

Mentoring Matters When Growing Your Own Educators

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The journey to establish the Future Educator Pathway (FEP), formerly known as Project Teacher Development, has been a long yet gratifying one. My colleagues and my students have been instrumental in helping to design a pathway for middle school and high school students of color to pursue a career in education. The whole process began with the Color of Teaching Mentoring Program (CoT) established in 2007 and now includes the CoT, Side-by-Side (SBS) in-school seminars for high school students, a Future Educator Academy (FEA), which is a summer residential college experience, and an opportunity for high school students to take up to four dual enrollment courses to jump start their college careers. The mentoring components of the FEP are the most crucial as they establish effective mentor-mentee relationships to foster a sense of belonging on a college campus, encourage exploration of careers in education, support mentees' goal achievement, and endeavor to diversify the educator workforce. This paper describes the development and impact of the FEP on recruiting and retaining students of color to pursue a career in education. Findings indicate that mentees who participate in at least two of the four FEP programs persist toward their goal at a higher rate, and mentors report growth in their understanding of the importance of being culturally responsive mentors and educators demonstrating the reciprocal nature of mentoring.

Keywords: Future Educator Academy, dual enrollment courses, educator workforce, diversity, culturally responsive mentoring

Introduction

The Future Educator Pathway (FEP) is designed to recruit, motivate, educate, and mentor prospective middle school and high school students who are considering a career in education. The FEP consists of four components: a mentoring program, in-school seminars for high school students, a summer college residential experience, and dual enrollment opportunities. As FEP is a Grow-Your-Own program, two local school districts in partnership with the university guarantee that students who complete the program and graduate from the university with a teaching certificate will get an automatic interview which completes the grow-your-own cycle. School districts invest in their students in high school and desire to have them return to the district as educators.

The Color of Teaching mentoring program, the first program created for the FEP designed to recruit and retain students of color in the field of education, serves as the backbone of the FEP initiative and includes mentor training, on-campus events, and both individual and group mentoring meetings. Findings indicate that mentees who participate in at least two of the four FEP components persist toward their goal at a higher rate. All of the mentees featured in this paper are first-generation college students of color. Mentees' needs and voices are honored throughout the mentoring program as mentors listen to their mentees and design programming to fulfill their needs and interests. Additionally, a few mentees' words are highlighted in this paper as they reflect

on the impact that mentoring has had on them personally as well as their future career decisions. Mentors have given permission for their names to be published.

Literature Review

Across the Nation, we are experiencing an educator shortage crisis, and FEP, with robust mentoring components, helps address that crisis. In Pennsylvania, for example, in 2010-2011, 21,045 Instructional I teaching certificates were issued, while only 6,937 were published in 2019-2020, and the national average has declined over one-third in the past decade (Boyce & Morton, 2023; PA Educator Diversity Consortium, 2023). FEP offers mentoring, microteaching, motivation, a college residential experience, college course credit, and a clear pathway to a career in education.

The teacher shortage is seen at various levels of education. Still, the origins of the crisis stem from four primary sources: financial considerations, recruitment challenges, inconsistent preparation induction, and unattractive working conditions (Boyce & Morton, 2023). The teacher shortage is a pressing issue, but that does not condone a decline in teacher quality. Although the need for teachers is high, the quality of teaching should stay the same. Teacher quality is the critical factor affecting students' achievement in the classroom (Boyce & Morton, 2023). Teacher quality also applies to diversity in the teaching force as well. Having teachers of color in classrooms improves outcomes for all students, particularly children

of color (Boyce & Morton, 2023). The diverse nature of students participating in FEP allows for culturally relevant discussions and opportunities to learn about other cultures which may lead to having more culturally responsive teachers in the classroom.

