

Exploring Co-mentoring Circle Practices: Insights for Leadership Development

Kathleen M. Cowin

Washington State University—Tri-Cities

This article describes a graduate mentoring program included in a course that is part of the required coursework for the PK-12 Principal and Program Administrator Certification Program, and findings related to the program's effectiveness. The mentoring program is called a "Co-mentoring Circle," which is held as a part of the required Principal and Program Administrator Internship Seminar once a month during the academic year. The co-mentoring circle process has been refined over the past 10 academic years with over 100 participants. The co-mentoring circles process was designed to fill a need for PK-12 Principal and Program Administrator Interns to have a supportive and confidential space in which to process their internship experiences and learn from the wealth of knowledge, experience, and expertise among all the Interns in the Seminar. Co-mentoring circles draw upon foundational and current mentoring scholarship and integrate effective mentoring and co-mentoring practices with leadership preparation scholarship and best practices for PK-12 Principal and Program Administrators for service as future building-based school or school district level leaders.

Keywords: co-mentoring, co-mentoring circles, mentoring school leader candidates

Introduction

This article describes findings regarding a graduate mentoring program included in a course that is part of the required coursework for the PK-12 Principal and Program Administrator Certification Program at Washington State University, Tri-Cities. The mentoring program is called a "Co-mentoring Circle," which is held as a part of the required Principal and Program Administrator Internship Seminar held once a month. I developed the co-mentoring circle process over the past 10 academic years, with over 100 participants. I started co-mentoring circles because I saw a need for our Principal and Program Administrator Interns (Interns) to have a supportive and confidential space in which to process their internship experiences.

My Positionality as an Educator and Researcher

I share my positionality as I feel I bring "who I am" to my work as an educator, mentor, and researcher. I am a woman of Northern European descent. My first language is English and I have studied Spanish since high school. I have been serving as a professional educator for over 45 years. I began my teaching career as a bilingual (English/Spanish) teacher. I served as an elementary teacher for 14 years before becoming an elementary, then middle school, principal. I served as a principal for 16 years before coming to work at the university level. I have worked in and led a teacher preparation program, and currently serve as a teacher and mentor in our graduate level program in Educational leadership and

Principal and Program Administrator Certification Programs. I also completed my certification as a PK-12 Superintendent.

The "Why"

I developed the Co-mentoring Circle process for multiple reasons. First, because I felt I had too many interns to support one-on-one in the way I would have wanted to be supported as a Principal Intern myself. I saw the experience and expertise of the veteran educators in our program, and I knew that if a process for allowing them to share all that experience and expertise could be developed, a rich group of co-teachers and co-mentors could be created. I could see the potential in giving interns a way to connect with other interns who really understood the work that interns do, fellow interns to whom they could turn for confidential support both during and outside of our seminar time. Of course, it takes time to develop the co-mentoring circle, including time for interns to get to know each other and for trust to develop among them.

I also observed the unique needs of Interns as there can be a number of tensions within their Internship and in their relationship with their Internship Mentor. The Internship Mentor is usually the Intern's supervisor in their other role in the school or school district. For example, the Principal Intern's mentor is most likely their Principal who they report to as a teacher, or in other roles in the school such as instructional coach, dean of students, or counselor. For Program Administrator Interns, their mentor is usually their direct supervisor in their school district role.

One tension is that Interns do not want to be seen by their mentors as not knowing how to

do something, and possibly looking ill-prepared for leadership. Another tension that Interns have described is when they disagree with how their Internship Mentor would complete a particular assigned task. Even when the Intern completed the task successfully, if it was not done how their Mentor would have done the task, tensions can grow. Sometimes Interns have described these differences in approach as causing worry about how their work in their other role (such as teacher or school district leader) might be evaluated. Interns reported they worried that if they have a disagreement with their Mentor, it could influence their future employment since their Mentor serves as the main gatekeeper and recommendation writer for the Intern as they seek employment as a principal or school district leader. Having a way to talk through disagreements and discuss the Intern's performance in a collaborative and collegial manner was a tension that came up often. Yet another tension was that sometimes the assessment of the Intern's work was based on data observed by third parties, essentially hearsay. This often happened as the Mentor would give the Intern a task from the Mentor's set of to-dos and then the Mentor would go on to do some other tasks and not actually see the Intern in action. This secondhand observation data was often used in the assessment of the Intern's performance and as such the performance data was often delayed. This delayed reporting also compounded the difficulties in discussing the performance assessment data and in allowing time for the Intern to make potential changes for the next set of tasks they would be assigned to complete. Hearing these tensions from Interns in the Internship Seminar course was the starting point for establishing the co-mentoring circle process to provide Interns with a supportive and confidential space to discuss their internship activities. I want to be clear that this time is not used as a time to complain about the Mentor's actions, but rather for Interns to seek support and feedback on their actions and discover potential alternative actions for the future. In the next section, I will discuss the mentoring scholarship that informed my development of the co-mentoring circle.

Literature Review

Mentoring Definitions and Literature Connections

My perspectives on mentoring have been influenced by many scholars over the years. Foundational work about the developmental nature of the mentoring relationship and how it develops over time comes from the work of Ragins and Cotton (1999), Kochan (2002), Mullen (2005), and Allen and Eby (2010). From the work of Kochan and Pascarelli (2003) and Kochan and Freeman (2020), I learned to think more deeply about mentoring across contexts, communities and cultures. The work of Searby (2010, 2020)

helped me think more about the perspectives of the "mentoring mindset" of both the mentee and the mentor. The work of Kram (1988), Ragins and Kram (2007), and Ragins and Verbos (2007), has influenced my thinking about mentoring in professional settings.

