

Building Mentor Networks in Leadership Preparation: Redesigning Clinical Experiences for Aspiring Leaders

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This study explores the development and exploration of a dual mentorship model in a culminating field experience course within an educational leadership preparation program at a public southeastern university in the United States. Grounded in relational trust, wellness-centered leadership, and culturally responsive leadership, the revised model addresses gaps in traditional clinical educational leadership experiences by providing rationale for both a site-based principal mentor and a community-based leader mentor not affiliated with the mentees school site. Preliminary survey data revealed inconsistent mentorship engagement, unclear expectations, and limited feedback for leadership practice with the current clinical site-based only experience. Findings from interviews and survey responses with four candidates highlight the need for a more responsive and structured clinical support model. Data also suggests that the absence of dual mentorship presents gaps in leadership clinical experience placements that can be revised with pairing of a site-based principal and a community-based mentor. A mixed methods study involving surveys and interviews captured perceptions of the traditional structure and examined the potential impact of a dual mentorship structure. Key findings included themes of mentorship disappointment, barriers to support, professional confidence, and strategies for navigating mentor relationships. Participants emphasized the added potential value of a second mentor, noting increased access to leadership perspectives, improved role clarity with specific activities, and enhanced feedback for growth in Educational Leadership Disposition Assessment (EDLDA) competencies. This paper proposes dual mentorship as a scalable model for refining leadership preparation programs and potential to foster relational trust, build leadership competency, and support equitable learning experiences for aspiring school leaders. This work contributes to the ongoing refinement of clinical experiences in leadership programs and offers a replicable framework for supporting aspiring principals through intentional, multi-layered mentorship.

Keywords: Mentorship, instructional leadership, leadership preparation, field experience, principalship

Introduction

Leadership preparation programs play a critical role in preparing aspiring leaders for their roles as school principals and administrators. In addition to the comprehensive course of study, embedded clinical experiences ensure that culminating candidates enter leadership roles with the confidence and skill readiness needed for leadership success. However, early career leaders in Tennessee indicated that principal preparation programs incorporated field placements that lacked structure, consistency in leadership experiences, and insufficient practice in key aspects needed for successful school leadership placements (Tennessee Department of Education, 2024). In response, aspiring principals were surveyed at the conclusion of a semester clinical experiences, and, as a result of the responses, a dual model was adopted. This case study explores the process of this expanded mentorship model

in a field experience course designed to address these deficiencies. The initial phase of this study provides an anecdote of the perspectives of aspiring leaders and explores perceptions of the potential impact of dual mentorship on confidence, professional competencies, and equity in leadership field experiences. Lessons from this case study serve as a guide for leader preparation programs and indicate areas that drive leadership growth to ensure competent and prepared school leaders.

Literature Review

The role of mentoring in school leadership preparation occurs in the context of various leadership models, including the relational trust model (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), the wellness centered leadership model (Shirley, Hargreaves, & Washington-Wangia, 2020), and the culturally responsive leadership model (Khalifa, 2018).The

theoretical foundation for this proposed dual mentor model draws upon those frameworks and serves to address the demands of the multifaceted nature of clinical placement mentoring.

Relational trust is essential for effective mentorship. Bryk and Schneider (2002) highlight centrality of principal leadership, authentic parent engagement, small school size, stable school communities, and voluntary association as key conditions associated with this model. Often, aspiring leaders participating in field experiences rely on pre-existing relationships to complete their placements. This can result in aspiring leaders pursuing field placements in school communities led by principals who do not align with the type of leader they wish to be in their careers. Pre-existing relationships and potential for smaller, more stable conditions allow mentors to have more time and capacity to support aspiring leaders due to the nature of the existing relationship. Pre-existing school mentor relationships are also often voluntary, and mentees report a stronger alignment with their career goals and values when relational trust is in place.

Shirley et al. (2020) introduce the need for systemic changes to address the root causes of leader burnout, including poor work conditions and lack of mentorship or professional growth opportunities. This wellness-centered leadership model focuses on shared responsibility and sustainability (Shirley, Hargreaves, & Washington-Wangia, 2020). Wellness-centered leadership aims to build school cultures where collaboration and mutual support are prioritized, and where mentorship and professional growth are ongoing and collective. Recruitment and incorporation of mentors in this proposed leadership model could potentially mitigate burnout and helps create conditions for communal wellness by nurturing leadership development within a system that shares responsibility and invests in people. This dual proposed mentorship structure acknowledges the challenges and potential burnout of both aspiring and practicing leaders by distributing the mentoring load across two mentors.