Diversity indicates quality and should be viewed as a necessity in the education system. Educator diversity is a fundamental goal of FEP and specifically the CoT mentoring program. When students of color have a teacher, principal, or counselor of the same race, it correlates to higher test scores for them, and they are more likely to reach graduation in addition to earning other academic and extracurricular achievements (Pennsylvania Educator Diversity Consortium, 2023). However, it is easier to diversify the educator workforce if barriers are removed from teacher preparation programs and the certification process. Solutions include investments in pathways into teaching, which include special education, STEM, and secondary instruction. In the case of FEP, investment in providing high school and college students with experience has shown the best results in retaining teacher candidates from diverse backgrounds. FEP has provided mentorship for underrepresented 7th-12th grade students since 2007. In a post-pandemic climate, the program has evolved into a comprehensive agenda that applies the "Grow-Your-Own" educator recruitment strategy (Toshalis, 2014) which has become increasingly popular with school districts trying to fill their teacher vacancies.

Future Educator Pathway Overview

The Future Educator Pathway (FEP) is a comprehensive "Grow-Your-Own" program designed to recruit, motivate, and mentor students of color so they can attend college and become future educators (Gist et al., 2019). The FEP is a collaboration between Millersville University and local school districts and consists of four unique programs that are offered to middle school and high school students typically at no cost to students or their families. The Future Educator Pathway is supported by four major components: the Color of Teaching Mentoring Program, Side-by-Side, Summer Future Educator Academy, and dual enrollment courses.

Color of Teaching Mentoring Program

Color of Teaching Mentoring Program (CoT) is a mentoring program that provides students of color in grades 7-12 with a college student mentor. Matched mentor-mentee pairs interact to set goals, provide encouragement, and discuss routes for college success. College student mentors may also request a college professor for a mentor as this is a three-tiered mentoring program. CoT includes events held on the university campus such as public lectures, athletic contests, participation in low-ropes team-building activities, game

nights, scavenger hunts, etc. The major mentee recruitment event is called Teacher Ed Day (TED).

Teacher Ed Day (TED), a recruitment conference for high school students, is organized and run by CoT mentors at the university. The purpose of the conference is to introduce students from all backgrounds to the education field and encourage them to consider higher education and the education profession. Typically, the day starts with a welcoming speech from the Dean of the College of Education and Human Services, a keynote address from a motivational educator, followed by roundtable discussions with practicing educators of color, attendees, and CoT mentors sharing their stories about their journey to becoming a teacher, counselor, social worker, or administrator. Next, the students have lunch at the campus dining hall, so the attendees have an opportunity to try the food on campus. After lunch, the students tour the campus, experience a performance by a university student organization, and end the day with a Q&A session with panelists who represent various majors and organizations on campus. Survey data are collected at the beginning and the end of the event so researchers can track the potential impact this event may have on high school students' perceptions about careers in education. Results of the survey demonstrate an increase in participants' desire to learn more about FEP and how to become an educator. In 2023, TED celebrated its 20th event. Local school districts come to expect that TED will occur each year.

In 2024, TED partnered with Educators Rising, a Pennsylvania Education Association-sponsored program, to offer a new format including "teaching competitions" and the Keynote speaker was Elizabeth Raff, the 2022 Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year. Two of the students who participated in CoT, who are taking dual enrollment courses, and who attended the FEA, won regional speech awards at the competition.

Side-by-Side

Side-by-Side (SBS) is a series of seminar-style workshops offered during the regular school day for students in grades 9 & 10. The program is conducted by university faculty and college student mentors to introduce high school students to the art of teaching through various skill-focused activities, including microteaching. The high school students, who have been nominated by their teachers and counselors, participate in SBS during the school day each month throughout the academic year. The goal of this component of the FEP is to motivate and educate participants about the value of being an educator.

Summer Future Educator Academy

Summer Future Educator Academy (FEA) provides students in grades 11 & 12 with opportunities to reside on campus for a week, eat in the dining halls, attend lectures taught by

college professors, participate in field trips and learning activities, and learn about college from the admissions, library, and financial aid office staff. FEA gives participants (and their families) an experience of college-style living. Students in FEA also function as teacher's aides for younger children attending an educational summer camp which provides them with practical co-teaching experience and supports their desire to become educators.

