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The relevance and promise of relational mentoring for school leadership: a conversation

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Abstract

Purpose – Studies uniformly portray the assistant principal (AP) position as challenging given a number of systemic issues that negatively impact job satisfaction and performance. Mentoring has been proposed as a way to redress these problems. The purpose of this paper is to illuminate an alternative to traditional mentoring and make recommendations for how to utilize this approach in supporting APs and principal interns.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors employ a retrospective and conversational approach, sharing incidents and interactions from their professional experience and making connections to existing research literature. The authors explain the relevance of three concepts developed in relational cultural theory (RCT) including: interdependent self-in-relation, growth-fostering interactions, and an exploration of systemic power.

Findings – The narrative exposes the ambiguity of school leadership and its toll, as well as how relational mentoring facilitates integration and making sense of challenging experiences for improved coping. Barriers in communication are described and the ways relational mentoring addresses these weaknesses by building trust, recognizing the expertise of mentor and protégé, and encouraging protégé empowerment and judgment.

Research limitations/implications – Potential research limitations such as inaccuracies in recall, reliance on a single method, and hindsight bias are recognized and addressed to reduce their threat.

Practical implications – RCT may provide ways to develop and structure more effective mentoring programs and educate both aspiring leaders and their mentors in their work together to provide for leadership development.

Social implications – Improved mentoring practices have the potential to help APs socialize into the role more quickly and become more effective school leaders.

Originality/value – The authors describe the use of RCT in a new context. The paper provides insights and guidance for APs, principals, principal interns, and leadership preparation faculty to offer a pathway on which to prepare the next generation of school leaders equipped with the desired competences and experiences to transform schools.

Keywords Reflection, Power, Coping, Assistant principals, Relational mentoring

Paper type Conceptual paper

Literature on assistant or vice principals (APs) remains minimal despite numerous and consistent calls over the years for increased attention (Gurley *et al.*, 2015). Researchers find the assistant principalship to be a highly influential experience in the socialization of school leaders and is one that tends to cultivate their adoption of a custodial orientation to leadership (Armstrong, 2010; Marshall and Greenfield, 1987). Studies uniformly portray AP positions as challenging given a number of systemic issues that negatively impact their job satisfaction and performance (Austin and Brown, 1970; Tredway *et al.*, 2007). Celikten's (2001, pp. 67-68) review of the literature stated that chief among the noted difficulties for APs is the lack of:

> […]consistent, well-defined job description, clearly stated duties, or method of evaluating outcomes from accomplished tasks…. The role of the AP is usually one that entails a number of tasks the principal does not necessarily want to do and is based on the amount of power the principal is willing to share or delegate to them.

Hartzell (1993) was among those who first recognized the potential negative influence of this kind of socialization on the subsequent effectiveness of administrators. Bastian and Henry (2015) analyzed data from a sample of 981 first-time principals in North Carolina to find an association between school outcomes and principal experiences being an assistant.

In data collected through both interviews and surveys, APs reported that they generally spend much of their time attending to student discipline, supervising co-curricular activities, evaluating programs and personnel, and performing related management tasks (Hausman *et al.*, 2002). In addition, APs desire and are prepared (i.e. in their ideal practice) for more involvement in tasks associated with instructional leadership and professional development (Militello *et al.*, 2015). Numerous recommendations have been offered by scholars to ameliorate the disparity between observed and ideal work practices of APs, which include justifications for increased participation in efforts to improve teaching and learning given educational accountability.

Noting the intensifying demand for student achievement, Greenfield (1985) proposed reconceptualizing the AP role by "making it more central to the instructional domain without sacrificing the stability function" (p. 85) attained by the duties-as-assigned job description. He articulated four assumptions or conditions as necessary for successful implementation of this change. Interestingly, three of these have become fairly ubiquitous in schools today: a focus on outcomes and standards, resources and training for instructional leadership, and regular time for and ongoing practice of teacher collaboration. His fourth assumption recognizes principal consent to make realistic adjustments, as "the 'new set' of responsibilities must not be merely 'added' to current responsibilities" (p. 89). His insight aligns with others who point out the importance of principal support and collaboration with APs as instructional leaders (Paskey 1989; Militello *et al.*, 2015). Researchers have examined the barriers and bridges that APs encounter in securing support from their supervisor. For example, Marshall and Mitchell (1991) point out the hidden micropolitical rules of an administrative culture that influences principal trust and willingness to share leadership with their assistants, while Pounder and Merrill (2001) add their voices to those who identify mentoring as fundamental to moving both individuals and the profession forward.

