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Co-creating a mentor academy within a school–university partnership: continuity in effective mentoring of teacher candidates, novice teachers and beyond

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigated a mentor academy that was co-created within a school–university partnership (SUP) to support continuity in high-quality mentoring for teacher candidates, student teachers, novice teachers and teachers new to the school. We explored growth in the mentors and aspects of the academy that impacted that growth.

Design/methodology/approach – This instrumental case study included eight mentors and one administrator participating in six sessions of the mentor academy during one academic year. Data included surveys, an interview, artifacts and notes. Additional survey data were gathered from teacher candidates and novice teachers who were mentees and other administrators. The academy focused on identifying the needs of mentees at different levels of experience, approaches to communication, feedback and observation and building a sustainable and life-giving mentoring program. The constant comparative method was applied within and across sources to reveal themes. Numerical data from Likert scale survey questions were cross-referenced with qualitative data.

Findings – Mentors improved their ability to build trusting relationships with mentees, provide individualized support based on mentees' developmental levels, confer and offer specific feedback. They learned to mentor for independence, and mentors grew in confidence, suggesting and enacting leadership roles.

Research limitations/implications – This study is limited to data from only one cohort. Furthermore, studying the content of mentoring sessions could provide a more nuanced understanding of mentors' growth. Therefore, future research will include analysis of mentoring sessions and mentees' goals and progress.

Originality/value – The mentor academy spanned the school–university boundary by cultivating cohesive mentoring practices, which supported the clinical preparation of teacher candidates, the development of teachers and the professional learning of mentors. The tools, procedures and network created by the mentors contributed to a self-sustaining and life-giving mentoring culture in the SUP.

Keywords Case study, Collaboration, Mentorship, Professional learning

Paper type Research paper

The first few years of teaching are especially important to teacher retention. Studies indicate that anywhere from 17% (Gray & Taie, 2015) to 40–50% (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011) of teachers leave the profession within the first five years. Teacher retention impacts both student achievement and school culture. Experts suggest that retention of new teachers is greatly

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influenced by the mentoring they receive early in their career (Gordon, 2020; Tompkins, 2023). Despite the importance of strong mentoring, most mentors for teacher candidates and new teachers have no training as mentors (Schlaack, 2023).

This project emerged from a robust partnership between South Buffalo Charter School (SBCS) and Buffalo State University that includes multiple mutually beneficial endeavors. Each year approximately 40 teacher candidates from Buffalo State are mentored at SBCS during classes in methods of teaching English language arts and student teaching. Several of these teacher candidates have become full-time teachers at SBCS, which currently employs at least 20 teachers who graduated from the university's teacher education programs over the past five years. Therefore, we co-created a mentor academy to work toward excellence in mentoring for teacher candidates, student teachers, novice teachers and teachers new to the school with the goals of increasing the success of teacher candidates and retention of new teachers (NASUP Essential 2).

During the first year, the administration invited eight mentors to participate in a series of six one-hour sessions to learn about mentoring, co-construct mentoring structures and enact and reflect upon mentoring activities. A university faculty member and teacher liaison facilitated the sessions with support and input from an administrator (NASUP Essential 8). The goal of the program was to develop mentors for teacher candidates and new teachers and develop a support network for all mentors in the building. In this way, we created a learning community with the goal of constructing contextualized knowledge of mentoring (NASUP Essential 3). This community reflected upon mentoring practices, engaged in responsive innovation and generated new knowledge that benefited multiple stakeholders (NASUP Essential 4). Through studying the mentor academy, we sought to answer the questions: What growth in mentors does a mentor academy support? What aspects of the academy were most impactful for mentors?

Literature

Student teachers credit mentors as their *most important* source of learning to teach (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014). Mentors have a strong impact on student teachers' professional dispositions and habits (Clarke *et al.*, 2014), setting the stage for success as early teachers. New teachers participating in effective mentoring programs are more likely to persist in the field (Gordon, 2020; Tompkins, 2023) and employ effective instructional practices, and their students exhibit stronger achievement (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Effective mentoring

Effective mentoring programs share several characteristics. Mentors for teacher candidates help connect learning from courses with classroom practice (Zeichner, 2010) while managing the classroom (Wilson, 2013), learning workplace norms and creating a supportive learning environment (Avalos, 2011). New teachers benefit when mentoring focuses on student achievement and is informed by data and teaching standards (Gaines, 2020). Feedback, co-planning and co-teaching and building strong relationships also support new teachers (Gaines, 2020). Mentoring for new teachers in our state of New York is guided by standards that suggest a clear philosophy of mentoring grounded in research, a process for selecting and supporting high-quality mentors, a structured approach to mentoring aligned with state teaching standards and a system for evaluating mentoring (New York State Professional Standards and Practices Board, 2022).