Culturally responsive leadership underscores the need for centering marginalized voices, critical self-reflection, community engagement and advocacy, and equity in education (Khalifa, 2018). Dual mentorship in this model encourages aspiring leaders to seek mentors who reflect their values and communities, even in the case

when practical necessity dictates that aspiring leaders conduct their field placement at a school where they have pre-existing relationships. Through the development of a network through community-based mentors, aspiring leaders will be able to expand leadership connections within the community and not only school leaders. This model will support the innovative reflection needed of aspiring leaders to address systemic inequities that exist in the traditional model of school leader preparation.

Effective mentorship is multifaceted and has been conceptualized in various ways, each highlighting essential dimensions of support and development for aspiring leaders. Scholars emphasize mentors as role models, providers of feedback, and real-time problem solvers to support decision making in aspiring leaders (Daresh, 2004; Orland-Barak & Hasin, 2010; Peters, 2010). However, mentoring is not without its challenges. The mentor's role is inherently demanding and complex yet must be navigated carefully to address the ethical challenges and the moral imperatives of the role (Harris et al., 2004; Sergiovanni & Green, 2015; Stader, 2013). These varied perspectives illustrate that effective mentorship is not only about technical guidance, but also about relational support, fostering of ethical leadership, and sustainable leadership development achieved with a structured dual mentorship component embedded in clinical leadership experience.

Methodology

This case study sought to understand the perceptions of mentorship in clinical leadership practice. During an 8-week clinical experience, a mixed methods case study approach was utilized to analyze and incorporate feedback from aspiring leaders at the culmination of their assigned field experiences, researchers examined how participants experiences could justify shifting from a site-based principal mentor traditional structure to include a dual mentorship model. The design allowed for research questions to be answered in qualitative semi-structured interviews – to gain insight on the mentorship relationships present in the current version of the course. Participants volunteered to complete interviews following the assigned clinical experience.

Figure 1 *Research Questions*

- Before beginning your field experience, how did you define or view the role of a leadership mentor in school administration?
- How has your understanding of effective school leadership evolved as a result of working with mentor in this course?
- Describe a moment or activity during your clinical experience where your mentor significantly influenced your learning or leadership decision-making. What EDLDA competency was most connected to that experience?

- To what extent did your mentor provide timely, actionable feedback on your leadership development and reflective practices?
- What impact did your mentor have on your confidence and preparedness to assume a leadership role in a real school setting?
- How would having both a field placement principal and a designated mentor influence your ability to apply leadership skills such as instructional supervision, equity-centered leadership, or data-informed decision-making?
- If the mentorship component were to be refined or expanded, what would you recommend to strengthen its alignment with your leadership development needs and EDLDA expectations?

Note: Research questions used for the case study.

The interview was recorded and transcribed, then coded per Braun and Clark's (2006) methodology for thematic analysis. Participants also completed a post-field experience survey, in which they provided information on what was gained through their experience as well as feedback from their

mentors. Data collection was initiated by the coding of themes and a additional reflections were intentionally incorporated into the analytic process as part of a commitment to transparency and trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry.

Table 1
Participant Informationn

Participant Code	Placement School Type	Demographic Info (Age, Gender, Race, etc.)	Years of Experience in Education	Pre-existing relationship with site/supervisor
Aspiring Leader 1	Public Elementary	African American female	5 years	Current Teacher at Site
Aspiring Leader 2	Public Middle	White female	12 years	Current Teacher at Site
Aspiring Leader 3	Public Middle	White male	13 Years	Current Teacher at Site
Aspiring Leader 4	Optional K-8	African American female	16 years	Current Teacher at Site

Participants

Participants (described in *Table 1*) were students in the field experience class. The field experience class is a component of their degree requirements for a Master of Science in School administration and Supervision.

Data Collection

Qualitative data was collected through a semi-structured group interview which occurred in the final meeting of the spring field experience class. The interview lasted for 40 minutes. Participants were asked to respond to eight open-ended interview questions intended to gauge their baseline perceptions and expectations of mentorship, measure their growth and the impact

of mentor engagement, connect mentor influence to specific leadership competencies, assess the unique contribution of mentors compared to traditional site supervisors, explore feedback quality and formative support, measure self-efficacy and readiness to enter the field, and gather feedback and suggestions for course design.