Calabrese and Tucker-Ladd (1991) offer a clear and succinct essay on mentoring involving principals and their assistants, which is frequently referenced in the literature. They begin by making explicit its purpose, stating that a "principal as a mentor provides opportunities for growth, develops self-confidence, and motivates the assistant principal to higher goals" (p. 68) and continue by describing eight qualities of

forming strong mentoring relationships: initiation, collaboration, inclusiveness, coaching, modeling, reciprocation, development, and separation. While there is much of their portrayal that we appreciate, and we will acknowledge the ways in which their representation aligns with evolving theory on mentoring, their discussion also contains language that limits and misguides both mentors and protégés. The purpose of this paper is to update, illuminate, and simplify these characteristics of mentoring relationships to three tenets: interdependent self-in-relation, growth-fostering interactions, and an exploration of systemic power. We draw from relational cultural theory (RCT) (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007) in forwarding these tenets, and we will explain their relevance through examples and reflections on our experiences of leading in schools and preparing others for leadership. Thus, our format is retrospective as we share incidents and interactions from our past, as well as conversational, for we alternate between authors in presenting our position.

The procedures we used in generating this narrative expose our description and interpretation to several limitations, including inaccuracies in recall (Cooper *et al.*, 1978), reliance on a single method (Creswell, 2003), and hindsight bias (Hawkins and Hastie, 1990). We recognized these constraints, as they are well known in qualitative inquiry, and intentionally addressed them to reduce their threat (Merriam, 2009). For example, hindsight bias tends to restrict sense making as it tolerates oversimplifying and reduces uncertainty (Woods, 2005). Through sharing our experiences with each other, and given the differences in our positionality, we critiqued and resisted the inclination toward reductionism. Other checks for accuracy and credibility were employed as we sought triangulation within our analysis. The excerpts we share were ones that each of us could appreciate and recognize. Following Chase's (2003) guidance, the narration from which our excerpts were drawn was formed by "listening for gaps, silences, or contradictions, and reiterating the invitation through questions that encouraged fuller narration of the complexities" (p. 289) in our stories.

Before proceeding further, it is appropriate to offer a brief introduction to each of us. Kathleen, C. has been studying mentoring relationships to better understand how they develop, as well as what actions affect the relationship, including best practices that support growth and development of both protégé and mentor. Kathleen, C. has 16 years as an elementary and middle school principal and now serves as a faculty member preparing educators for leadership roles in schools. She is currently the supervisor for 15 principal interns. Gordon works with Kathleen, C. in the same preparation program and has been on faculty for a total of 16 years at two different universities. He works primarily with doctoral students on school improvement initiatives using action research. Additionally, his research interests include the principalship and the ways mindfulness contributes to leadership practice. Kathleen, L. was a doctoral student of Gordon's and has held the role of middle school AP for two years, before which she was a dean of students for six years, an elementary school AP, and lead teacher in gifted education. Kathleen, L. collaborated with Gordon on a study of instructional leadership given her expertise and professional experience. It was during her discussion with Gordon about how to support and sustain educational leaders that the role of mentors surfaced. We invited Kathleen, C. to join our deliberation, which is how this paper came to life.

Some grounding mentoring literature
The word "mentor" may bring up different images for each of us. We may first think of the proper noun, a name from Greek mythology, and of Odysseus, who seeks a caretaker for his son, Telemachus; it is Mentor who fills this role (Lattimore, 1965). Or,

in the retelling cited by Hansman (2002) it is the goddess of wisdom, Athena, stepping forward in male form as Mentor to watch over Telemachus and guide him. Levinson *et al.* (1978) used the terms "teacher, advisor, or sponsor" (p. 97) and these words are echoed by Hansman (2002): "Teacher. Guide. Pathfinder. Leader. Pilot. Advisor. Supporter. Counselor. Director. Sponsor. Conductor. Caretaker. Friend" (p. 1). While such notions and language continues to exert influence, it is not without contest. Within this section, we explain several shifts in the mentoring literature that push against the traditional model as they expose the foundation on which RCT rests, and which helped us to identify critical issues within our conversations that clarified alternative possibilities of ways in which to nurture leadership development of not only APs, but principals and principal interns too. Our description attempts to unfold how each modification builds on or is inclusive of the others, beginning with the understanding of mentoring as a verb.