School–university partnerships (SUPs) have an important role to play in developing strong mentoring practices (Gordon, 2020). These partnerships can nurture mentoring communities of practice in a third space to support mentors and mentees in various stages, from teacher candidates through novice teachers and beyond (NAPDS, 2021). The collaboration of stakeholders from both institutions holds potential to create dynamic structures and processes

that are beneficial and responsive to the needs of teacher candidates, new teachers and mentors, as well as students and teachers throughout the building.

Third space for professional learning

SUPs create a third space in which stakeholders collaborate to create new tools, ideas and processes that arise from the unique context of that partnership (Schlaack, 2023). Through this process, mentors, university faculty and administrators have the potential to engage in professional learning with and from one another. For example, Thant Sin (2023) found that mentors in an SUP reported growing pedagogical content knowledge as a result of working with student teachers. Chizhik, Chizhik, Close and Gallego (2018) found mentors benefitted by gaining confidence and self-efficacy through mentoring in an SUP. All stakeholders are positioned as valuable members of the team, and all knowledge is valued as new knowledge, processes and tools are created.

Contextualized, collaborative and sustained learning

This third space supports contextualized, collaborative and sustained learning. It is often assumed that an effective teacher knows how to be an effective mentor. However, this is not the case (Schlaack, 2023). New mentors benefit from thoughtfully structured professional development (PD) about mentoring and adult learning. Studies support common components of PD for mentors, including defining mentor and mentee roles, developing communication and reflection skills and knowledge-building through sustained PD (Betlem, Clary, & Jones, 2019; Gordon, 2020). Mentors also benefit from analyzing their own practice (Carroll, 2006) and co-construction of knowledge with other mentors (Kemmis, Heikkinen, Fransson, Aspfors, & Edwards-Groves, 2014).

Betlem *et al.* (2019) studied the potential of site-based professional learning groups for mentors in an SUP. They found that mentors improved their professional knowledge about mentoring through collaborative reflection upon their own practices over a period of two years. Schlaack (2023) found that an SUP supported university faculty to align instruction with knowledge of the school's program requirements. Mentor teachers recognized opportunities for PD with university faculty and learned from their teacher candidates (Schlaack, 2023).

Creation of dynamic and responsive structures and processes

New structures and processes that arise from SUP work are dynamic and responsive to the needs of the stakeholders. For example, Schlaack (2023) found university faculty created training opportunities, such as mentor orientations, as a result of their SUP. There is also potential for these experiences to become opportunities to develop mentor teachers' leadership skills (Eargle, 2013) when mentors and university faculty co-design and co-facilitate training, as will be shown in this study.

Methods

Partnership context

The mentoring program was implemented within an urban charter school located in a mid-sized city in the northeastern United States of America. Charter schools are privately operated, publicly funded schools of choice. At the time of the study, SBCS served approximately 900 children in kindergarten through grade eight. The population included students identifying as White (51%), Black (27%), Hispanic/Latino (15%), Asian/Pacific Islander (3%) and American Indian/Alaska native (2%). Around 80% of the students were considered economically disadvantaged, 11% were classified as students with disabilities and 1% were English learners. In total, 80 teachers were employed at the school, which utilized a schoolwide co-teaching model at the time of the study. Two certified teachers, or a certified

teacher and a Buffalo State University teacher candidate, were employed in every classroom from grades one to six.

Buffalo State University serves approximately 5,500 undergraduate students. In total, approximately 69% of the teacher candidates in our program identify as White, 12% as Black, 10% as Hispanic or Latino, 6% as multiracial and 1% as Asian or Pacific Islander. Grounded in the nine essentials, the university partners with over 100 schools in the region and across three states and five continents. For almost 30 years, the university has offered PD to partner schools, including an annual conference, where partners present action research and best practices, and consortium meetings, where schools share innovative practices developed by their SUPs.

