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A Mentoring Network for Novice and Experienced Music Teachers: Concept, Design, Outcomes, and Recommendations

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Mentoring has traditionally been defined as a one-to-one relationship through which an experienced teacher guides and supports a novice teacher (Smith, 2005; Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007). However, mentoring is complex (van Emmerick, 2004), and the traditional mentor-mentee relationship can be challenging. Mentors may not have the time, expertise, or experience necessary to properly guide and support a mentee by themselves and requiring a mentor to take on multiple roles can be overwhelming (Turk, 1999). Further, mentees value diverse perspectives and have various needs, which one mentor cannot always fulfill (Bell-Robertson, 2014). Diverse mentoring relationships are, therefore, “indispensable” (van Emmerick, 2004, p. 578). Having a network of developmental relationships, rather than just one mentor in a one-to-one relationship, allows mentors with various experiences and expertise to take on mentoring roles and broaden the support provided to novices (Turk, 1999). Networks, which are often informal (Smith Risser, 2013), immerse teachers in a reciprocal, collaborative, synergistic, and developmental experience (Kroll, 2016).

Group Mentoring

Mentoring networks fit within the description of “group mentoring,” which researchers also have defined as co-mentoring, mentoring community, collaborative mentoring, and mentoring circles (Kroll, 2016). Others have referred to group mentoring as mentoring partners (Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007) and mentoring constellations (van Emmerick, 2004). Although associated with various scholars, several philosophical roots underly group mentoring: (a) it is rooted in co-learning, encouraging dialogue and sharing; (b) it is nonhierarchical; (c) it focuses on relationships rather than methods of mentoring; (d) it aims for an open, intentional, trusting, and reflective environment; (e) all participants, regardless of role or responsibility, are seen as valued and valuable to the mentoring experience; and (f) each member has the opportunity to

develop multiple reciprocal and mutual developmental relationships (Kroll, 2016). A mentoring network is intentionally designed, blending multiple layers and types of support with a learning community approach (Beane-Katner, 2014) and extending beyond functional, organizational, and geographic boundaries (Whiting & de Janasz, 2004) to allow a broader, more flexible support system that overcomes the limitations of the single mentor (Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007).

Turk (1999) spoke of mentoring teams in education, primarily consisting of experienced educators, for which a novice is immersed in a supportive environment rather than just a one-on-one relationship. This is mutually beneficial. Collaborative relationships form as the novice educator receives support from multiple people, the mentors receive support from one another, and all team members have opportunities to professionally develop.

Virtual/Online Mentoring

Virtual mentoring may provide increased opportunities for interactions with other music teachers, valuable professional development opportunities for experienced teachers whose geographic location makes face-to-face mentoring difficult, and reduced feelings of isolation (Reese, 2016). Macià and García (2016) examined literature on teachers' informal participation in online networks and communities (they used these terms interchangeably), and its effects on enriching professional development. Network participation was fostered as teachers shared experiences, knowledge, and materials, while also providing emotional support. Dialogue established in networks gives teachers new insights on their practice. Participation can promote teachers' reflective practice and inquiry into new methods and resources. Macià and Garcia (2016) noted the value of novice and experienced teacher exchanges, stating "the asynchronous nature of online communities and networks, the shared knowledge and the immediacy of

responses make these environments a suitable space for enhancing teacher professional development” (p. 301).

Klecka et al. (2004) found electronic mentoring programs supported both novice and experienced teachers. Novice teachers felt safe speaking openly and sharing questions and concerns with teachers outside their own districts knowing they were somewhat anonymous. Mentors felt their experience was valued and found advice from different perspectives helpful, stating they were learning and reflecting on their own teaching more than they expected. Gareis and Nussbaum-Beach (2008) found that an asynchronous online mentoring community moved beyond a conventional mentor-to-novice exchange to more of a community or network of learners where participants engaged with each other to identify and improve in specific areas of professional practice. They concluded that this forum served as both a complement and an alternative to conventional one-to-one mentoring, stating when designed as a group forum with multiple new and veteran teachers participating, online mentoring “holds considerable promise as a means of addressing the needs of novice teachers, reducing attrition, and improving teacher effectiveness” (p. 232).