Enerson (2001) described how the topic of mentoring and the relationship between mentoring and teaching has entered into our language and into educational practice, noting that the word mentor, which historically was a noun, has now shifted to a verb. Enerson observed that in this movement from noun to verb also lies an understanding that mentoring "is an activity having even less to do with showing others what we can do than with helping them perceive what they can do" (p. 8). Enerson explained that this "shift from the noun to verb places a clear emphasis on both the process and the learner" (p. 8).

Ragins and Kram (2007), citing the work of Kram (1985) and Levinson *et al.* (1978), defined mentoring as a relationship between a more experienced (and often older) mentor and a less experienced and younger protégé focussed on assisting in the career development of the protégé. Kram's (1985) seminal work focussed on the two main functions that mentors serve: career functions and psychosocial functions. Career functions were described as behaviors in which mentors were engaged in coaching the protégé, sponsoring protégé advancement within their organization, increasing the visibility and positive exposure of the protégé, offering protection to the protégé, and finally, giving challenging assignments to the protégé. Psychosocial functions were related to interpersonal aspects of the protégé's professional and personal growth, identity, self-worth, and self-efficacy. Mentor actions included acceptance, counseling, role modeling, offering friendship, and were founded on trust between mentor and protégé.

Other early work by Ragins and Cotton (1999) suggests that "formal mentoring programs should mimic the development of informal relationships" (p. 546) and that "formal mentoring programs should not be considered a substitute for informal mentoring relationships" (p. 546). Implications from their study suggested that the way to build relationships between mentors and protégés was to provide education on strategies and skills for developing relationships. A key finding focussed on the various roles mentors and protégés bring to the mentoring relationship. For example, mentors serving in supervisorial roles tended to provide "more career development functions" (such as control over the protégé's work-related assignments), but mentors who also serve in a supervisory capacity may be inclined to provide more limited psychosocial functions because of perceived potential conflict with their supervisorial role (p. 547).

The impact of the mentoring relationship was the focus of a study surveying over 1,000 employees by Ragins *et al.* (2000). They examined the association between career attitudes and the following: presence of a mentor, type of mentoring (informal or

formal), the quality of the mentoring relationship, and the perceived effectiveness and design of the mentoring program. Their results suggested the protégé's satisfaction with the mentor was more critical to career aspirations than having a mentor or other features of a mentoring program.

Mullen (2005) examined metaphors that are used in the mentoring literature. For example, metaphors from the medical field where mentors are the veterans treating the ailments of novices, or the idea of cloning a protégé to be in the image of the mentor, tend to reinforce issues of power between mentor and protégé. Mullen, citing the work of Freire (1997), describes the cloning process as one where protégés may "feel inclined or pressured to assimilate their teacher's values and ideals, dreams and aspirations" (p. 31). Building from this understanding, researchers focussed on the developmental nature of relationships forged between mentors and protégés to expose the complexity of mentoring (see Allen and Eby, 2010; Mullen, 2005; Ragins and Kram, 2007). Whether the mentoring is the result of a formal program or an informal process is also a key consideration.

Dougherty and Dreher (2007) reviewed a meta-analysis conducted by Allen *et al.* (2004) that included these key findings from 47 mentoring studies: individuals who had been mentored received greater career outcomes than those who had not been mentored; career-related mentoring was positively related to career outcomes (such as salary growth, promotions, career satisfaction, job satisfaction, and satisfaction with the mentor); and psychosocial mentoring was also positively related to career outcomes (p. 53).

One of the more recent challenges to the traditional conceptualization of mentoring draws on the relational aspects described above by adding recognition of the various developmental benefits for mentors. Daloz (1999) provided an early foundation for this argument when he drew attention to the qualities of the relationship stating that mentors "neither 'give' nor 'do' […] rather, it is a way we [mentors] stand in relation to them [protégés]" (p. xvii). Daloz's claim encouraged others to examine the needs of adult learners involved in educative and mentoring relationships. More recently, Fletcher and Ragins (2007) framed a newer mentoring concept called "relational mentoring" that goes beyond the traditional perspective of a one-directional, hierarchical view. Citing work by Ragins (2005) and Ragins and Verbos (2007), Fletcher and Ragins (2007) stated that "relational mentoring represents the relationship state of high-quality mentoring" in which there is "an interdependent and generative developmental relationship that promotes mutual growth, learning and development within the career context" (p. 374). Relational mentoring seeks to address limitations of traditional mentoring perspectives by exploring what functions and outcomes the protégé might provide for the mentor, examining traditional views defining career success as autonomy, independence and differentiation, as well as how power affects mentor/protégé interactions.