Relational Cultural Theory from the work of Fletcher and Ragins (2007) has been a touchstone for me in thinking about both mentoring and co-mentoring, particularly the three tenets of Relational Cultural Theory: "interdependent self-in-relation" (p. 378) which describes how everything you do each day is in relation to others; "growth-fostering interactions" (p. 381) in which one can share their true ideas or approaches without having to hide them for fear of judgement; and "systemic power" (p. 389), as power dynamics exist in all relationships. This tenet focuses on addressing this power, and how trust and confidentiality may be impeded and negatively affect the development of the mentoring relationship.

My views on how to establish a mentoring conversation are influenced by Zachary and Fischler's (2014) "five levels of conversation" model. The five levels are: "monologue," "transaction," "interaction," "collaborative engagement", and "dialogue" (pp. 165-169). Thinking about these levels has helped me learn how to deepen a mentoring conversation to the level of "collaborative engagement." In "collaborative engagement," one can share their vulnerability and explore issues, seeking feedback from a mentor or co-mentor, reflecting together in an open manner. In a "dialogue," our discussions can lead to changes in thinking, and new, creative insight can occur. In "dialogue" level conversation, one can be open without feeling the need to hide portions of their story from their mentor or co-mentor, or to be defensive.

My definition of mentoring is influenced by the work of Domínguez and Kochan (2020) who suggest that the term mentoring has four components. First, mentoring "occurs within the context of a developmental network" and a mentor is "a portal to networks of people, data, and information" (p. 8). Second, "a new reciprocity and mutuality exists between the mentor and the mentee, and both participate in and receive benefits from their relationship" (p. 8). Third, mentoring occurs within a "wide variety of forms, formats, and relationships" (p. 8), and fourth, "technology" (p. 8) will continue to impact mentoring going forward.

My definition of co-mentoring flows from the work of Kochan and Trimble (2000) who describe a co-mentoring relationship as being focused on "collaboration, shared decision making, and systems thinking" (p. 20). Also, Mullen's (2005) work describing the importance of examining the power dynamics in a co-mentoring relationship is key to my thinking, especially as it relates to Fletcher and Ragin's (2007) work on Relational Cultural Theory. The next section will describe in detail the 10 components in the process for

forming the co-mentoring circle.

Method

Co-mentoring Formation Components

I have developed 10 components to establish the co-mentoring circle. The 10 components are: a) affirming and using a set of group agreements; b) holding confidentiality about all discussion topics; c) studying one's communication style and skills; d) learning how to give and receive feedback; e) using reflective practices and giving time to reflection; f) studying trust building skills and being trustworthy; g) assessing the work completed in the circle; and three specific activities called "hopes and concerns," "the professional timeline," and "the self-portrait." In the next section, I will highlight each component in more detail. For more information on the development of these co-mentoring circle components see (Cowin 2021, 2023, 2024).

Group Agreements

I use the group agreements work of Gibbs (2006) to establish how we will be in community together. I have used these group agreements to lead schools and graduate student studies. Gibbs' (2006) four group agreements are: "attentive listening," "appreciation – no putdowns," "mutual respect," and "right to pass" (p. 71). We take time to discuss each group agreement and be sure we know what each agreement looks and sounds like. Then each Intern, and I as the facilitator, agree to uphold the agreements. Each time we meet individually, in other classes or the seminar, and in the circle, we take time to affirm our group agreements. As facilitator of the seminar and the co-mentoring circle, it is my role to assure that if there were concerns, I would facilitate a discussion until we reached a solution to any concern.

Confidentiality

Being a member of the educational community, there are often people who know you, or know others you know. For this reason, it is very important that we hold confidentiality about everything that is said in the co-mentoring circle. We practice a form of confidentiality that comes from my experiences in "The Courage to Lead"® called "double confidentiality" (Palmer, 2009). In double confidentiality, only the person who brings up a topic can bring it up again. For example, if a discussion in the co-mentoring circle were about a conflict between two members of one's school district staff, and how to bring the parties to resolution of their conflict, I would not come to the next circle and ask, "Hey, how's the issue with your staff going?" That would be a total breach of double confidentiality. At each meeting, class, seminar, and co-mentoring circle we always check in on how our confidentiality is holding and affirm that all is rock solid before beginning any discussions.

Communication Style and Skills

Each Intern takes time to assess and study their communication style and skills. Interns take a brief self-assessment based on the work of Alessandra and O'Connor (2017, 2018) to learn more about their own communication style and set goals for their own development as communicators. Interns also study Zachary and Fischler's (2014) model for mentoring conversations. While we are working together in the co-mentoring circle we seek to have conversations at a level Zachary and Fischler (2014) call "collaborative engagement" (p. 168), in which participants strive to be vulnerable, sharing concerns or fears with each other. This level of conversation can happen if there is trust in the relationships, and while not all co-mentoring conversations achieve this level, we strive to be open and transparent. Interns have noted that having conversations at this level builds trust, is helpful in discussing concerns, and provides a supportive place to work with others who understand the unique role of an Intern.

Giving and Receiving Feedback

A major responsibility of school and school district leaders is to give and receive feedback. Educational leaders give feedback on instructional practices and actions taken by students and staff, and they must learn to regulate how they give feedback to each individual, as giving feedback in a way that overwhelms the receiver can inhibit the receiver from engaging with the feedback. As a part of the Interns' study we use the work of Sullivan and Glanz (2013) and investigate different approaches for giving feedback and for working through one's response to how others receive feedback. Interns also study the framework developed by Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2016) for a developmental approach to evaluating one's own preferred way of getting feedback which can influence how one gives feedback. Learning that not everyone wants to receive feedback the way you do can be eye-opening for the Interns. The skills of giving and receiving feedback are practiced in the co-mentoring circle as we offer support to one another for the issues brought to the circle. We also study giving and receiving feedback from the non-evaluative perspective of a "critical friend," where the aim is to elevate the work we do in the circle (Costa & Kallick, 1993) and not to offer judgments unless requested.