Bell-Robertson (2014) created an online community specifically for novice music teachers. The teachers found that sharing experiences helped them feel emotionally supported and less alone. This community not only provided them an outlet to vent, but also promoted a sense of altruism among teachers as they supported each other. Later, Bell-Robertson (2015) noted benefits of teachers engaging in virtual communications with peers and accessing subject-specific online support systems. Collegial discussion groups can have positive effects on novice music teachers’ learning, reflection, development, and connection. They stated the need for creating online communities to support novice music teachers, which could “provide music

teachers with opportunities for peer interactions and meaningful professional development that they may not have otherwise had” (p. 33), and suggested a virtual resource such as an online forum centered on music education.

We wanted to expand mentoring beyond a one-to-one relationship to a more collaborative approach (Weimer, 2017). Therefore, we created a year-long network of experienced and novice music educators as a source of mentoring for novice teachers and professional development for all. The purpose of this article is to describe the structure and content of this network, and outcomes and recommendations based on participating teachers’ perspectives and experiences. We aim to provide insight on how creating mentoring networks to reconceptualize the mentoring experience from a one-to-one relationship to a more collaborative and community-based approach may impact mentors and mentees, and how music teacher educators may facilitate these networks. This was not an attempt to entirely replace one-to-one mentoring, rather an opportunity to offer a different approach to mentoring novice music teachers.

Network Concept and Design

Goals for the Network

We envisioned an online network that would be professionally beneficial to novice and experienced teachers; a space to connect and learn. Ajero (2007) suggested that university faculty support online mentoring for music teachers by helping to make experienced teachers in various music content areas available to small groups of novices. Carter and Francis (2001) suggested providing opportunities for mentors to meet and engage in professional dialogue to develop new understandings about teaching and learning. We aimed to do both by (a) providing opportunities for novice music teachers to be mentored by experienced music teachers while interacting and learning from each other and (b) allowing experienced teachers to collaborate

with each other to improve their mentoring skills and gain valuable professional development from other network participants. We wanted to encourage informal connections (Carter & Francis, 2001) and avoid specific mentor-mentee matching and requiring specific times for and types of mentor-mentee interactions. Therefore, we did not specifically design this network as a mentoring program, although we did refer to mentoring program practices described in the literature (Gareis & Nussbaum-Beach, 2008; Klecka et al., 2004; Koerner et al., 2016; Macià & García, 2016) when designing it.

We aimed for this network to extend beyond geographic locations (Whiting & de Janasz, 2004); alleviate issues such as time, proximity, travel, and subject-specific matching (Ajero, 2007; Weimer, 2017); and provide an inclusive, informal, collaborative setting where experienced and novice teachers interacted (Bernard et al., 2018). As Gareis and Nussbaum-Beach (2008), Klecka et al. (2004), and Macià and García (2016) described, we wanted the space to be encouraging and open; provide opportunities for novice and experienced music teachers to connect with one another; prompt communication, insight, and reflection; and provide emotional support. Our intention was to include experienced educators in the same teaching content areas (i.e., general music, band, chorus, orchestra) and school district settings (i.e., rural, suburban, urban) as novices (Carter & Francis, 2001; Portner, 2001; Smith, 2003). We also wanted it to be voluntary; as Koerner et al. (2016) stated, success is likely when people are motivated to help one another.

Participants

To recruit network participants, we emailed all recent music education graduates of two collegiate institutions in an upper Midwest state prior to the start of network activities. After receiving confirmation of interest in network participation, we then emailed experienced music

teachers in that state who taught in similar school district settings (urban, suburban, and rural), similar grade levels (elementary, middle, and high school), and music teaching areas (general music, choral, and instrumental). Some of those experienced music teachers served as supervising practitioners of student teachers of the 2nd author, while others were professional acquaintances who had previously voiced an interest in this type of endeavor. We informed each participant via email of the network's concept, design, and purpose.

Ten teachers originally agreed to participate, and with those 10 we did have an experienced teacher to match each novice's specific music content area and school district setting. However, three experienced teachers ended up not being able to participate due to other personal and professional matters. Therefore, seven individuals participated: four experienced and three novice public school music teachers. We defined "novice" as those with 4 or less years of inservice teaching (Blair, 2008) and "experienced" as those with 5 or more years of inservice teaching. Novice educators had one to three years of inservice teaching experience, while experienced educators had five to 21 years of inservice teaching experience. Although the participants were in relatively close proximity within the state, they did not know one another prior to joining this network.