Fletcher and Ragins' argument also draws on the work of Miller (1976) and Jordan *et al.* (1991) who reviewed relational mentoring through the lens of RCT to tease apart and analyze mentoring interactions within the larger societal and cultural context in which they occur. Miller and colleagues coined the term "growth-in-connection" to help explain an alternative way of viewing human development to that offered by psychology during the 1970s. According to RCT, human development does not primarily occur through separation and individualization, but rather through connection with others. Empathy, or the capacity to be vulnerable, as well as related relational-oriented emotions, were recast not as deficiencies but as strengths.

For example, a key focus of RCT pertains to questioning assumptions promulgated in western society that often socialize men and women to view women as the gender that holds the relational skills and asks men to devalue or deny their competence or success in forming deep connections with others. Perhaps the best example of how divergent RCT is from traditional mentoring is evident in Calabrese and Tucker-Ladd's (1991) advice on separation, their last quality of mentoring, when they explain "the mentor must let go, where the individual receiving the mentoring outgrows this supportive relationship […]. It is a natural event" (p. 73). RCT offers a different view or recommendation to Calabrese and Tucker-Ladd's advice. In RCT, the formation of the mentoring relationship is viewed as a web of connections, which may change over time but rejects the notion that promotes the ending of a relationship as a sign of its success.

In the next sections, we share some of our conversations exploring and pondering RCT and the ways in which we have come to appreciate Fletcher and Ragins' (2007) conception of interdependent self-in-relation, growth-fostering interactions, as well as an exploration of systemic power as essential in mentoring for school leaders. In the last section, we summarize our key points of argument and connect them to our interpretation for mentoring the next generation of school leaders.

Interdependent self-in-relation: Kathleen, L.
Fletcher and Ragins (2007) cite the work of Miller (1976, 1984), Miller and Stiver (1997), and Surrey (1985) who challenged the traditional western view of the concept of the "self." The traditional western view is that with personal development comes an ability to separate oneself from others, "moving from dependence to independence" (p. 378). Fletcher and Ragins (2007) explain that the RCT view of the "self" is not an independent self, but a self-in-relation to another, a "two-directional flow of mutual influence" (p. 378) between the mentor and protégé. Expressions of who we are include not only our professional personas but also integrated views of who we truly believe we are and who we are with each other. Being able to reveal how we are feeling in a situation with each other is such a freeing experience, as so often what is thought or felt is hidden from others. Having another person with whom to share one's true self and feelings can be freeing. This sharing allows one to let go of some of the stress, worry, and fear, all of which take a toll on one's wellness, physically and/or mentally, and which the authors have often experienced as exhaustion.

I remember when I was an intern, earning my principal certificate. There were a number of incidents that challenged me to see parents/guardians in new ways. At the time, I believed I held a fairly progressive, pro-parent/guardian involvement philosophy. I knew parents/guardians were not without faults, but as a teacher I had tried to work with the families of all my students. Coming into contact with a much larger number of parents/guardians meant having to deal with the most challenging and severely problematic home situations. I am not saying these are bad people – I am saying mental health issues, drug abuse, unemployment, poverty, and so on, create real difficulties for students, families, and educators. Some teachers and administrators may believe such parents/guardians do not love their children or do not know how to parent. In my experience, such judgment does not help anyone, but rather adds fuel or oxygen that nourishes the burning flame that is both student failure and educator fatigue.

I recall the first time I was involved in suspending a student. A day or two later, the boy's father came to plead for his eighth grade son. It was a difficult situation. He cried and asked for justification of the school officer who had arrested, cuffed, and publically

escorted his child out of the building. Yes, his son had erupted in gym class and he threw a punch at the officer who had overheard the scuffle and attempted to break up the fight. This father shared that he and the boy's mother were divorcing. Home routines were disrupted, he suspected his son was skipping or missing taking his medication and his grades were suffering. The father claimed he had tried to get the teacher to arrange a meeting with the student support team, but the teacher and principal had not been supportive. It seems the boy's mother had not wanted it. I felt uncomfortable and desperately wanted to extract myself since I did not believe the appropriate action had been taken in either the arrest or suspension. I did not want to say anything to this father that I would later regret. There was no one I felt safe enough to talk with about my doubts. It was the first of many decisions that involved not really knowing if what was done was what should have been done. Since then, I have come to understand that in many situations there is no right answer that gives oneself peace. The flip side of this problem is just as bad; I am amazed that despite the many possibilities, it seems that in many cases "what is best for students" is unnecessarily restricted to someone's single right way.

