiences, the potential for them to become more humane decision makers increases, through this self-directed way of learning. Last but not least, service learning in teacher education encourages students to think bigger about their own life and role in the community. This civic learning through social engagement has great potential to positively change these young adult’s attitudes toward future service efforts in the communities in which they will live and teach (Putnam, 1999). The many benefits of service learning in teacher education are demonstrated in this ED 310 student’s final journal entry:

I was sad to say good-bye. They are great young people and I realize now that I look at and perceive kids I do not know differently because of this experience. Around campus you hear bad things about Romkey Park and people sometimes glare at kids who come on campus to skateboard or bike. I would catch myself thinking, “what are those kids doing, and what are they up to?” And now I catch myself looking to see if I know any of these kids. I am really looking forward to teaching someday so I can know more kids, really know them. I think that will be a great thing.

### **Best Practice: Collaboration with Community Partners**

Although the mantra “it takes a village” has been overused when it comes to talking about how to make positive change for youth, without shared responsibility (Benson, 1997) among key community partners very little will change in the lives of young people, and as a result complex problems will go unresolved. The reason for this conclusion is that the contextual nature of a youth’s life shapes and surrounds his or her social environment, decision-making, and development.

Ultimately, what is needed is development of a positive community climate. This climate was aptly described by Villani (1999):

[it] means human interactions, the embracing of quality and an unapologetic love of humanity. Community climate means cohesiveness and interdependence. It is the sense of being part of a team, working for the common good, achieving group goals, and fostering interdependent relationships (p. 104).

A complex problem for the Moorhead community to resolve through this type of positive community climate is encouraging its youth to make healthy lifestyle decisions and then supporting them in their efforts to make these kinds of decisions. In a recent survey, a large percentage of Moorhead youth reported feelings of isolation, not being connected to adults in significant ways, and not having enough opportunities for after-school program participation (Hatfield, 2000). In an attempt to help resolve these problems, the after-school mentoring program was created. The ED 310 mentoring program is a working example of what happens when community stakeholders work together to try and solve a community problem. Over the past 2.5 years, we have provided over 3000 hours of mentoring to over 300 Moorhead youth. Evidence that these efforts have made a difference in the lives of Moorhead youth and ED 310 students are seen in the following comments:

A friend of mine asked my mentee if he was staying out of trouble and my mentee said, "I am not going to get into trouble anymore because Dustin and I talked about getting in trouble." That made me (i.e., Dustin) feel good.

Tonight had to have been the highlight of my mentoring! When I arrived I was a few minutes late and was attacked by Cindy. She missed me; she wanted to spend time with me; she brought stuff for us to do.

She taught me some Spanish words that I didn't know and I tried to talk Spanish to her. We laughed quite a bit because I was really bad. We decided that the next time I came we would write a story in Spanish and then draw pictures. We laminated the book and made two copies, one for each of us. I am so happy for this opportunity to be a mentor. This has given me a different perspective on my life.

These words speak to the importance the ED 310 students attach to their work as mentors—they realize they have something important to offer. Not only do the ED 310 students realize the importance of their work, but also they enjoy it. This conclusion is supported by results from a survey given to the Fall 2002 mentoring group:

85% reported looking forward to seeing their mentee each week.

90% reported enjoying spending time with their mentee.

95% reported feeling better about themselves because of their mentoring work.

### Best Practice: Viewing Youth as Multi-dimensional

It is difficult to make meaningful and lasting contributions to youth if the adults interacting with them view them as one-dimensional. The ED 310 students are regularly challenged to answer the question, “Who is my mentee?” They struggle in trying to learn as much as possible about their mentee, their family, and the context that surrounds and shapes their lives. One day in our ED 310 class, a student told the story of sitting in the kitchen of his mentee’s family and listening to the father, through a translation by the son, tell about how members of his ethnic group were murdered by the ruling government of their home country. Obviously the pain and suffering of this story has much to do with this family struggling to develop trust and to feel welcome in a new home. This type of learning is invaluable to those preparing to teach.