Dual Enrollment Courses

FEP offers four 3-credit college dual enrollment courses, which are available usually for free to high school juniors and seniors that prepare students for the transition from high school into college and explore teaching and coaching as careers. The EDFN 179 course content includes: "college knowledge," time management, academic skills, social skills, personal and professional development, the importance of mentoring, and exploration of teaching and coaching as careers in terms of research, critical observations, and self-reflection. One main theme of the course is "education as an act of social justice" as students reflect on culturally responsive teaching practices. The WELL 175 course focuses on children's health through awareness, effective practices, and knowledge of health issues, including creating safe environments, nutrition education, and planning. The PSYC 100 course will focus on motivation, emotions, sensation and perception, individual differences, the nervous system, and learning and personality from the perspective of understanding human behavior. COMM 100 is the fundamentals of speech class providing students with public speaking experience.

The first cohort of juniors from one urban district have completed the first two courses successfully and will attend the Psychology and Communications courses on the college campus in their senior year. When students are successful in all four courses, they will earn guaranteed admission to the university.

As a "Grow-Your-Own" program, the school districts support their students in high school. When they graduate from the university with a degree in education and a teaching certificate, they are guaranteed an interview at the school district. This completes the "Grow-Your-Own" program cycle.

Commentaries from Participants

Mentee's Voices

These four components of FEP make it possible for a student to be inspired, educated, motivated, and mentored to pursue a career as an educator from 7th grade through college graduation. The curriculum of FEP is grounded in Culturally Relevant Teaching (Ladson-Billings,

2014) and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2013). FEP endeavors to create a familial culture typically embraced by African American and Latinx communities. The mission of the CoT Mentoring Program is to recruit and retain more students of color, specifically, in education careers. Participants' authentic voices are valued and help to shape the activities and curriculum of the program; therefore, some of their voices are featured here:

One African American female mentee shared:

I was in Color of Teaching for 3 years since my sophomore [year] and currently, I'm a soon-to-be graduating senior. During my time in Color of Teaching, I always felt important because someone was there to help me or to hear me. I feel as a growing young woman I need that; in this society to not get caught up in my stress and just talk to someone about it. Color of Teaching helped me realize I wanted to help adolescents just like teachers, counselors, principals, etc.

A senior Egyptian female mentee reported, "My new dream is to be an ESL teacher for young kids." Another junior Latina mentee said, "[My goal is] to graduate, go to college, major in early childhood, and minor in special ed." It is important to note that these two former mentees are pursuing their dreams now at the university and are serving as FEP mentors to the next cohort of mentees.

All these student voices speak to the personal impact specifically the mentoring program and Side-by-Side have had on them. All three mentees featured here are all pursuing a teaching career.

Mentor's Voices

College student mentors also report learning more about how to be a culturally responsive teacher by working with the ethnically diverse mentees in the program. College mentors are offered the opportunity to be matched with a college faculty mentor as well. These mentoring relationships provide the pre-service teachers with professional opportunities like presenting at academic conferences and getting published in academic journals. The faculty mentors acknowledge that mentoring college students helps them to be more sensitive professors because they more clearly understand some of the issues that college students are facing. Three-tiered mentoring is effective because the faculty mentor can help their mentee (the college student mentor) if they have any challenges working with their pre-college mentee.

Through CoT, mentors gain leadership experience, professional development, diversity development, public speaking experience, conference opportunities, and study abroad opportunities, and are provided with a safe space to cultivate ideas for further development as culturally responsive educators. Mentors in the

program identify various learning experiences that contribute to their professional development. The following mentors gave permission to have their names published.

Claire Robinson, former CoT Treasurer and Mentor, now a practicing Early Childhood teacher, shared:

Color of Teaching's events are often aimed at bettering ourselves. From resume and goal-setting workshops to being able to speak comfortably in front of people, I am always learning something new as a member of this program. These new skills help me to be a better mentor to my mentee.

Brynn Raub, Former CoT Vice President and Mentor, now a practicing middle school teacher explained:

We [CoT] host a variety of different events. Many of which build skills that will help them [mentees] in the future. Their impact is not just limited to the members of CoT. They also seek to educate and assist the surrounding community. CoT hosts a variety of different events like Teacher Ed Day [on-campus conference to celebrate educators], Dream Warriors [Native American performance including history], and the Scholastic Book Fair [community service project to promote literacy in urban elementary schools].