The ambiguity of school leadership can take a very heavy, personal toll. Relational mentoring points to the value of having others to whom you can reach out and share how you are feeling, to help make sense of and integrate what is perceived and experienced. It makes room for the perspective of leaders, teachers, and others as whole people, rather than reducing individuals to a label, behavior, or role. While this type of conversation might be possible in a dependent, one-directional, traditional mentoring relationship, the outcome might not successfully serve the professional "self" of the person recounting his/her experiences and feelings. Assumptions that attend professional boundaries and hierarchy are often violated by interactions that communicate or recognize our interdependence. Calabrese and Tucker-Ladd (1991) advise principals that they "not view the assistant principal as a future competitor, but rather as a talented colleague who is being initiated […] [which] establishes a basis for mutual feelings of loyalty and trust" (p. 69). The quality of the described interaction they offer leans in the direction we are pointing, but they do not go far enough.

Growth-fostering interactions: Kathleen, C.
The second tenet of RCT explained by Fletcher and Ragins (2007) is identifying "specific conditions, skills, and outcomes that define a mutually (i.e. two-directional) growth-fostering interaction" (p. 381). A major condition of a growth-fostering interaction is moving from mutual authenticity to mutual empathy. In the example previously discussed, having a person to express one's feelings and experiences to in confidence, and from whom one does not have to hide aspects of the story for fear of judgment of the listener, offers the potential for a growth-fostering interaction to occur. In the moment of telling the details of the incident and sharing one's feelings, one may have insights into recurring patterns of behavior that are reflected by the listener's reactions – even with minute words, such as "yes," "oh," or "hmm." It may be in the telling of the experience that one says things that might reflect or be filled with the emotion of reliving the experience – things that may even seem out of character to one's self or to the listener. Having the listener listen deeply and reflect your comments back to you so you can hear what you are saying, by making comments such as, "I know you wouldn't really do that!" or "Wow, is there something more to this story?" helps one consider what other related issues the incident might be bringing up. The comments could be outrageous or very much out of character, but somehow speaking the words

allows the speaker to expel some of the pent-up emotion of the experience. It might also be that in hearing those comments from the listener, and taking the time to reflect on the comments, the speaker may develop a new perspective. Or it may be the questions asked, or the stance of inquiry that the listener takes, that brings about a learning-filled moment. Also, it can be in stating something that might be considered an oppositional or "far-out" idea that allows one to live out reenactments of the experience vicariously, and having once expressed these ideas out loud, they can be dispensed with as not how one would see one's true self responding.

Central to my practice as a teacher, leader, and mentor is reflection. Reflection in today's fast-paced, hurried world can seem counter-cultural. In my work with teacher leaders who are busy principal candidates, I have to find ways to bring reflective practice into their practice, and then foster its use. One way I have been able to bring reflection into their practice is to actually give class time for reflection. While the examples I share draw on my experience with principal interns, the issues raised are easily identifiable for APs.

I teach a formalized, written method to help set a tone for developing a reflective practice based on the work of Arredondo-Rucinski (2005), who drew upon the work of John Dewey (1916) and Osterman and Kottkamp (1993). Arredondo-Rucinski described the four levels of the use of reflective practice as: emergent, competent, expert, and ethical and socially just (p. 84). As I begin work with our principal candidates, I find that they move from the emergent to the competent stage quickly when given time and feedback on their written reflections. Further, through the regular use of written reflection practice, I have found that students move toward providing a richer detail of events that they are seeking to understand, as well as asking additional questions and giving best guesses given their experience. The practice nurtures risk-taking and fosters self-efficacy as candidates develop skills of leading rooted in inquiry. I suspect that such preparation contributes to student dissatisfaction with incidents involving their principal mentors that reflect a judgmental approach to mentoring (Lejonberg *et al.*, 2015). The Educational Leadership faculty in our university is collaborating with local districts to offer a certificate to participating first year administrators, which includes among other learning activities time for reflection (written and discussion-based). The certificate program also involves the district-appointed mentors of new principals, wherein we aim to strengthen their appreciation and skill in developmental mentoring (Educational Leadership Program, 2015).