Reflective Practice

Precious co-mentoring circle time is given to reflect and develop reflective practices. I have found that without giving class or seminar time to reflection, it just does not happen. We take time to study reflection and reflective practices with several key readings, and I also do direct instruction on the topic. Interns read the work of Arredondo-Rucinski (2005) and Rodgers (2002)

and we discuss these readings. We always end each circle with time for oral reflection and then written reflection. Each Intern submits their written reflection and I give them individual feedback on their reflection. Taking time for reflection during the seminar and circle time is one way I model how much I believe in the power of reflective practice. Reflection can be of great benefit to leaders in their work and in modeling for those they lead how slowing down and taking time to reflect can help in finding new or creative solutions.

Trust

We begin by discussing how fleeting trust can be. Many Interns have stories of when trust was broken, and those lessons of broken trust can be insightful for future leaders to study and reflect upon. We study an article by Combs et al. (2015) examining four trust building practices: “understanding trust,” “monitoring your reactions,” “addressing concerns,” and “saying ‘thank you’” (pp. 18, 19-22). Then we study Tschannen-Moran’s (2007) framework of trust that include five facets: “benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence” (p. 99). We also study Tschannen-Moran’s (2014) work on successful school leadership that focuses on establishing, earning, and maintaining trust. We engage in trust building activities as we work together at each class, seminar, and co-mentoring circle. We assess how our own trust building skills are developing and how we are building trust as a circle. The next three activities that I have developed were designed to establish and deepen trust among the Interns.

Activity: Hopes and Concerns

This activity is done at the first meeting with the Interns. When we meet in-person it can be done with post-its posted to the whiteboard and when done via Zoom we have used the Jamboard application. Each Intern is asked to think about their hopes and concerns for their work as an Intern. Each Intern is asked to write at least one hope on one post-it and post it to the hopes board. These postings are anonymous, so no names are written on the post-its. Then Interns are asked to write at least one concern on one post-it and post it to the concerns board. If more than one hope or concern is noted they are listed on separate post-its and anonymously posted to the appropriate board. Then we take time to view each board. I ask for a volunteer Intern to move post-its that are similar in nature together in groupings. Then we continue to take in the boards. Then I ask for volunteers to note a theme of each grouping of post-its.

Each time I have led this activity there have been many similar themes on the post-it notes. What also has happened is many Interns identify the post-its they posted. When Interns do this they report a sense of comradery and a building of trust as they complete the activity. A photo of the whiteboard can be taken so we can revisit the hopes and concerns as needed, and the Jamboard

application can also be exported and saved for future use.

Activity: The Professional Timeline

Interns can use an arts-based approach, drawing with pencils or markers on paper, or an online timeline program to create their professional timeline. Interns are asked to share only what they want to and mark important dates or events in their professional timeline. Some Interns start with their earliest memories of playing school as a child with siblings, relatives or friends and build to their desire to become a school leader. Others start later in the life journey when a change or event provided an opportunity to work in education.

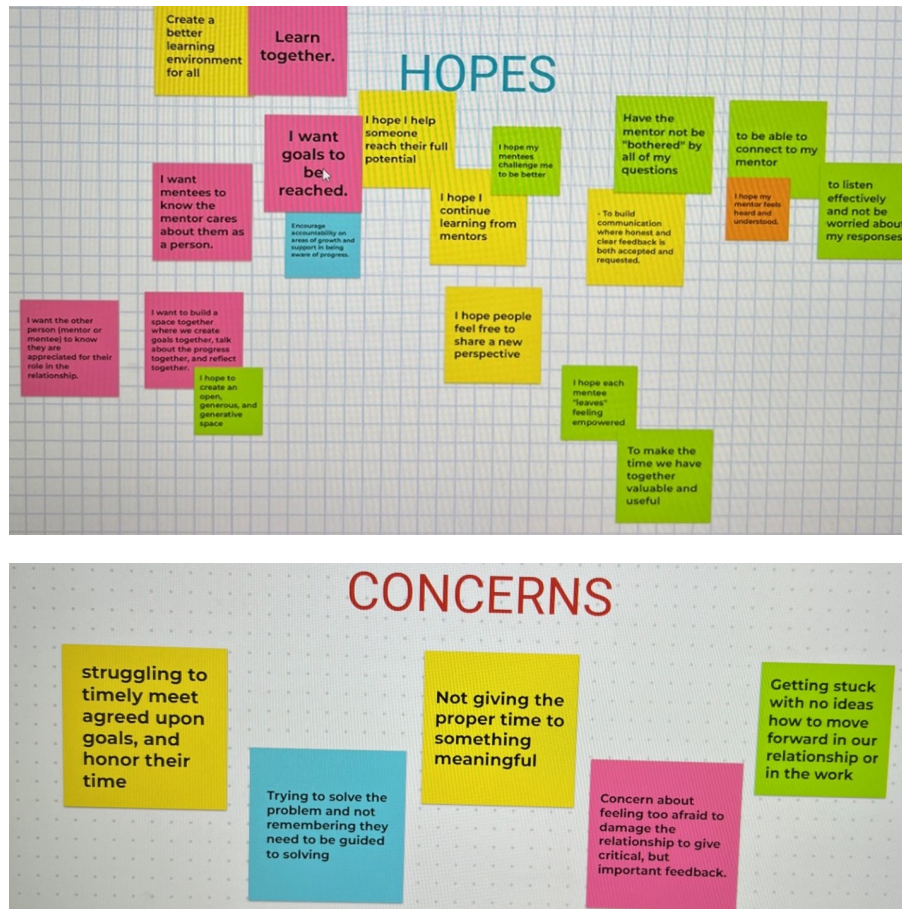
What happens each time I have led this activity is that Interns report seeing how similar their stories are and how certain touchstones in their stories overlap with those of other Interns. Also, Interns report a deepening of trust in sharing their journeys. Interns report that they also gain a fuller understanding of the other Interns’ roles and responsibilities, and this can be a huge help as they note areas of each Intern’s experience and expertise. For example, if you note that an Intern has 20 years’ experience in special education, and you need co-mentoring on a special education issue, you have the knowledge of who has that needed expertise you might call on. The timeline activity develops and deepens the trust among interns so they feel comfortable reaching out to each other for support.