Findings

Survey and feedback data are collected during each part of the FEP so that modifications can be made. After reviewing the comprehensive data in 2021, several themes emerged: belongingness, focusing on teaching as a career decision, and the need for culturally responsive mentoring.

Belongingness

CoT allows mentors, faculty, and mentees to closely bond through mentor training and various activities. Typically, CoT holds two activities per month for mentors, faculty, and mentees to attend. In addition, CoT holds monthly business meetings for mentors and other members within the organization. Mentees and mentors express their belongingness in a variety of ways.

Taylor Hough, former Mentor and CoT Secretary, now a practicing high school English teacher shared:

The Color of Teaching Mentoring Program had quickly become my favorite organization when I joined my junior year. Education has always been a field in which I was eager to grow and learn more about myself and others. Color of Teaching has allowed me to do that through strong relationships with professors, peers,

and other professionals in the field.

A senior African American female mentee in CoT stated:

Color of Teaching was one of my biggest support systems during my high school years. I always wanted to go to college, but I was very confused how to get there. Color of Teaching mentors helped me to set a goal in the beginning of the semester then midway through my 3rd marking period we would reflect back and ask ourselves if we have accomplished our goal.

Specific activities were designed to promote bonding; for example, the group participated in a series of low ropes course activities on the college campus. These activities promoted teamwork, problem-solving, and good communication skills. Participants worked in partners, small groups, and large groups to complete tasks an individual would not be able to complete as well alone. Mentors, mentees, and facilitators discussed the benefits of this activity as a group which fostered more unity. Mentees and mentors agreed that the low ropes activity showed the importance of communicating in many ways including when one person is struggling. Members of CoT reported that this activity strengthened all participants' abilities to work together effectively. The low ropes course experience is also part of the FEA (Summer Academy) as it helps all Scholars bond and practice important communication and problem-solving skills.

Consideration for Teaching

Since the goal of FEP is to recruit more students of color to pursue careers in education, the following testimonials from mentees in the program highlight some of their growth and self-reflection.

A Latino male mentee in CoT said:

Hands down my favorite memory [in SBS] was the activity where I became the teacher and taught others how to play Hangman. That really showed me how difficult it was to teach simple things like games.

During his senior year, this mentee presented at an academic conference with the FEP Director and other college mentors.

Sophomore African American female mentee in SBS shared:

I selected my top [career] choice because becoming a teacher is something I really want to do. What interests me about being a teacher is coming up with fun ways to learn and being able to help students with their education.

Culturally Responsive Mentoring

When college mentors first join the program, they participate in mentor training. The training includes understanding the qualities of a good mentor, the importance of effective mentoring, the “dos and don’ts” of mentoring, the content of mentoring sessions, the stages of mentoring, and becoming a culturally responsive mentor. The principles of the organization align with Ladson-Billings’ definition of culturally responsive teaching (mentoring). She states, that culturally responsive teaching is “a type of teaching that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p.20). Participants, both mentees and mentors, in the program provided the following testimonials to support the importance of culturally responsive mentoring.

Samantha Waldman, former CoT Member at Large and Mentor, now practicing 2nd grade teacher described:

Color of Teaching equips its members and mentors to be culturally responsive and aware. The program also challenges the mentors to examine their own unconscious biases, a task people are seldom asked to intentionally do. Those who join Color of Teaching leave with newfound skills and knowledge, not only about themselves as leaders and advocates, but about students of urban school districts, various cultural groups, and the world around them. This organization creates a sense of belonging and purpose on campus, but also prepares its members for life after college and equips them with an intangible foundation to become better leaders, advocates, and community members in society.

In the Winter of 2020, six CoT mentors participated in a study abroad trip to Puerto Rico where they were able to co-teach with a teacher in their content area. Anna Milner, former CoT President, now practicing 3rd grade teacher explained:

This past January I was able to teach Science STEM in Puerto Rico challenging myself to teach students who speak mostly Spanish. This organization gets people to think about the world beyond them and the bubble that we live in. I have learned lots about other students’ cultures, races, and ethnicities. It has gotten me to look at my own unconscious biases which have made me realize that I have a lot to learn. This organization has encouraged us to defy our own limitations through many avenues. All this and more have made me become more confident, more energized, develop great relationships, and have clearly let me know that I chose the right path for me.