Reflection and mentoring are critical partners. An example of how they work together is visible in a writing exercise I have used with several cohorts. Principal candidates engage in self-ethnography drawing from their K-12 school experiences to explore the interconnectedness of school and home. The assignment is introduced after building trust with students. The stories the principal candidates tell tend to be deeply personal and revealing. For example, one principal candidate wrote a detailed account about an event in his personal life. In his self-ethnography he described growing up in a home in which expectations for exemplary behavior were held out over academics, discipline was strict, and mistakes were not tolerated. In fact, punishment was often delivered in a violent manner. This principal candidate explained that he lived in constant fear as a child and in youth that he would do something in school that would prompt a call home.

So, my knowledge and understanding of the principal intern's history, as revealed by the self-ethnography, helped me mentor this intern through an internship experience using reflective practices we had established through written reflections.

The principal intern was called to the office to handle a discipline issue involving a student using profanity in anger with his teacher. The school policy required a call home but before the call was made the principal intern talked with the student. As the intern talked with the student about the incident, he learned that the student was terrified that his father might be called. In fact, the student began to cry and plead with the principal intern not to call his home at all. The student begged for any other punishment rather than the call home. The principal intern felt racked with worry and was, as he described, "just sick" from this experience. The principal intern described to me that he was thinking about what might happen to the student at home and was recalling what would have happened to him at his home in a similar circumstance. When the principal intern tried to talk with his principal mentor about wanting to take time to explore a bit more about what the student's home life might be like, especially based on the student's reaction, and to explore if there might be any concerns about an overreaction by the parent/guardian, the mentor principal brushed off the intern's concerns saying, "It's the job – get it done."

The principal intern called me and told me what had happened with the student and his mentor principal's reaction. As we talked together, I found it powerful to know the intern's story through the self-ethnography and to be able to use a reflective practice approach to thinking through not only what needed to be done per school policy, but going deeper into how to, or even if to, try to structure a future talk with his mentor principal about this incident. Our conversation went deep, using what Zachary and Fischler (2014) call a level four conversation: "collaborative engagement" (p. 168). In this type of conversation, both mentor and mentee can share experiences that make them vulnerable, but because trust has been established both are willing to be vulnerable with each other. I will remember this conversation for a long time to come because it held a special mentoring moment for both of us. I asked the intern these questions: "Why do you think you were called to handle this situation?" and then, "What are the lessons here for you if you were the leader — the principal?" This use of inquiry allowed a rare moment in our conversation where we could both acknowledge that leading takes courage and that maybe a phone call home was not the way to handle this situation. Maybe a hard and fast policy about calling home would not be in place in the school that the intern would one day lead. From this mentoring conversation, it appears that taking time to reflect and remember can be valuable mentoring actions. In this moment, we both shared in the learning, and I think this learning moment will come around again.

Exploration of systemic power: Gordon

Systemic power is the third tenet of RCT that Fletcher and Ragins (2007) consider. Again, the work of Miller (1976) is cited, especially in a deeper look at how the concepts of independence and achievement may be viewed. Miller (1976) reframes the idea of individual achievement as a myth because everything we do and accomplish is in relation to others. Focussing on perspectives of gender and power dynamics, Fletcher and Ragins (2007) prompt us to remember that mentoring has its roots "in the experience of White male professionals in the Western world, […] [which] reflects the attributes, values, life experiences, and gender role expectations" (p. 390). Therefore, traditional views of mentoring may not align with the needs of women and may add a layer of tension for women to navigate. McDermott *et al.* (2009) among others recognize the problems present in essentializing the experience or perspective of individuals based on identity. There is value in acknowledging the ways in which the multiple

identities that each person may possess or choose (e.g. gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, religion, ability, occupation, etc.) open toward a richness in possibilities for what matters and the various tensions that may necessitate navigation (Chikkatur, 2012).

The effect of identification within groups at a societal level also has ties to systemic power issues. Fletcher and Ragins (2007) point out that "the legacies of patriarchal laws, slavery, and homophobic secrecy" (p. 391) have created power dynamics that should be considered when studying mentoring relationships. In the previous examples, there are issues related to power dynamics but they may not be visible or made explicit in the description. Power can be sifted out and denoted among each of these actors and in how individuals relate to others who experience these incidents. Most clearly, the very nature of serving in the role of AP is telling, as defined by the hierarchy of position as assistant to the principal within these examples.