SBCS's four teacher liaisons and five administrators meet with two Buffalo State faculty quarterly. This liaison team discusses the on-going joint projects and mentoring for university teacher candidates enrolled in a course on methods of teaching English language arts (approximately 30 per year) and student teachers (approximately 10 per year). Collaborative projects have included university-facilitated PD on co-teaching, an anti-racism book club for teachers, a joint course on early literacy, an author study and author visit to Buffalo State's campus and teacher candidates assisting at SBCS events such as a family literacy night.

Participants

The mentor academy (MA) collaboration included eight teachers, one administrator (Gina, third author) and one university faculty (Jennifer, first author). Michelle (second author), one of the eight teachers, also helped to plan the sessions and is employed by the university as a student teaching liaison. The participants in the MA had an average of 14 years of experience teaching, with a range of 6 to 23 years, and an average of 9 years teaching at SBCS, with a range of 3 to 16 years. The average number of mentees they had previously mentored was 5, with a range of 1 to 20. Eight participants identified themselves as White and one as Asian-Pacific Islander. There were eight females and one male in the group. Gina has ten years of experience as an administrator and attended the meetings. Data were also collected from three other administrators and mentees of MA participants, including five teacher candidates and four teachers. As an active participant observer, Jennifer has over 25 years of experience in education, including as a literacy specialist, consultant and coach and as university faculty.

Planning the mentor academy

The content of the MA was created by the three co-authors based on research about effective mentoring and coaching, the state standards for mentoring and our shared contextual knowledge. We framed our curriculum around mentoring principles, corresponding activities and action items. We also chose the professional text *Coaching and Mentoring First-Year and Student Teachers* (Podsen & Denmark, 2006) for readings each month. We adjusted plans based on the needs of the group as they evolved throughout a single meeting or across time. Our curriculum was created around these key questions:

(1) How do the needs of mentees and demands of mentoring differ by level and experience?

(2) In the context of mentoring, what are effective approaches to communicating, providing feedback and engaging in observations?

(3) What are the joys and challenges of observations?

(4) How can we build a sustainable and life-giving mentoring program?

Meeting 1: creating a continuum and vision for mentoring

The first meeting began with participants sharing a positive mentoring experience and a challenging one. This laid the groundwork for discussing how mentoring differs by mentees'

experience. Mentors worked in teams to analyze the needs and supports for one of the following groups: teacher candidates taking a course in methods of teaching English langugage arts with fieldwork, student teachers, first-year teachers and teachers new to the school. For their assigned level, pairs discussed: What is this group focused on learning? What supports are helpful? For example, participants noted that student teachers focus on learning how to plan quickly and how to manage the entire class. They benefit from full access to curricular materials and frequent communication with student teaching supervisors. In contrast, first-year teachers focus on communicating with families and becoming part of the school community. These teachers benefit from networking and classroom visitations.

Mentors also developed a shared vision of mentoring. They wrote several descriptors of strong mentoring on sticky notes, grouped these into categories and collaboratively composed a vision of mentoring based on these categories. The resulting vision statement read, "The SBCS mentoring program supports a responsive community fueled by collaborative communication to establish a long-term commitment to individualized and schoolwide professional growth." This vision was posted on each subsequent agenda and employed as a touchstone to guide the group's work.

Meeting 2: dialogue and goal setting

The second meeting focused on effective approaches to communication. Mentors revisited the continuum of mentoring from the first meeting. In pairs, they created questions to guide a preliminary conversation between a mentor and mentee at each developmental level. For example, a methods-level mentor may ask about experiences working with children or reasons for becoming a teacher. A teacher new to the school might be asked about previous teaching and impressions of the school. Mentors agreed that every conversation would benefit from focusing on mentees' perceived strengths, goals and desired supports.

Participants then reviewed the teaching evaluation rubrics associated with the university and school and considered how to use them with mentees to set individualized goals. They created a simple goal-setting guide, which included the (1) goal, (2) timeline, (3) progress indicators and (4) resources. After this meeting, mentors employed the guiding questions with their mentee, reviewed one section of the appropriate teaching rubric together and used the goal-setting guide to help the mentee set a professional goal.