Analysis

Per Braun & Clark's (2006) thematic analysis methodology, the transcript of the group interview was coded, then the resulting codes were analyzed to identify overarching themes in responses. To support the robustness of the data, additional data was collected through a Qualtrics survey to triangulate responses. The data collected was also

used to incorporate an expanded and responsive dual mentor model into the field experience course.

Findings and Results

After coding and analyzing the transcribed interview, nine key themes emerged: (a)

disappointment with the mentorship/field experience, (b) barriers to mentorship quality, (c) the impact of mentorship on professional confidence, (d) empathy/compassion for mentor, (e) mentees' strategies for a successful mentorship experience, (f) informal mentorship relationships, (g) fulfilling experiences, (h) initial expectations for the mentorship experience, and (i) a lack of

Figure 2.
Themes and Implications

Emergent Theme	Implications for Dual Mentorship
Disappointment with Mentorship/Field Experience	Dual mentors increase support, reduce risk of unmet expectations
Barriers to Mentorship Quality	Community-based mentors can provide relational trust and confidentiality
Impact on Professional Confidence	Broader feedback from two mentors enhances self-efficacy and role clarity
Empathy for Mentors	Reduces burden on site principals, shares emotional and logistical load
Mentees' Strategies for Success	Offers mentees more pathways for feedback, advocacy, and engagement
Informal Mentors	Formalizing multiple mentorships strengthens existing informal support systems
Fulfilling Experiences	Dual mentorship maximizes exposure to meaningful leadership tasks
Initial Expectations for Mentorship	Clear roles from both mentor's shape expectations and reflection
Lack of Consensus on Ideal Mentorship	Diverse mentors offer broader perspective, helping address varied mentee needs

Note: This figure represents the emergent themes and implications for dual mentorship in leadership preparation.

consensus on ideal mentorship experience.

Theme One: Disappointment with the Mentorship/Field Experience

Participants expressed dissatisfaction due to (a) minimal feedback, (b) lack of mutual trust, (c) mentees' feelings of stress and vulnerability, and (d) learning from mentor's shortcomings. One participant shared: *"I didn't receive a whole lot of feedback"* (Aspiring Leader 2). Another added, *"It never really got better...I missed out"* (Aspiring Leader 1). Trust and pre-existing dynamics affect relation depth and experience access.

Theme Two: Barriers to Mentorship Quality

Participants cited trust, confidentiality, and school stressors as perceived barriers that may have hindered their mentorship experience. Relational factors, such as trust, seemed to be make or break

the mentorship relationship in cases. *"We just kind of...don't bother each other"* (Aspiring Leader 4). Others described newness to the school created guardedness while serving in the clinical experience's role.

Theme Three: The Impact on Professional Confidence

Confidence varied by tasks given and provided during field experiences. One participant reported, *"There are certain things I feel really confident... others, I need to watch more"* (Aspiring Leader 2). Conflict resolution and observation practices emerged as growth areas.

Theme Four: Empathy for Mentors

Participants acknowledged the pressures that their field mentors faced. One participant described

how having a second mentor might alleviate some of the added pressure of being a mentor on these principals. One respondent suggested a second mentor could ease the burden: *“Having both (mentor and site-based) mentors would alleviate stress”* (Aspiring Leader 1).

Theme Five: Mentees’ Strategies for a Success

Self-advocacy was a crucial note worth capturing from participants. *“I pulled him in the hallway...he loaded me with admin duty”* (Aspiring Leader 4). Others found efforts to advocate unsuccessful: *“She would not come...it never got any better”* (Aspiring Leader 1). Suggestions for improvement included clear task lists and a dual mentor model. Participants noted what they thought would be helpful to make the course more effective in the future, including providing a checklist of necessary experiences, and supporting the dual mentor model.

Theme Six: Informal Mentors

Valuable guidance and experience came from assistant principals or staff during the field experience. Some participants noted that individuals other than their supervising principal served a mentorship role during their field experiences. *“My assistant principal... took me under his wing”* (Aspiring Leader 2). Based on notes captured, participants noted that including assistant principals or alumni leaders in mentoring roles could enhance experiences.

Theme Seven: Fulfilling Experiences

Although most participants offered feedback on aspects of their field experiences that were disappointing, many also shared moments that they found fulfilling and exciting. For one participant, it was the opportunity to be the leader she aspired to be.