The power dynamics among those in the mentoring relationship may be less transparent due to the sense of authenticity, the revealing of one's true self, feelings of trust and confidentiality, and the development of friendships. Power dynamics, even in relationships where all these positive components exist, must be thoughtfully navigated. A misplaced expression as small as "hmm," or the lack of attention caused by conflicting events – such as having time to talk at the time the speaker needs to talk – can affect the mentoring relationship.

I have never been a principal, nor an AP. The lack of this professional experience and supposed qualification for teaching in an educational leadership program is one that I have been confronted with or have bumped into from time to time. When it is pointed out, it is usually done by a colleague who is attempting to exert power as a decision is about to be made and I have made a recommendation that they disagree with. I have had students ask me about this too, but it is usually when we are first getting to know one another. I am in schools often, though not frequently enough, but it is usually for research and I have learned well the skills of observer and listener. I teach classes as well and ask my students questions that allow them to speak about their experiences. The mentoring they are receiving is clearly evident in the kinds of things they discuss doing, the ways they talk about students or colleagues, and the positions they advocate for as being aligned with those of their school and district.

Mentoring relationships generally form in one of several ways: a teacher self-selects to take coursework toward principal licensure/certification, or a sitting principal suggests that a current teacher consider a leadership role, or another colleague, friend, or family member suggests that a teacher consider a leadership position, or even a combination of these forces may be at work. It is not unusual for my students and former students to share the difficulties they have in receiving mentorship from a principal whose leadership was the very reason for considering entering the program. The "I-can-do-leadership-better-than-this" motivation has stimulated more than a few individuals I have known and worked with.

This story has been re-told to me more than once by others I have worked with who are considering and/or pursuing principal certification. Of course, this type of circumstance makes the formation of the mentoring relationship with this same principal very difficult to say the least, and results in a relationship fraught with the potential for difficulties from the very start. So, the way future administrative candidates are surfaced from the teaching ranks and then partnered with their current administrator, or the way APs are partnered with principals to be their mentors, is not

aligned with what could be considered as strong mentoring practice. These relationships begin based on proximity, or less-than-purposeful assignment, based on who comes forward rather than by an educative process that explores how the pairing might best be made on the building of a future mentoring relationship.

Navigating this type of situation is difficult for a variety of reasons. For example, the principal may not view the candidate as having leadership potential because their educational views are at odds from the start. The difficulties often show up in a delayed response or resistance by the would-be-mentor to give the principal candidate even the smallest leadership opportunity. In these cases, the university supervisor is needed to intervene and talk with the mentor about specific opportunities and tasks that they should consider having the candidate experience. There are also frequent issues of power and control that interfere with the candidate's ability to gain a wide range of leadership experiences, further handicapping her/him by somehow "marking" him/her within the educational community as "less than" or as a "know it all," or worse, as a "renegade." Candidates very often cannot find a position within that community and must look outside the district for a first leadership position. Or, when they are hired for a leadership position within that community, they are somehow "marked" as "less than" other novice leaders. This inability to be seen by one's mentor as a future principal builds roadblocks to the mentoring relationship before the relationship even has a chance to be formed.

Even in the best of circumstances, when a sitting principal in the building in which the candidate works suggests the future candidate consider a leadership position by giving them leadership opportunities, there are risks for the candidate. These risks often come in the form of a feeling of separation from their current colleagues (the other teachers in the building). A part of my own strategy as a mentor is to be sure I take opportunities to talk with teacher leaders to encourage a thoughtful dialogue about considering becoming a school leader – such as a principal. I have even had this conversation within my own family. My own sister, a teacher for over 20 years, only the other day lamented that she rejected my earlier encouragement to become an administrator, as she is just the kind of leader we need in schools today.

This dichotomous view of a distinct separation in roles and work between administrators and teachers is not just water-cooler talk; it is alive and well, based on my current conversations with leader candidates and from the ranks of teacher colleagues that I speak with often. This fall, as school districts in our state were on strike, there were many stressful days and nights among principal interns because they were not seen as "real administrators" and were excluded from administrative team meetings. Several students who were interns expressed in class the feeling that they had no community at the school any longer. The teachers saw them as administrators, and the administration did not see them as fully part of the administrative ranks. They missed out on many leadership learning opportunities due to not having a clearly defined role and place. In some ways, what they described as having experienced is similar to that attempted exercise of power through exclusion that I shared experiencing.