Meeting 3: conversational moves

During meeting three, mentors discussed experiences using the questions and goal-setting guide. They posed questions to one another and provided support and suggestions. Jennifer discussed the role of dialogue in teacher development, including building consonance (i.e. mutual understanding) through revoicing and introducing productive dissonance through reconceptualizing (Reichenberg, 2018). After reading examples, mentors were presented with a common scenario (e.g. "These kids just don't care about school. I can't seem to motivate them to do anything.") and challenged to respond by revoicing the mentee's concern and reconceptualizing it. Mentors shared potential responses and offered feedback to one another. The mentors' action item was to engage their mentee in a conversation about a problem of practice, attempting to revoice and reconceptualize once each during the conversation.

Meeting 4: observations

After discussing their experiences with mentoring conversations, mentors turned their attention to observations of instruction. They discussed helping mentees choose a focus for feedback before the observation. Mentors also explored ways to gather data during observations, including notes, video and tallies. They watched a video of a teacher candidate's lesson and practiced taking descriptive, non-judgmental notes. Mentors then

discussed potential goals for this candidate. They considered how to let the candidate take the lead in choosing a focus for discussion while keeping mentoring goals in mind.

Next, participants were introduced to the PD-CASE reflective process (see Reichenberg, 2020) as one way to frame post-observation discussion and watched a video of Jennifer mentoring a teacher using this process. Mentors were asked to help their mentee choose a focus for an upcoming lesson observation, collaboratively choose a method of observation (videorecording was encouraged), practice writing descriptive, non-judgmental feedback and engage in a reflective post-lesson conversation.

Meeting 5: debriefing on observing

During meeting five, mentors debriefed about observing and conferring. They individually noted joys, challenges and questions about observations and post-observation conversations on sticky notes and collaboratively grouped the notes by theme. Challenges included scheduling observations and mentees' anxiety about being videorecorded. Joys included seeing growth in the mentee, feeling helpful and seeing new teaching ideas. The mentors' questions centered on how to help mentees reconceptualize, i.e. shifting a mentee's focus from something negative to a positive direction for growth. Mentors practiced reconceptualizing several statements by mentees together as a group. The action plan for this meeting was to consider how to build a sustainable mentoring program.

Meeting 6: sustainability, leadership and celebration

The final meeting focused on leadership and how we could build a sustainable and life-giving mentoring program. Mentors brainstormed responsibilities of mentors, mentor facilitators (graduates of MA), mentees and administration. They discussed next steps for sustainability, such as mixers for mentors and mentees and co-facilitated mentor orientations. They also explored how to sustain the momentum of the MA through mentor support socials during the next year. At the conclusion of this meeting, each new mentor facilitator was presented with a framed certificate. A photograph of the group and congratulatory email were disseminated to the administrative team at the school and to the university's teacher education leadership team (NASUP Essential 9).

Data and analysis

Instrumental case studies seek to understand a specific problem, issue or concern and cases are selected to best understand that problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Case study research allows in-depth analysis of a bounded system through multiple sources of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An instrumental case study was selected for examination of our research questions because it allowed us to apply multiple sources of data to develop an in-depth understanding of the learning of mentors and what aspects of the MA were most impactful to that learning within a bounded system. The system consisted of a co-constructed MA, which included eight mentors and an administrator, and those they mentored. The data collected included pre- and post-surveys of mentors and administrators, post-surveys of teacher candidate mentees and first-year teacher mentees, a semi-structured focus group interview and notes and artifacts from six meetings (see Table 1).

Surveys were administered online and included open-ended and Likert scale questions. These surveys allowed us to triangulate evidence of mentors' learning from the perspectives of mentors, mentees and administrators. Artifacts collected at the conclusion of each meeting included minutes and co-created products such as a vision for mentoring, a goal-setting guide, guiding questions and co-created posters. These data provided further evidence of mentors' learning. The semi-structured focus group interview, which helped us to understand which aspects of the MA were most impactful to mentors, was audio recorded and transcribed by Jennifer.