During the month of September, all network participants completed a questionnaire (please see the online supplemental file) containing open-ended items about their music program, past and current teaching responsibilities, their goals as a mentor/mentee and a learner, and the responsibilities they envisioned themselves and others enacting within the network (Weimer, 2019; Orland-Barak & Hasin, 2010). We also asked them to self-report strengths and challenges in various teaching, administrative, and organizational areas (Haack & Smith, 2000).

Network Documents and Components/Timeline of Mentoring Network

We designed the network materials to meet the goals defined above. Koerner et al. (2016) found using reference documents as conversation starters a useful aspect of Music Educator Association (MEA) mentoring programs. Therefore, we created and granted participants access to a Google Drive folder containing a “Dialogue” document, a “High Point/Low Point” spreadsheet, and an “External Dialogue” document. Network materials were intended to promote discussion and reflection on various music teaching and learning topics; the sharing of strategies, ideas, and resources; and mutual support and encouragement.

We rolled out the structure of the mentoring network in three main stages, starting in October with the “Dialogue” document, which initially served as the means for participants to introduce themselves and respond to each other’s introductions. They then used this document throughout the duration of the network to post and respond to questions, thoughts, or comments related to music teaching and learning. The dialogue document was designed to be used as needed with no requirements to check in at set times or a specific number of times. This flexibility gave participants opportunities to truly reflect on what to share, rather than focusing on a set number of responses (Coombs & Goodwin, 2013). Online interactions allowed participants to respond when it was convenient and written communication allowed each person time to think through questions and responses (Whiting & de Janasz, 2004).

After participants had opportunities to engage with one another using the Dialogue document, we encouraged them to chat one-on-one, particularly if one had questions about a specific area of expertise for another. For this, we included an “External Dialogue” document as a place to record email exchanges, phone conversations, or face-to-face meetings either online or in person. To keep from intruding on their conversation, we requested just the time spent and the

topic (e.g., a 35-minute phone call discussing assessment of middle school string students) rather than documentation of their specific conversation.

Maintaining open lines of communication and dialogue in mentoring is important, and benefits both mentors and mentees by conveying intentionality, availability, and approachability (Coombs & Goodwin, 2013). Weimer (2019) suggested regular check-ins where mentors and mentees share classroom happenings and successes and challenges, either in person or via a shared online space. Online documents could serve as a space to share thoughts, ideas, and questions.

The “High Point/Low Point” spreadsheet, suggested by Haack and Smith (2000), was distributed in October, shortly after the “Dialogue” document. It was designed to be used weekly to allow participants to reflect and comment on their own teaching and respond to each other’s entries. Participants would state one “high” and one “low” point of the week: something going well and something challenging. We provided space on the spreadsheet for participants to comment, including sharing ideas for improving situations and encouraging words of support. Sharing high and low points helped participants focus on positive aspects of their work and helped novice teachers see that even the most experienced teachers still have challenges (Weimer, 2019).

Following our first face-to-face group discussion we created a new online resource folder, “Discussion Topics,” based on participants suggesting we provide additional interaction opportunities. Every three to four weeks from January to June, we added a new document, each with a specific topic and related prompt focused on various music education matters: post-concert/informance activities, performance anxiety/wellness, creativity, classroom management, music literacy, curriculum and lesson planning, and working with students with special needs.

We also emailed reminders when someone did not post in the weekly “High Point/Low Point” document.

We gathered feedback on participants’ experiences in the network by having individual and group conversations. We met with each participant individually once halfway through the year, and twice as a group, once halfway through the year and once at the end. The group discussion times were also opportunities for participants to have conversations among and between themselves.

Our Role as Network Facilitators

Our purpose as network facilitators was to maintain “sustained and authentic communication” (Murphy et al., 2005, p. 345). We aimed to provide a space for participants to have open conversations and honored their expertise by allowing them to take the lead on discussion and choosing how to interact with one another. Therefore, we purposefully refrained from posting in the documents or commenting on posts. Additionally, we did not require participants to have face-to-face communication, observe one another, or share materials unless they chose to. While they did share materials with each other, no participants had face-to-face communications or observed one another.