Activity: The Self-portrait

The self-portrait is based on the qualitative methodology of portraiture created by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997). I teach about portraiture methodology, highlighting the five components of “context,” “voice,” “relationship,” “emergent themes,” and “aesthetic whole” (pp. xvii). Interns are invited to focus their written auto-ethnography (the self-portrait) using these components. Interns are asked to share only what they want to and to consider a point in their lives where school, home, and community intersected. The stories shared in the written self-portraits are often deeply self-revealing, moving, and insightful. The written self-portraits are shared with me and I give each Intern feedback. Then Interns are invited to share their drafts of their self-portraits with each other for feedback. This verbal sharing of the self-portrait is by invitation and not required. While over the past 10 years there have been a few Interns who voiced concerns in sharing their self-portrait, after hearing the self-portraits of others their anxiety has been reduced to the point that every Intern has decided to share at least some portion of their self-portrait. In almost every case, Interns have wanted to read their entire self-portrait. Every time I have led this activity, Interns have said they feel closer to each other, and several times over the years the Interns have used the word “bond” to describe their relationships with one another after this activity.

Figure 1

An Example of the Hopes and Concerns Activity Using Jamboard.



Findings

Examples of Hopes and Concerns

Figure 1 represents an example of the Hopes and Concerns activity completed using Jamboard. Listed at the top of Figure 1 is the "hopes" page from the Jamboard display after volunteers have moved the post-its into similar themes. All the comments listed on the post-its are anonymous. Comments in one grouping on the left side of the page were: "I want to build a space together where we create goals together, talk about the progress together and then reflect together" and "I hope to create an open, generous, and generative space." These two comments are about the type of mentoring relationship Interns are hoping to create with their mentors. A second grouping at the top of the page notes: "Create a better learning environment for all" and "Learn together." These comments focus on how Interns are thinking about how to create a learning approach and how to have that approach be reciprocal between mentors and Interns. A third theme focused on goal setting, and assessment and accountability

for those goals. Comments were: "I want goals to be reached," "I hope I help someone reach their full potential," and "Encourage accountability on areas of growth and support in being aware of progress." Communication with one's mentor was also noted on the "hopes" page as exemplified here: "To build communication where honest and clear feedback is both accepted and requested."

In the bottom portion of Figure 1 is an example from the "concerns" page of this same Jamboard. There were fewer "concerns" posted. The concerns that were posted focused on themes of structuring time for feedback and learning, and how to ensure that the Intern received feedback without damaging the relationship between the Intern and their mentor.

The hopes and concerns activity brings up many important themes in how the Interns can work to structure a conversation about the type of mentoring they hope to receive from their mentors, and also opens the possibility for me in my facilitator role to share key mentoring approaches with the mentors in my meetings with them.

Figure 2
An Example of an Arts-based Timeline



Note. Names of people, specific places, organizations, and programs are anonymized.

Examples of Timelines

In Figures 2 and 3, two examples of the professional timeline activity are displayed. The Intern who created the Figure 2 timeline used an arts-based approach. The Intern who created the Figure 3 timeline used technology. Both timelines have been anonymized, but enough data has been left so readers can see the timeline product. The timelines are displayed by each Intern and each Intern has the opportunity to highlight any portion of their timeline they wish. After all the timelines have been introduced, we discuss highlights and take-aways from the activity. What often happens is the similarities among all the Interns' timelines becomes a focus of discussion. This activity always promotes discussion and Interns again report a feeling of comradery among the circle members.

Examples of Self-portraits

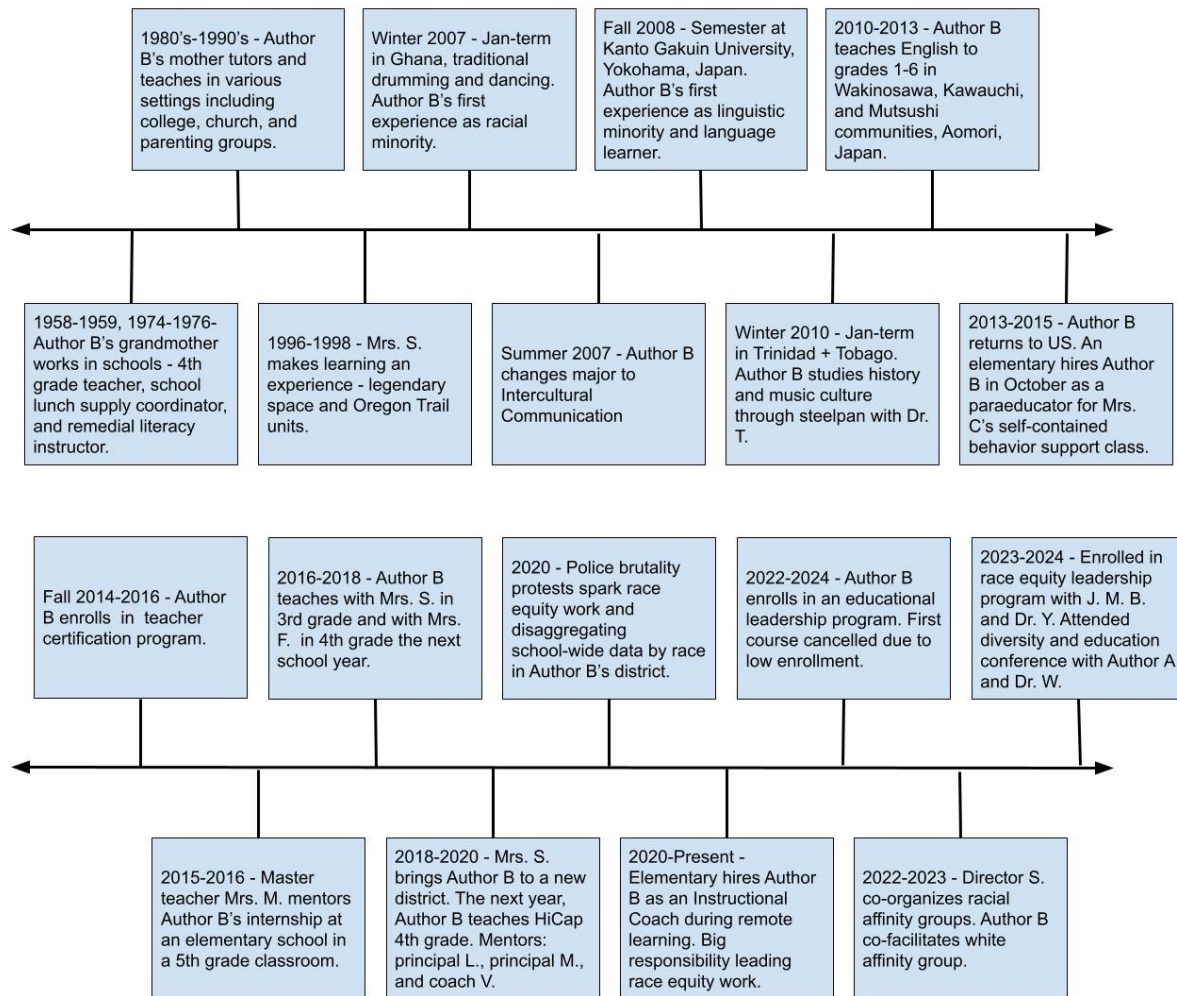
The self-portrait activity, which has several layered components, is the last activity we use in forming the co-mentoring circle. First, each circle participant writes a draft auto-ethnography about a time in their life when home, school, and community intersected. Then each circle member orally presents all or some self-selected portion of their self-portrait to the other circle members. After the self-portrait presentations, circle members take time to reflect orally with each other within the circle on what presenting their self-portrait, and the feedback they received from listeners, meant to them. Circle members who were listeners also reflect on what hearing the circle member's self-