Table 1. Data

Instrument	Description	Focus
Mentors (n = 8)		
Beginning-of-year survey (September)	6 open-ended questions	Role of mentor Challenges Approaches to mentoring
	11 Likert scale items	Mentoring skills
End-of-year survey (May)	Repeat beginning-of-year survey 4 new open-ended questions	Impact of mentor academy (MA) Features of MA that supported growth Next steps for mentor Suggestions for MA
End-of-year semi-structured interview (May)	4 open-ended questions (65 minutes)	Impact of MA Features of MA that supported growth Next steps Suggestions
Notes and artifacts from mentor academy meetings (Various dates)	6 sets of notes 16 artifacts	Evidence of evolving thinking about mentoring such as vision, continuum of mentoring and goal-setting guide
Administrators		
Beginning-of-year survey (September) ($n = 4$)	5 open-ended questions	Current state of mentoring Challenges Goals for mentoring
End-of-year survey (May) ($n = 2$)	Repeat beginning-of-year survey 1 new open-ended question	Changes in mentoring in the building
Teacher/Mentee (n = 4)		
End-of-year survey (May)	6 open-ended questions	Perceived growth How mentor supported growth Future plans Suggestions
Teacher candidate/Mentee (n = 5)		
End-of-year survey (May)	2 open-ended questions	How mentor supported growth Suggestions

Source(s): Table created by authors

Analysis proceeded in three main steps. First, the constant comparative method was applied to the open-ended questions for each participant group (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The three authors individually read and identified emerging codes within each question. We discussed to resolve differences. Next, we collaboratively collapsed these into common codes across questions within each participant group. An example code identified in mentor data is *support from discussions*.

These codes were then collapsed and applied across participant groups by Jennifer. For example, mentors' data showed the code of *building relationships*. First-year teacher mentees' data showed the code of *trusting their mentors*. These codes were collapsed into *building trusting relationships*. All data were then re-coded with the final set of codes by Jennifer and confirmed by Michelle and Gina through discussion.

Table 2. Growth in mentoring skills reported by mentors on end-of-year survey compared with beginning-of-year survey ($n = 8$)

Survey item	Beginning-of-year *M* out of 4	*SD*	End-of-year *M* out of 4	*SD*	Change in mean	Percent change in *M*
Help a mentee learn to seek out and identify resources and alternatives to address challenges	2.88	0.64	3.5	0.53	0.62	21.5%
Listen to and incorporate new ideas and suggestions from a mentee	3.13	0.64	3.63	0.52	0.5	16%
Help a mentee analyze their own performance to identify strengths and areas for growth	2.88	0.64	3.25	0.46	0.37	12.8%
Provide additional resources or information	3	0.93	3.25	0.71	0.25	8.3%
Communicate feedback using strengths-based language	3.25	0.46	3.5	0.53	0.25	7.7%
Model effective teaching, differentiation, assessment, and classroom management	3.25	0.71	3.5	0.76	0.25	7.7%
Develop a positive and productive relationship with a mentee in which the mentee seems comfortable with asking for/accepting feedback and/or help	3.63	0.52	3.88	0.35	0.25	6.9%
Co-teach with a mentee in a way that supports the mentee to grow	3.13	0.64	3.25	0.71	0.12	3.8%
Provide timely, specific feedback that encourages growth in the mentee through action to try new things	3.13	0.64	3.25	0.46	0.12	3.8%
Have time to be accessible and available to a mentee	3.13	0.83	3.13	0.64	0	0
Determine a mentee's current skills in an area of teaching and scaffold the mentee to move to the next level	2.88	0.64	2.88	0.35	0	0

Source(s): Table created by authors

Finally, the mean and standard deviation for each Likert mentor survey question were calculated by Jennifer along with the percent change over time (see Table 2). The numerical data were cross-referenced with qualitative data to further support findings. All three authors then reviewed the findings. Trustworthiness was sought through triangulation of data sources. We engaged in member checking with participants through discussion to confirm findings. We presented this work at a national conference and enlisted a peer researcher with a background in SUPs and mentoring to review our methods and findings.

Mentor growth

Findings showed that mentors improved their ability to build trusting relationships with mentees, provide individualized support based on mentees' developmental levels and needs and confer and offer specific feedback. They learned to mentor for independence. Finally, mentors gained confidence and enacted leadership roles.