One way to have teacher education students learn about the context that shapes and surrounds youth is through studying risk and protective factors. Risk factors are those behaviors and events that interfere with normal development and make healthy and positive decision-making difficult, while protective factors are those behaviors and events that provide some resiliency, that is, promote normal development and positive decision making to the negative effects of risk factors. Some major risk factors include the oppressive reaction of the dominant culture to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class; drug and alcohol use; spending large amounts of time alone; overexposure to television; early-age sexual intercourse; easy access to weapons and weapon-related violence; problems with schoolwork; depression; and gambling. Some major protective factors include academic success, positive parent-family relationships, demonstrating positive values (e.g., equality and social justice), being engaged in one’s community (e.g., church attendance), resisting danger, participating in after-school programs, and living in a community that values its youth (Benson, 1997; Benson, Galbraith, & Espeland, 1998; Blum, Beuhring, & Rinehart, 2000). It has been documented that resilient youth (i.e., those with a larger number of protective factors than risk factors) tend to be more successful in school, get along better with peers, develop stronger self-concepts, and better establish internal loci of control than less-resilient youth (Werner, 1994).

When mentors understand that a majority of risk factors come from one’s social environment and are not a choice made by the individual (e.g., a child cannot choose the family she is born into), they begin to understand the context that can shape and surround an individual’s life. The following journal entries demonstrate the mentor’s understanding for risk factors present in the lives of the youth they mentored and how this understanding better prepares them for a teaching position in the near future:

I hung out with the kids who were there. It’s really sad how these kids don’t

even have hope for tomorrow. The comments they made, made me cry. Most of them can't even think past this trailer park, they talk about how they'll always be here and how life is just set for them.

I really got a bird's eye view of how she and her family lives, the problems they have and obstacles that are sometimes in their way. I will never forget my mentee.

Because of this mentoring work, I can now put meaning to the class learning. This experience opened my eyes to a world that I knew existed, but never directly dealt with—I know I can now.

I feel better prepared to understand these problems and issues I will be dealing with when I am teaching. I am going to have to try and find creative ways to try and overcome them.

I can't begin to tell you how much this experience has made me want to become a teacher even more. I like being a positive influence in a child's life.

These kinds of powerful conclusions are generally not made by teacher education students who stay inside college classrooms for instruction delivered by their professors. Being part of the community and personally and intimately experiencing ideas talked about on campus changes the way one thinks about what he or she is learning. When the university and the community become one, learning becomes more meaningful, engaging, and personalized, because student thinking is more complex, contextual, deep, and rich.

## Conclusion

If ED 310 students are encouraged to think about how, as teachers and community members, they can be actively engaged in providing protective factors for their students and the community's youth, they may begin to view youth as multi-dimensional persons with an array of needs, interests, and talents. If ED 310 students can learn to view their soon-to-be K-12 students as multi-dimensional, not defined solely by any single characteristic (e.g., socioeconomic class), their instructional decision-making may become humanitarian and holistic as they attempt to meet more needs of more students. This mentoring program provides ED 310 students with opportunities to develop these dispositions and skills within the context of our local community.

If teacher educators are going to prepare their students to become effective and

humane teachers, they need to provide opportunities for them to not only learn important content, but also to connect this content to authentic learning in the community. We need to challenge teacher education students to think about how they have been socialized to think about teaching and learning, community, diversity, and the power context has on the lives of K-12 students and their families. We need to take the next step and help our teacher education students to become beginning teachers who teach for social justice and positive community change. Bill Ayers (1998) captures this kind of teaching through these words:

Teaching for social justice demands a dialectical stance: [with] one eye firmly fixed on the students—who are they? What are their hopes, dreams and aspirations? Their passions and commitments? What skills, abilities, and capacities does each one bring to the classroom?—and the other eye looking unblinkingly at the concentric circles of context—historical flow, cultural surround, economic reality.... And so the fundamental message for the teacher of social justice is: You can change the world (p. xvii).

If we can prepare teachers who work towards achieving this goal, maybe we can achieve Dewey's (1916) dream of developing thoughtful citizens who actively participate in democratic communities for the betterment of all.

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