Theme Eight: Initial Expectations for Mentorship

Despite challenges, participants cited rewarding opportunities with the clinical experiences class. While some participants knew what they wanted to see going into their field experiences, others wanted to be open and let the experience unfold naturally. Hands-on roles in scheduling, discipline, and testing coordination helped participants build confidence in EDLDA competencies.

Theme Nine: A Lack of Consensus on Ideal Mentorship

Participants overall expressed inconsistency with ideal aspects of their field experiences. There was a lack of consensus on what the ideal mentorship experience should include. For example, participants disagreed on what types of experiences they thought should be prioritized: *“I’m not saying that any task that goes on in a school is not important, but there are some that we really need to see and some that we won’t see*

very often. So, I feel like having a list of those tasks would be helpful” (Aspiring Leader 2). Additionally, there was a lack of consensus on some of the qualities they believe an effective school leader mentor should embody. One participant noted that school leaders should be instructional leaders first and foremost.

In response to the findings, the field experiences incorporated a dual mentoring model for the summer clinical experiences, pairing candidates with both site supervisors (principals) and mentors. Specific mentor expectations were added, including feedback provisions, access to debrief key leadership tasks, and a completion of a field experience checklist aligned with licensure standards. The enhancements aimed to improve relational quality, accountability, and perceptions of professional growth and competency for aspiring leaders.

Discussion

The findings of this case study have important implications for practice and research. This research explores the gaps of a single mentorship model within leadership clinical field experiences. Findings suggest that dual mentorship—pairing an aspiring leader with both a site-based principal and an external mentor—offers a promising avenue for cultivating leadership dispositions grounded in equity, inquiry, and reflection. Districts and community leaders can benefit from a potential dual mentorship structure that can support more humanizing and responsive models of leadership development. In contrast to traditional single-mentor systems, the dual model can close gaps shared by aspiring leaders. This model challenges the assumption that site-based mentorship alone can meet the developmental needs of future leaders, especially in systems where principals are overextended or where the site context does not align with the mentee’s evolving leadership goals.

Participants described gaps in individualized and purposeful field experiences that extended beyond routine administrative exposure. This finding supports and elaborates on the definition of effective mentorship forwarded by O’Mahoney (2003). In addition, findings align with the relational trust framework, particularly as it relates to mentorship within small, stable school communities where trusting relationships are present (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Also important to the relational trust framework described by Bryk & Schneider (2002) is the concept of voluntary association. The value and flexibility of dual mentoring addresses concerns of overextension of site principals. When site principals’ engagement is limited due to time or resource constraints, mentees are left with minimal feedback. The dual mentor model seeks to mitigate these issues by allowing external mentors to supplement site-based guidance, ensuring that aspiring leaders still receive timely, substantive feedback on their practice. Moreover, the study contributes to the

literature on Culturally Responsive Leadership (Khalifa, 2018) by highlighting participants' desire to be mentored by individuals whose values and practices reflected the kind of leaders they aspire to become.

Although participants reacted positively to the idea of the dual mentorship model, this model has yet to be fully implemented. Additionally, it is possible that participants experienced a form of hindsight bias influenced by the idea of having an additional external mentor, particularly if their site-based mentorship experiences were lacking. This study's strengths include its mixed-methods approach, which provided both quantitative breadth and qualitative depth, as well as its attention to participant voice. However, its limitations include the small sample size and the potential lack of generalizability to larger or differently structured leadership programs. Additionally, while mentor perspectives were included, future studies might include longitudinal data to understand how dispositions shaped during the field experience endure into early leadership practice. An ethical consideration that emerged during data collection was the power dynamic between students and their site-based mentors, as well as students and their instructor. While participants were assured of confidentiality, some may have hesitated to be fully candid about negative experiences.

The findings of this study are most transferable to leadership preparation programs that are values-driven, equity-centered, and committed to mentoring as a core component of learning. Programs operating in large urban districts, where site-based mentorship may be highly variable, may find the dual mentorship model especially beneficial.

This study highlights the need for future research in several areas and has various implications for the design of leadership preparation programs. First, clinical programs should explore strategies for embedding dual mentorship models as a structural component to field experiences. Second, leadership preparation providers might develop communities of practice among mentors to support consistency, equity-mindedness, and shared learning. Finally, the field would benefit from future research examining the long-term impacts of dual mentorship on leadership retention, efficacy, and equity outcome

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