Building trusting relationships

On surveys, mentors reported a 6.9% increase in their ability to develop a positive and productive relationship with a mentee in which the mentee seems comfortable with asking for and accepting feedback and/or help. In addition to showing growth, mentors rated themselves highest on this item both before and after their training, showing it was likely a strong skill upon entering the program and highly valued by mentors. They noted growth in their ability to make mentees feel welcome, reassure them and listen. In the final interview, one mentor said, "I think I became a better listener." Another noted the importance of being an "active listener" to inform "what path to go down" and sometimes letting the mentee "vent." Mentors highlighted confidentiality and validating mentees' concerns as critical: "It's important for the mentee to know that what they say is kept private and you can be trusted." First-year teachers/mentees also emphasized that their mentors were skilled at developing trusting relationships, saying their mentors were "always there for me," "available" and listened with "open ears." A teacher candidate/mentee said that she "always felt supported and heard."

Individualized, flexible support

Mentors noted growth in their ability to provide individualized, flexible and targeted support. Two survey items that ranked second and third in growth were as follows: "listen to and incorporate new ideas from the mentee" grew by 16%, and "helping a mentee analyze their own performance to identify strengths and areas for growth" grew by 12.8%. One mentor explained, "A mentor teacher is there to be whatever the mentee needs." Another noted, "It's important to be flexible and do what works best for you and your mentee." A third explained that the focus of mentoring shifted with time as the mentee grew beyond concerns with classroom management to refining teaching. Mentors explained how approaches might differ for teacher candidates and first-year teachers, shifting from a gradual release of responsibility approach with teacher candidates/mentees to looking at data and focusing on first-year teachers'/mentees' specific challenges. First-year teachers/mentees also highlighted that their mentors helped with specific challenges such as students' behavior or navigating difficult co-teaching relationships. A teacher candidate/mentee noted that her mentor gave specific suggestions to guide lesson preparation. Administrators mentioned that mentors learned to have difficult conversations with mentees, sometimes required to guide professional growth. A persistent challenge, however, was finding time to meet. Mentors said they would have appreciated "more time together" and noted mentoring "took a lot of time."

Conferring and offering feedback

Mentors also reported growth in their ability to confer and offer feedback on two Likert survey items: their ability to communicate feedback using strengths-based language with a mentee (a 7.7% increase) and provide additional resources to a mentee (an 8.3% increase). One mentor explained her growing confidence in "knowing the way to say certain things or approach things." Mentors cited growth in their ability to employ specific techniques during conferring such as revoicing and reconceptualizing mentees' comments. A mentor's survey response noted growth in "revoicing and reconceptualization, [employing] consonance and dissonance and discussing the problems of practice." Six mentors also noted their increased skill in framing questions to propel their mentees' professional growth and set goals. One noted, "How to help my mentee set a goal and using a goal-setting guide was very informative and something I will use in the future." Teacher candidates/mentees were most enthusiastic about the "explicit and direct feedback" they received from their mentors. Two first-year teachers/mentees cited their mentors' suggestions as fundamental to their growth, with one noting that the mentor always revisited the advice to "see how it went." Perhaps due to positive experiences conferring with mentors, one administrator noticed an improvement in mentees' productive participation in administrative observation meetings. Some persistent challenges

included mentors feeling uncomfortable drawing mentees' attention to weaker areas, the need for more practice conferring and some mentees' reluctance to be videorecorded.

Mentoring for independence

Mentors' Likert survey items showed the greatest growth in mentoring for independence, with 21.5% growth in helping a mentee learn to seek out and identify resources and alternatives to address challenges. One mentor noted that she connected her mentee with "resources on assessment." Another facilitated her mentee visiting other classrooms to address her interest in classroom management.

Mentors noted the importance of networking and suggested additional approaches to connecting mentees with others such as mentor–mentee mixers. One first-year teacher/mentee highlighted her mentor's ability to connect her with "resources to read and strategies to try." A teacher candidate/mentee noted that her mentor "explained why she was doing what she was doing." This externalization of teacher decision-making processes holds potential to build capacity to independently reason through teaching decisions in the future (Penlington, 2008).