portrait meant to them. During this activity circle members focus on how presenting one's own, and hearing the self-portraits of others, can influence one's development of their leadership stance. They then write the final draft of their self-portrait, which Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) call the "aesthetic whole," and a final reflection on the self-portrait process. In the next section, I will present snippets of two self-portraits along with parts of their leadership reflections on their self-portraits. The names used are pseudonyms.

Jade's Self-portrait Snippet

Jade's self-portrait focused on a day in class when she felt a deep cultural divide between her classmates and how her teacher, in attempting to smooth over the event, made her feel a mix of emotions from worried to embarrassed to needing to be a voice for her background.

Our teacher had stood at the front of the class and announced that she wanted our class to come sit on the large carpet placed next to the classroom windows. With excitement we sat down, and our teacher announced that she was going to show us a video.... As I looked at the video there is the image of an elder who was dressed in his regalia sitting on a rock out in the desert surrounded by red rocks and a cliff. He is banging on the drum and after a few seconds of drumming he begins to sing.... In the next moment I see kids laugh at the video and not understanding what was funny I just looked around dumbfounded. My teacher stopped the video.... In my teacher's soft

Figure 3*An Example of a Timeline Completed with Technology*

Note. Names of people, specific places, organizations, and programs are anonymized. The Intern creating this timeline used the pseudonym Author B.

voice, she called my name "[Jade].... Come with me."... She closes the door, and she asks me are you ok?... I told her I was ok and then she asked me do you want to say anything to the other kids. What was I supposed to say? It was a blur and next thing I knew... I stood in front of the kids.... Words just started flowing. "It's ok that you laughed but please don't. Just because you don't understand it doesn't mean you should laugh. If you have any questions, you can ask me." Kids started to cry.... Confused again I began to think, great now I'm really in trouble because I made kids cry. The rest of the day was a blank and I still couldn't understand why kids laughed. To me that was my culture, and I was proud of it.

A Snippet of Jade's Self-portrait Reflection

Jade's reflection on her self-portrait describes how she continues to reflect on this experience and how this experience continues to be a part of her educational leadership stance.

I stood up for not only my identity but for my people. Why did my teacher not handle this situation? Granted this was a community that didn't have a high population of Native Americans, it doesn't excuse the lack of preparation to show our students another culture. It wasn't fair to me to have to speak out to my classmates at such a young age.... I wouldn't change my response, but I'd like to ask my 5th grade teacher if she would have handled this situation differently. This lived experience is likely a cause to why I feel so

strongly towards representing my tribe and my interest in a Native American voice. It could explain why I'm so mindful in how I address people and the words that I speak.

Kalel's Self-portrait Snippet

Kalel's self-portrait focused on an interaction he had as a middle schooler with a first year teacher, and a conversation they had when they reconnected many years later.

I could see from my back-row desk two of my good friends sharing a piece of loose-leaf paper across the aisle.... Suspicion gnawed at my attention and grew more incessant with each pass of the paper and furtive look my way.... But the note was intercepted, my teacher's eyes scanning it right there in front of everyone.... Looking up from the paper, my teacher's knowing glance landed on me.... I felt utterly exposed and vulnerable. He knew my secret, and there's no telling how he feels about it or what will happen.... On one of our breaks, my teacher kept me in and let me read the note. When I was done, he took it back, crumpled it into a ball, and tossed it into the recycling bin. No words then. No words after. Just indiscernible nonverbals that didn't become clear until I was almost 30 years old and working as a teacher in my childhood district when we reconnected and he asked, "Did I do right by you back then?" The weight of all of those silences is difficult to carry and difficult to shed, but what I didn't know was how brittle they could be. Almost 20 years later, a colleague showed me how easy a silence crumbles when she brought me a gift. It was a soft, gray Jersey cotton t-shirt with the words, "School is for everyone," complete with pride flags representing various identities. She also had one to match.... With a simple gesture, a silence was broken. The first day I wore it to work, three children on different occasions that day stopped me to say, "I love your shirt!" They each pointed to a different flag, exclaiming, "That's me!"... I pointed to my own flag and said, "This is me." I wore that shirt every Friday after that because I was learning that with a simple gesture, a silence can be broken.