Outcomes

Content of Document Postings and Responses

Participants’ posts and responses on the “Dialogue” document encompassed a wide range of topics, including vocal health, teaching methodologies and processes, educational psychology theories, books and podcasts applicable to teaching practices, composition in the music classroom, integrating solfege in a general music class, and adaptive ideas for teaching music using the Orff approach. The “Discussion Topics” folder included sharing elementary lesson

ideas, composing at the secondary level, utilizing music technology, programming a guest artist/performer series, and post-concert/informance activities.

Participants' posts on the "High Point/Low Point" spreadsheet included rewarding teaching moments, student successes, and positive assessment outcomes, while their "Low Point" entries included struggles with individual students or entire classes, lack of student engagement, and fatigue. Some asked for suggestions on how to deal with particularly challenging students and situations. Responses consisted of empathetic feedback, as well as teaching strategy and resource suggestions.

Opportunities for Reflection

The mentoring network was of assistance to participants as it provided them a supportive space that facilitated connection and reflection, all of which are important traits for a virtual discussion group (Bell-Robertson, 2015; Gareis & Nussbaum-Beach, 2008; Klecka et al., 2004; Macià & García, 2016). Both experienced and novice educators stated that participation in the mentoring network provided the impetus for reflection on their work and reinforced the importance of reflection as a part of the teaching process. Novice educators said the network gave them opportunities to reflect on planning and teaching, both short- and long-term, which imparted benefits such as self-regulation and stress reduction:

It's [participation in the network] a good reminder to reflect. I enjoy having those topics to [think] "Oh yeah, *that's* what I am doing in this area." It was a nice reflection tool, like, "Okay, how did this week go and what's next week gonna look like" type of deal (novice high school strings teacher).

[The high/low point for a week] was more of an "after the fact" that was helpful. I wasn't really thinking about it when I wrote [in the document]. Later on, it was kind of nice to

think about my weeks...I guess [the reflection] just kind of made it seem more manageable (novice elementary general music teacher).

One experienced educator with an intense daily teaching schedule believed that interaction with the network provided motivation for reflection and reinforced the belief that consistent reflection can improve practice:

I did this in the hopes that it would force me to sit down and do the self-reflection that I've wanted to do for some time, to sit down and notice patterns throughout a year, because that does make you a better teacher. I don't feel like it's an extra thing on my plate. I feel like it's the kick in the pants to do what I'm supposed to do (experienced elementary general music teacher).

Benefits of Sharing Experiences

Novice educators looking for advice on classroom challenges expressed relief when the experienced educators empathized with them and shared stories of their current struggles and challenges. Two novice educators found this meaningful, reassuring, and validating:

It's the perfectionist in me who wants to be the master teacher. When I'm so focused on, "Oh man, that was a horrible lesson," it's hard to remember, "Mister 10-years-of-teaching-experience also didn't have a very good week." You've just got to be like, "Oh, I'm not alone! Breathe!" It's just telling and reminding myself that (novice middle general music and high school strings teacher).

It's nice seeing that other teachers are doing the same types of things. Like, with improvisation, it seemed like lots of people were excited about that, too. [The network] is a nice reflection tool and a nice validation tool. That we are in the same boat (novice elementary general music teacher).

Recommendations for Mentoring Networks

Based on conversations with participants, we provide recommendations for activities to consider including when starting a mentoring network: real-time activities via videoconferencing platforms; professional development sessions for mentor development; and active facilitation through reminder emails and prompts to generate discussion.

Program Commencement Activities

Both experienced and novice educators noted that engaging in the network was a low priority and believed that participation could have been a higher priority if the network's first activity included face-to-face synchronous interaction and opportunities for relationship building:

It's that personal relationship piece that provides you with the impetus to respond. "I care for you as a person so I want to help you in your teaching," as opposed to, "I don't really know you that well and I'm happy to help, but I don't necessarily feel the need to go out of my way to do it at this time." It's all based on relationships, just like teaching (experienced elementary general music teacher).

There's something about putting it out there for strangers versus putting it out there for people you've met [face-to-face], and who, by meeting, are committed to spending the year together. Because you just made that commitment meeting face-to-face, however informal it is, you are more likely to be involved (experienced elementary general music teacher).