Emerging leadership

Mentors' confidence and leadership emerged throughout the school year. Confidence was the most common area of growth identified in the year-end comments of mentors. One mentor explained, "I feel more confident in my knowledge, skill, and dispositions regarding mentoring." Another noted, the MA "gave me more confidence and knowledge in what I was speaking with my mentees about each month."

This confidence led to the mentors' growth in leadership skills and dispositions. One mentor explained that the MA "helped me gain confidence in my role as a leader." As evidence of this, at the conclusion of the MA, mentors suggested and volunteered to facilitate new structures to support all mentors in the school. They held an end-of-the-year gathering for mentors and mentees and planned mentor–mentee mixers, with the goal of creating a network of support. They also valued supporting one another and all mentors in the building, so they suggested a support group for mentors. In addition, the participants co-facilitate meetings of the second cohort of the MA and orientations for new mentors.

Discussion and implications

The MA benefitted mentors' knowledge, skills and dispositions and strengthened the quality of mentoring in the school, as evidenced by mentors' pre- and post-survey data and the comments of their administrators and those they mentored. Mentors cited two aspects of the MA that supported this growth: supportive dialogue and tools. One said that "talking with my colleagues" and "hearing stories" was beneficial because she realized that others were facing similar challenges. Another noted that discussions were "reassuring" and a good way to exchange advice with other mentors, highlighting the co-construction of knowledge with other mentors as a support for mentor development (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014).

In addition, tools gave the mentors new strategies, supporting their ability to engage mentees in reflection (Betlem *et al.*, 2019; Gordon, 2020). These included conversational tools (e.g. revoicing and reconceptualizing), discussion guides (e.g. goal-setting guides and questions) and approaches (e.g. data-discussions and videorecorded observations). Mentors appreciated the action cycle of learning about tools, implementing them with mentees and reconvening to discuss.

Several of the nine essentials (NAPDS, 2021) were evident in this project. The MA is a comprehensive approach to supporting teacher candidates, new teachers, mentors and students in the school and potentially decreasing teacher turnover (Essential 1). The co-planning of the MA by a school administrator, teacher liaison and professor contributed to the boundary-spanning nature of the experience. The implementation of the MA spanned the school–

university boundary by cultivating cohesive mentoring practices for Buffalo State teacher candidates and SBCS teachers (Essential 8). These practices supported both the clinical preparation of educators (Essential 2) and the professional learning of the mentors, contributing to mentors' willingness to step into leadership roles (Essential 3). Throughout the school year, the mentors also contributed to responsive innovation and the generation of new knowledge through the tools and procedures they co-created, such as the goal-setting guide and conversation questions for different developmental levels of mentees (Essential 4).

As a result, the impact of the MA reaches beyond the eight mentors and their mentees. This is most apparent in the network of support created by the mentors as a result of their participation. This network will extend to all mentors in the building and their mentees in the coming years. In addition, the mentors will impact the quality of the experience of future cohorts of teacher candidates, many of whom become teachers in the building who, hopefully, become mentors themselves. Since we know that strong mentoring positively impacts teacher retention Lindsay *et al.* (2021), this cycle has the potential to lead to increased rates of retention for this school. Another likely factor impacting retention is the opportunity for teacher leadership (Seelig & McCabe, 2021), including opportunities afforded by the MA such as facilitating orientations, training sessions and social activities for mentors and mentees.

Limitations, lessons learned and next steps

This study is limited to data from only one cohort. Furthermore, studying the content of mentoring sessions and the development of mentees could provide a more nuanced understanding of mentors' growth. Therefore, future research will include analysis of mentoring sessions and mentees' goals and progress. We also plan to gather data on retention of mentored teachers.

Through this study, we learned that the mentors continued to desire collaborative support at the conclusion of the MA, especially if their mentee did not perceive a need for growth. Mentors also suggested that mentees should provide feedback to their mentors, so we plan to implement an evaluation of the program aligned with the state's call for evaluation. As a result of this study, we will continue running the MA each year with a fresh cohort of eight to ten mentors. Future iterations of the MA will include an increased emphasis on data-driven mentoring. The goal is for all teachers in the building to eventually participate and create a shared culture of mentoring and growth for all teachers. As a result, teachers will have tools to informally mentor one another, drawing flexibly upon their various strengths to build up the entire school community.

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