A Snippet of Kalel's Self-portrait Reflection

Kalel's reflection on his self-portrait described how that long ago interaction, teacher to middle school student, now shapes his approach to honoring all children's identities in school.

My stories highlight the crucial role of relationships as well as creating opportunities for students and adults to make themselves known. Familiar and affirming symbols of identity in the environment open doorways to trust and connection. Through moments of connection, I have more power as an

educator and colleague to say and do things that communicate care and value, vital contributions to belonging. Thus, the physical and interpersonal space within my control and influence can be thoughtfully arranged, so to speak, to provide opportunities for those around me to be known and feel cherished.... I see now that leadership can be inspired by loving care and a manifestation of high regard. Love is what softens and expands my heart enough to hold care and compassion for those who need to be known, seen, and heard as well as for those who come from a place of not knowing. This spaciousness and flexibility create additional capacity for me to value others and their experiences while simultaneously holding everyone, myself included, capable and able of knowing and doing better. With and through loving high regard, I see a future where knowing others authentically is the engine of validation, affirmation, liberation, and change.

Assessment of Circle Processes and Activities

Time is always scheduled within the circle session to reflect on and assess the work completed in the circle. I have found that time to reflect and provide assessment is vital to the ongoing development of the circle practices and activities, and to the work completed in the circle. A key finding for me was that if we did not reflect before leaving the circle, the reflection was not completed or was completed at a much more surface level. Reflecting and assessing right after the conclusion of the circle allowed for circle members to recall in more detail the work we did. I have found that having a brief period of time (even five minutes) for oral reflection would help prepare the circle members for written reflection and assessment. In face-to-face circles we would end our class and then hold silence and allow 10 minutes for written reflection. Circle members submitted their written reflections and then left class. In Zoom circles, we turn off our cameras and write, submitting the reflections and assessment via the chat or through the university electronic platform for assignments. The reflection and assessment focus on standardized prompts such as key take-aways from today's circle, areas for further reflection, any changes to circle practices needed for future circles, and an open-ended prompt where circle members can add other assessment feedback they want to share.

After the Circle is Formed

After the circle has been formed using the 10 components, each circle focuses on the agenda that circle members want to discuss. Circle members submit topics for discussion and I as the facilitator structure the agenda topics and share them with the circle members. Each circle begins

with a check in on our group agreements, our code of double confidentiality, our communication skills and styles, and a reminder about giving and receiving feedback. Then I share the agenda of items for discussion within the circle. The discussion topics that arise have a huge range. For example, circle participants seek guidance on issues such as how to lead through tragedy, for instance the death of a student in their school, or school or community violence. Other topics can be more procedural, such as establishing bell schedules and adjusting school or school district budgets. Very complex topics, such as how to lead during a time of a teachers' strike or working through grievance processes with collective bargaining units, have been discussed. Topics related to maintaining a work and life balance and health and well-being as a school and school district leader have often been circle topics. Circle time is also used to process issues of conflict, such as leading conflict resolution among school or school district staff, or with an intern's mentor, and use of effective communication skills in resolving conflict.

Often there are more issues than time allows for the co-mentoring circle discussions, so my role as the facilitator is to assess the list of issues presented by the Interns and identify topics that could serve more than one of the issues that has been brought forward for discussion. For example, could a discussion of communication skills and styles be combined with conflict resolution approaches to help provide support for multiple Interns' issues?

Discussion & Recommendations

Connections Back to Mentoring Scholarship

The co-mentorship that the Interns provide to one another brings Domínguez and Kochan's (2020) description of mentoring to life because what the Interns do is create connections and share data and information with each other. The mentorship and co-mentorship the Interns provide for each other flows back and forth in a highly reciprocal manner in which all participants receive benefits from the co-mentoring. Our work in the circle also affirms Domínguez and Kochan's (2020) suggestions that potential formats in which mentoring may occur can be different than a traditional pairing of mentor and mentee. In the circle we use a form of group mentoring, and technology is very much a part of the co-mentoring circle processes and practices.

In the co-mentoring circle, we take time to discuss mentoring scholarship and think about the work of Fletcher and Ragins (2007) in Relational Cultural Theory. The first tenet of Relational Cultural Theory, "interdependent self-in-relation" (p. 378), suggests that everything we do, we do in in relation to others. Each time we convene a co-mentoring circle there is a deep sense of this

tenet and Interns often state "*we are all in this together*" as we affirm our group agreements and that confidentiality is being held among the members. Also in discussing the agenda for the circle, members often see the interconnectedness of the issues they want to discuss and knowing nods of heads happen all around the circle. The second tenet of Relational Cultural Theory, "growth-fostering interactions" (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007, p. 381), is a goal of our work as a circle. We reflect and assess our work and strive to offer feedback and support that affirms that our interactions foster growth and that we are open and can be our true selves without fear that those in the circle listening will judge us. The third tenet of Relational Cultural Theory is "systemic power" (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007, p. 389). In our circle we talk about power dynamics and we also discuss how power dynamics can intersect with much of the work we do as leaders. In our co-mentoring circle, we are also mindful that there are many connections in our educational communities. We openly discuss power dynamics and how power dynamics might affect our discussions and co-mentorship as sometimes circle members are from the same school districts. For example, a Principal Intern's site-based mentor (their Principal) may be supervised by a Program Administrator's district-based mentor. The intersections among circle participants in a school district or even different school districts is another reason for needing to assure confidentiality and demonstrating trustworthiness among all circle members.