If we spend all this time building a document with the intention that people will read it to get meaningful information, how is that document any different from the number of books that have been written about teaching music? I feel like it's the personal

relationship that will make me want to open up that document and really know what [a network participant] said about this (experienced elementary band and strings teacher).

These three experienced educators noted the importance of building community and investing time in relationships early on to create a greater sense of investment and motivation to assist each other in spite of time-consuming occupational obligations. Researchers have suggested program facilitators create opportunities for social engagements and interactions to help foster a feeling of community amongst participants (Baumgartner, 2020; Conway, 2003).

Synchronous Activities via Videoconferencing Platforms

To assist with creating a sense of commitment and community with participants, three experienced educators suggested using videoconferencing platforms for real-time discussions and observations:

When you've got a busy calendar, having some sort of a set mandated [consistent meeting time]. Not saying that you need to force people into a mentorship situation, but...something that you plug into your calendar. Being there is the best, but I could throw up an iPad in the back of my room and ask somebody to watch during their prep in real time. You can read cues and...have more of a conversation (experienced elementary general music teacher).

There's that instant feedback in that conversation. You're just like, "Oh, I have an idea." I don't know if this is a deterrent, but taking the time to type it and make sure it looks right and doesn't have any spelling errors (experienced elementary general music teacher).

When you write it down, it's like, "Oh, I'm not going to say anything unless someone asks." It feels more permanent when you write it (experienced elementary band and strings teacher).

When used at consistent prearranged times to have synchronous conversations (albeit remotely) that feel more "real" and simulate face-to-face in-person discussions (Reese, 2016), videoconferencing platforms can encourage participants to spontaneously share additional information and ideas, and allow them to "read" body language that can be impossible to discern through a perceived "permanence" of the text medium.

Additionally, due to distance from other participants in the network, one novice educator used Google Hangout for all real-time meetings:

Just how it changed to, like, see people...seeing and meeting people makes it a little more real and makes me a little more invested in talking to those people (novice elementary general music teacher).

She found that using the videoconferencing platform assisted with creating a sense of connection and investment with other participants. Using such communication vehicles can help build rapport and connection with others, while seeing each other's body language promotes a natural sense of conversation (Lo Iacono et al., 2016).

Mentor Preparation and Professional Development Activities

Although agreeing to participate in a mentoring network free of exclusive mentor-mentee assignments, two experienced educators still expected that they would be "assigned" a mentee to support, demonstrating their acceptance of the traditional mentoring paradigm (Smith, 2005; Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007) with its exclusive one-on-one mentor-mentee assignments and "specialized" mentoring based on areas of experience and expertise. They stated:

Being like, “Okay...this is your person. Here are your email [addresses], talk back and forth,” or like “Here’s your document so you can go back-and-forth so that you can still see it.” Making it more one-on-one, or two on a smaller group...have it be more specialist related (experienced elementary general music teacher).

You have a group of people who have said, “I’m new, I need help. I actively want to ask people for help.” And then, I thought, “Oh, I’m going to be one of those where people reach out and ask me for help.” I ranked what I feel confident on, so if some need help in this area, “I’ll reach out to [participant] because they said they feel really confident in this.” I could offer advice (experienced elementary band and strings teacher).

To help educators prepare for their roles as mentors and for what could be a change in their perceptions of the mentoring paradigm, facilitators could lead mentor preparation sessions prior to the commencement of a mentoring network program, similar to other mentoring initiatives (e.g., Berg & Conway, 2017; Berg & Rickels, 2018). For example, preparation sessions might include discussions of multiple types of mentoring programs and means of interaction (e.g., exclusive mentor-mentee pairing, mentoring network, synchronous face-to-face, synchronous videoconferencing, asynchronous, etc.) and how they can complement each other. In addition, such sessions could be used to introduce adult learning principles and novice teacher development strategies that promote reflective skills and a willingness to respond to critiques. The use of digital mentoring could be particularly beneficial for recent retirees, who may prefer synchronous face-to-face observation and discussion or are unaware of the potential advantages of using digital media to enhance the mentoring experience (Berg & Conway, 2017, 2020). Additionally, throughout the term of the mentoring network, facilitators could program synchronous conversations centering on mentoring practices and broader topics in education, as

well as create a document exclusively for mentors to post their thoughts and converse asynchronously.