An African American female mentee in CoT shared:

My favorite memory ever being in Color of Teaching was BSU poetry night. I jokingly volunteered to talk about my experience of being a dark skin female. However, since Color of Teaching was invited, the mentors encouraged me, so I talked about various obstacles that I had to deal with being in my skin tone. I have never been so vulnerable and felt so loved at the same time. All the mentors were there hugging me while I was crying.

Mentees are provided with experiences on and off the college campus. However, most activities are held on campus allowing for mentees to explore and get to know campus better. For example, activities are held in university classrooms, the low ropes course, the Welcome Center, the library, the Ware Center, which is a performing arts facility in downtown Lancaster, sports complexes, and the University Student Center. By providing such opportunities, mentees have shared that they feel more comfortable with the college campus as well as are more willing to explore other campuses. Holding activities in different buildings helps the mentees navigate new places, even though mentors are typically with them, they try to allow mentees to navigate on their own. Mentees also have the comfort and confidence of the group. These connections strengthen the bond of the mentoring relationships.

Limitations

While FEP has grown significantly over the years from the Color of Teaching mentoring program to Project Teacher Development and now to the Future Educator Pathway, there are some limitations within the program. For instance, to hold events funding is necessary, or mentors may have to help pay for the events. The mentors host fundraisers and the Dean of the College of Education and Human Services has helped to partially fund CoT, TED, and FEA in the past. Events are typically held at the end of a school day which is 4:00 pm so that the mentees can take the bus and get to the campus. The program has many students interested in the events; however, college students lead very busy lives. The mentors may still be in class, have practice for their sport, or need to work. This problem also exists for mentees, as most after-school activities are during the same time. Sometimes there is a waiting list for mentees to get matched with mentors, so we use group mentoring practices to keep the mentees engaged, but there is nothing stronger than an effective one-on-one mentor partnership.

Conclusions

Theoretically, FEP can support a student from 7th grade through college graduation and it fosters a sense of belongingness for students. As mentees participate in the multiple programs, they will feel more comfortable on a college campus which may

decrease their potential anxiety about attending college. The Summer FEA gives mentees and their families a chance to see what living at college is like which can be a barrier for some protective Latino families, particularly.

Students are also presented with many academic opportunities such as leadership training and presenting at professional academic conferences. Mentees have expressed their success in developing skills such as goal setting, group engagement, decision making, public speaking, stress management, how to access resources, college readiness, and career decisions. Students are also connecting with college students and professors to gain more experience with college lifestyles and expectations.

Of course, not all middle school students, or even high school students, are sure of the career path they want to pursue, but many of the mentees in the program indicate that being an educator (i.e., teacher, guidance counselor, social worker, administrator) is one of their top three career interests. Students who practice microteaching report the challenges of lesson planning and delivering an engaging lesson, but they say this encourages them to work harder to acquire those skills.

Developing culturally responsive educators is so important for PK-12 students and society. Mentors in FEP are predominantly white females so having this exposure to mentees of color can benefit them as developing teachers. Through training and self-reflection, mentors learn to uncover their own implicit biases. Mentors often report on how much they learn from their mentees about their ethnicities, traditions, and school cultures. Mentees, of course, also gain a lot of college knowledge by working with their mentors. Effective mentoring is mutually beneficial to all stakeholders. By building strong connections, FEP focuses on preparing all mentors and mentees to be the best version of themselves they can be and inspiring them to become effective culturally responsive educators.

Considering the present national teacher shortage, there has been a high demand locally from school districts for the Future Educator Pathway program because it is a "Grow-Your-Own" program. School districts invest in their students now in hopes that they will return to their home districts as certified educators. Some school districts guarantee participants in FEP an interview when they complete the program and earn their certification. Students who participate in at least two of the four components of FEP typically persist toward their goal of being an educator. Side-by-Side, FEA, and dual enrollment are all supported by the CoT mentoring program. All stakeholders in the FEP benefit from the program, which is only possible through strong partnerships between the school districts and the university, and the mentees and mentors on both levels. FEP participants indicate that mentoring relationships truly matter when growing your own educators.

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