In our co-mentoring circle discussions, we also draw upon the work of Zachary and Fischler's (2014) "five levels of conversation" model. We seek to have our discussions move from "transaction" and "interaction" levels to what Zachary and Fischler (2014) call a "collaborative engagement" level. In a "collaborative engagement" level we can be vulnerable with each other and explore issues where things may not have gone as one hoped. The feedback they receive will be offered in the spirit of "we are all in this together" and each issue discussed presents learning and growth opportunities as a leader. We strive for the level of mentoring conversations Zachary and Fischler (2014) describe as "dialogue," where circle members can share without the fear of those listening judging them and where the feedback is creative and can lead to changes in one's thinking.

Concluding Remarks

Co-mentoring circle members offer feedback and assessment at the end of each term and at the end of their program. This feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Some Interns have gone on to take other courses I have offered in mentorship and co-mentorship. Some Interns seek to teach about mentoring, co-mentoring, and co-mentoring circle practices as they establish their mentoring relationship with their site-based mentor or school district mentor. Some of the co-

mentoring circles established years ago are still meeting and the members reach out to me to join when my schedule allows, which is a testament to the power of the co-mentoring circles to create supportive communities among the members who are now school or school district leaders. I will end this article describing the co-mentoring circle with a sample of co-mentoring circle members' feedback about their learnings about mentoring, mentorship, co-mentoring, and leadership.

Member-1:

After you have shared a really personal part of who you are, and what it meant to you, you feel like you have a bond within our circle. That you have others who "get" you and you can share other problems without worrying about what they might think of you. (2018)

Member-2: "I'm so thankful for my co-mentoring connections. Choosing this program was one of my BEST decisions" (2020).

Member-3: "I need to be with others who really understand the work I do every day and won't judge me" (2020).

Member-4:

Writing that self-portrait reminds me that every person has a story. Those stories are what motivates people, what makes them who they are. If people are willing to share their story, we should be open to listen as it gives us incredible insight. (2021)

Member-5:

My self-portrait helps me expand my leadership stance... by recognizing the value of sharing cultural experiences. Everyone within a school community - administrators, teachers, students, staff, families, have rich experiences that they can share with others. Sharing these experiences helps everyone. Sharing helps us connect and it opens doors.... (2022)

Member-6:

What better way to impact the school culture than to lead the mentorship practices of your building.... As a leader in my role, my hope is that I can introduce the scholarship to some, while also demonstrating my learning in a co-mentor role across the agency. (2023)

Member-7: "Learning about each other through sharing our ideas of what mentorship is, who we are professionally and personally, and sharing our goals for our relationship will allow us to create a foundation for co-mentoring circles" (2024).

Member-8:

With those I will lead, I think it will be central to share with them how effective participating in a co-mentoring circle has been for my own well-being, and the support it has provided in my position. Modeling vulnerability and presence in the conversations I have with staff as a leader is vital to initiating the circles. Striving to be transparent, vulnerable, and caring in all the interactions I have with others. (2024)

Member-9:

Knowing my district is not intentionally creating mentorship or co-mentorship opportunities for principal candidates, I will have to take initiative to create that space for myself. I have my experiences in the co-mentoring circle last term and this term ... to draw on down the road. (2024)

Member-10:

As a leader the value of co-mentoring circles is significant because it allows for humility and reflection to take place. Leaders who are not connected with those they serve can lose sight of their vision and goal. As a future leader it is important to utilize co-mentoring circles to maintain the qualities of humility, care, trust, reflection, and competence. (2024)

Member-11:

In my own leadership development, I will use co-mentoring circles to help improve my skills and understanding. I will practice the process of developing trust, building community, and offering opportunities for collaboration, creating a culture of growth, time and space for this work to be done through Professional Learning Communities. (2024)

Common Themes

Common themes in these quotes were the value placed on the relationships that were formed among the co-mentoring circle members. Also, how the circle members can take the components used in the formation of the co-mentoring circle forward in their future as leaders, using some of the circle formation processes for forming cohesive groups among those they lead. The processes taught in the formation of the circle provided lessons and gave a supportive and confidential space to practice new leadership skills. As a leader, these learnings and skills can be used with those they lead and they can also teach building-based colleagues, or colleagues in their school district offices, these processes. By opening up potential co-mentoring circles in their schools or school

district offices, these future leaders can continue the cycle of educating others about how to use effective mentoring and co-mentoring practices.

Summary

The co-mentoring circles were developed to provide future school and school district leaders a supportive and confidential space to lean into the very complex work of leading today's schools and school districts. I invite others to explore the use of co-mentoring circles and look forward to hearing what you discover.