“Active Facilitation”: Generate Discussion Prompts and Reminders

Participants suggested that we take a more active role in the mentoring network, such as emailing them with reminders to complete various tasks and generating prompts to elicit discussion:

I would love to see topics show up in kind of a different way. Like, “How can you support each other? Take a video of something that was your favorite this week or something that you worked on with your kids. Take a picture of what’s currently on your whiteboard.” I think those would spark conversation (experienced high school band teacher).

I feel like, especially if it’s online, you kind of have to tell people what to do and when. Like, “Okay, you have to answer this question by this day.” Not like something every day, but if you’re like, “Yeah, just put things whenever you want,” it’s probably going to end up at the bottom of the to-do list. “Remember you said that you would answer this by this date? These people are waiting for your answer.” That’s a big motivator (experienced elementary band and strings teacher).

Similar to suggestions offered by other mentoring program researchers (Baumgartner, 2020; Berg & Rickels, 2018; Conway & Holcomb, 2008), experienced educators suggested that network facilitators have participants respond to a prompt on a topic of interest to the group and provide an impetus for conversation, as well as provide email reminders with deadlines to help keep participants engaged.

Implications

Video and Videoconferencing in Mentoring

Two educators shared positive experiences with using videoconference technology and the benefits of “seeing” the opposite party during a standing meeting as part of maintaining the investment of the relationship that had already been established and “seeing” body language that cannot be discerned through text alone. Similar to what music education researchers have discussed regarding the use of video and videoconference platforms for preservice and inservice mentoring programs (Berg & Conway, 2017, 2020; Berg & Rickels, 2018; Reese, 2016; Vaughan Marra, 2019) and cross-institutional peer observation of preservice microteaching episodes (West & Clauhs, 2019), an additional suggestion would be to encourage participants to employ videoconference technology for meetings, connections, professional development, and remote observations, particularly for rural educators who might be the only music specialist within a large geographical area (Johnson & Stanley, 2021).

Mentoring Opportunities in Preservice Teacher Education Programs

Music teacher educators’ efforts to provide occupational socialization experiences for preservice educators during methods coursework can include participation in community and collaborative mentoring networks involving both preservice and inservice educators. Requirements for an institution’s methods course sequence can include preservice educator interaction with multiple inservice educators in an online environment with questions that connect to course concepts. In addition to receiving valuable perspectives from educators in the field, these types of interactions might shift preservice educators’ perceptions of the mentoring paradigm and how mentoring networks can complement face-to-face mentoring, as well as teach preservice educators how to interact with multiple mentors in an online environment. These experiences might create valuable and beneficial opportunities for networking and collaboration

with future colleagues, such as field experience hours, student teaching placements, and mock interview and debriefing experiences. Student teachers, in particular, can use these networks to build contacts for job placement, collect ideas for lesson plans, and gather resources for developing resilience throughout the formative years of novice teaching.

Create Relationships to Sustain Connections

In line with Murphy et al.'s (2005) definition of "facilitator," researchers should incorporate experiences that encourage participants to create and invest in personal relationships with each other within the overarching structure of the mentoring network, and thus promoting sustained and valued connections which could be beneficial for preservice educators as they transition to inservice novice educators. For example, participants appreciated how the first group meeting (a face-to-face experience) provided the opportunity to "put a face with a name" and get to know each other. As one experienced educator said, starting a mentoring network with a face-to-face experience might promote a sense of caring and provide an impetus to assist with another network member's practice, thus eliciting participation for the benefit of all network members.

Conclusion

A mentoring network may provide novice and experienced music teachers opportunities for peer interaction and collaboration, foster a sense of connection and community, and provide meaningful amounts of support. Participating in a mentoring network may lead teachers to deeper reflection and contribute to their professional development, as well as broaden their conceptions of mentoring as they experience how mentoring networks can effectively supplement one-to-one mentoring practices and serve as an additional means to receiving support in a music mentorship program. Additionally, a mentoring network facilitated by university

faculty offers music teacher educators opportunities to connect and engage with K-12 music teachers, building relationships and strengthening the music education profession overall.

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