References

- Alessandra, T., & O'Connor, M. J. (2017). *The platinum rule: Behavioral profiles scoring booklet*. Alessandra and Associates.
- Alessandra, T., & O'Connor, M. J. (2018). *The platinum rule: Behavioral profiles self-assessment*. Alessandra and Associates.
- Allen, T. D., & Eby, L. T. (Eds.). (2010). *The Blackwell handbook on mentoring: A multiple perspectives approach*. John Wiley and Sons.
- Arredondo-Rucinski, D. E. (2005). Standards for reflective practice. In S. Gordon (Ed.), *Standards for instructional supervision: Enhancing, teaching and learning* (pp. 77-90). Eye on Education.
- Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP). (2023). The AWSP leadership framework for school leader evaluation. https://awsp.org/docs/default-source/member-support-documents/leadership-framework/awsp-leadership-framework-3-0_2020.pdf?sfvrsn=74e90e7b_4
- Cowin, K. M. (2021). Creating and facilitating co-mentoring circles: A guide. In E. H. Reames & L. J. Searby (Eds.), *The art and science of mentoring: A festschrift in honor of Dr. Frances Kochan* (pp. 87-100). Information Age Press.
- Cowin, K. M. (2023). Facilitating leadership learning: Using co-mentoring circles. In D. Law & N. Domínguez (Eds.), *Making connections: A handbook for effective formal mentoring programs in academia*. Utah State University. <https://uen.pressbooks.pub/makingconnections/chapter/facilitating-leadership-learning-using-co-mentoring-circles/>
- Cowin, K. M. (2024). Case Study: Empowering one another: Leadership lessons learned in co-mentoring circles. In J. Haddock-Millar, P. Stokes, & N. Domínguez (Eds.), *Reciprocal mentoring* (pp. 93-102). Routledge.
- Combs, J. P., Harris, S., & Edmonson, S. (2015). Four essential practices for building trust. *Educational Leadership*, 72(1), 18-22. <https://web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=d281f284-c995-45f6-alb2-454f6ef5e03e%40redis>
- Costa, A. L., & Kallick, B. (1993). Through the lens of a critical friend. *Educational Leadership*, 51(2), 49-51. [file:///C:/Users/Kathleen/Downloads/Through_the_Lens_of_a_Critical_Friend%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Kathleen/Downloads/Through_the_Lens_of_a_Critical_Friend%20(1).pdf)
- Domínguez, N., & Kochan, F. K. (2020). Defining mentoring: An elusive search for meaning and a path for the future. In B. J. Irby, J. N. Boswell, L. J. Searby, F. K. Kochan, R. Garza, & N. Abdelrahman (Eds.), *The Wiley international handbook of mentoring paradigms, practices, programs, and possibilities* (pp. 3 - 18). John Wiley & Sons.
- Drago-Severson, E., & Blum-DeStefano, J. (2016). *Tell me so I can hear you: A developmental approach to feedback for educators*. Harvard Education Press.
- Fletcher, J. K., & Ragins, B. R. (2007). Stone Center relational cultural theory: A window on relational mentoring. In B. R. Ragins & K. E. Kram (Eds.), *The handbook of mentoring at work: Theory research and practice* (pp. 373-399). SAGE.
- Gibbs, J. (2006). *Reaching all by creating tribes learning communities* (30th anniversary ed.). CenterSource Systems.
- Kochan, F. K. (Ed.). (2002). *The organizational and human dimensions of successful mentoring programs and relationships*. Information Age Publishing.
- Kochan, F. K., & Freeman, Jr., S. (2020). Mentoring across race, gender, and generation in higher education: A cross-cultural analysis. In B. J. Irby, J. N. Boswell, L. J. Searby, L. J., F. K. Kochan, R. Garza, & N. Abdelrahman, N. (Eds.), *The Wiley international handbook of mentoring: Paradigms, practices, programs, and possibilities* (1st ed.) (pp. 471-486). John Wiley & Sons.
- Kochan, F. K., & Pascarelli, J. T. (Eds.). (2003). *Global perspectives on mentoring: Transforming contexts, communities, and cultures*. Information Age Publishing.
- Kochan, F. K., & Trimble, S. B. (2000). From mentoring to co-mentoring: Establishing collaborative relationships. *Theory into Practice*, 39(1), 20-28. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip3901_4
- Kram, K. E. (1988). *Mentoring at work: Developmental relationships in organizational life*. University Press of America.
- Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Davis, J. H. (1997). *The art and science of portraiture*. Jossey-Bass.
- Mullen, C. A. (2005). *The mentoring primer*. Peter Lang.
- Palmer, P. J. (2009). *Circle of Trust® approach from Parker J. Palmer*. <http://www.couragere-newal.org/approach/>
- Ragins, B. E., & Cotton, J. L. (1999). Mentor functions and outcomes: A comparison of men and women in formal and informal mentoring relationships. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 84(4), 529-550.

- Ragins, B. E., & Kram, K. E. (Eds.). (2007). *The handbook of mentoring: Theory, research and practice*. Sage.
- Ragins, B. R., & Verbos, A. K. (2007). Positive relationships in action: Relational mentoring and mentoring schemas in the workplace. In J. E. Dutton & B. R. Ragins (Eds.), *Exploring positive relationships at work: Building a theoretical and research foundation* (pp. 91-116). Lawrence-Erlbaum.
- Rodgers, C. (2002). Defining reflection: Another look at John Dewey and reflective thinking. *Teachers College Record*, 104, 842-866. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9620.00181>
- Searby, L. J. (2010). Preparing future principals: Facilitating the development of a mentoring mindset through graduate work. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 18(1), 5-22.
- Searby, L. J. (2020). The mentoring mindset: Desired practices of a protégé in a mentoring relationship. In B. J. Irby, J. N. Boswell, L. J. Searby, L. J., F. K. Kochan, R. Garza, & N. Abdelrahman, N. (Eds.), *The Wiley international handbook of mentoring: Paradigms, practices, programs, and possibilities* (1st ed.) (pp. 187-204). John Wiley & Sons.
- Sullivan, S., & Glanz, J. (2013). *Supervision that improves teaching and learning: Strategies and techniques* (4th ed.). Corwin.
- Tschannen-Moran, M. (2007). Becoming a trustworthy leader. In *The Jossey-Bass Reader on Educational Leadership* (2nd ed.) (pp. 99-113). Jossey-Bass.
- Tschannen-Moran, M. (2014). *Trust matters: Leadership for successful schools* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Zachary, L. J., & Fischer, L. A. (2014). *Starting strong: A mentoring fable: Strategies for success in the first 90 days*. Jossey-Bass.
- Association Mentorship and Mentoring Practices Special Interest Group. In 2020, Kathleen was selected as a Fellow of the Washington State University President's Teaching Academy.

About the Author

Kathleen M. Cowin, EdD, is an Associate Professor (Career Track) of Educational Leadership at Washington State University—Tri-Cities where she teaches, mentors, and co-mentors aspiring PK-12 school leaders. Her research focuses on the development of effective relational co-mentoring practices for PK-12 educational leader formation and the creation of co-mentoring circles among current and former educational leadership students. Kathleen also researches, with a colleague, a process called “Collaborative Conversations” which brings aspiring school leaders and pre-service teachers together to discuss culturally sustaining, socially just pedagogy. Kathleen served as a teacher and elementary and middle school principal for 30 years and also completed her Superintendent Certification. Kathleen is the past Chair of the American Educational Research