Calabrese and Tucker-Ladd (1991) define the antidote to the negligent exercise of power in mentoring that is being pointed out in the above examples. They counsel, "Collaboration implies that both parties bring an expertise to the activity, where neither party dominates. It suggests a relationship goes beyond advice seeking to advice sharing [...] and team decision making" (p. 69). The recognition of difference

creates a notion of separation that can needlessly complicate or compound the issues and context that require attention or action. Difference can be turned into a liability through the unwise exercise of power. Mentoring is fundamentally antithetical to behaviors and purposes that seek to exploit difference. Rather, mentoring relationships are firmly secured through intentional rejection of such opportunities, or when power is necessary, its use is for the benefit of the protégé.

Conclusion

The three qualities of relational mentoring address a number of concerns present in educational leadership literature. Most notably, they afford APs and principal interns access to socialization in leading schools that differs significantly from that which follows the traditional paradigm (Marshall and Greenfield, 1987). Mentors and protégés who recognize and model their practice on the qualities of interdependent self-in-relation, growth-fostering interactions and exploration of systemic power will both develop skills and gain knowledge through providing APs access to and participation in the fullest range of school leadership responsibilities. Relational mentoring opens communication and builds trust between participants, as well as promotes the interests and identification of areas of expertise of both parties. It offers a simple but not easy pathway on which to prepare the next generation of school leaders equipped with the desired competences and experiences to transform schools (Militello *et al.*, 2015).

Perhaps one of the best aspects of relational mentoring is that it holds significant promise for coping with problems that arise from working with a difficult principal, or as is sometimes the case, an underprepared mentee. Unlike traditional mentoring, the qualities of relational mentoring are not requirements that identify an ideal. By examining how a principal uses power, an AP or intern can assess the motives, values, and abilities that influence decisions made and actions taken. By analyzing such clues, the protégé is better positioned to respond and recognize her or his empowerment. Interdependent self-in-relation acts as reminder that while there may not be choice of the principal with whom one works, there is choice in the attention given to thoughts and feelings about that person. The principal who manages a school poorly possesses strengths that can be learned from when appreciated through the filter provided by the RCT model. The growth-fostering interactions may be less than optimal, yet even these can be nurtured or encouraged with empowerment and judgment exposed through the first two qualities.

In our principal preparation program, most often our graduates find their first positions as novice educational leaders as APs rather than as principals. And, while the hiring processes are varied and there are interview opportunities for principal and applicant (future AP) to get to know one another, these are very limited opportunities held over a one- to two-day interview process. The ability of the applicant to experience the leadership stance and actions of the sitting principal is very limited and can be non-representative of actual practice. Of course, there are hires that are made within the very building in which an applicant may have interned as a principal candidate, but in our experiences these are very rare circumstances.

These experiences we have described relate to the importance of how the mentoring relationship is formed and communicated to the entire school community. Could district-wide educative programs for mentors and protégés alike, based on the RCT model, affect how the relationship begins and develops, even if there is not a good way to change how the mentor-protégé matches are first selected? It seems that strong

mentoring could include a deep look at who is matched with whom, why they are matched, how best to make the match work, and how the match is communicated to other members of the school community. Indeed, researchers are exploring better ways to match mentors with protégés (Menges, 2016). Menges found qualified support for congruence between personalities of mentors and protégés. Taking a different approach, Searby (2010) has investigated and advanced a framework or "mentoring mindset" which mentors can use to better assess and match their support and engagement given the readiness and capacity of protégés to benefit from mentoring. Other scholars are studying and forwarding programs to assist mentors in recognizing and reframing their practice toward tenets that are similar to those of the relational mentoring that we have been discussing (Lejonberg *et al.*, 2015). The change in mentor beliefs, values, and practices forwarded in such programs, which align with the RCT model, also borrow from and lend consideration to a multicultural approach to mentoring (Kent *et al.*, 2013; Kochan and Pascarelli, 2003). Kent *et al.* (2013) affirm the importance of developing a mentoring culture stating, "Organizations that wish to create a mentoring culture should focus attention upon values that emphasize the differentiation of individuals as well as on the integration of individuals into the culture of the organization" (p. 209). An approach that uses both differentiation and integration as evaluative contexts by both mentor and protégé goes hand in hand with relational mentoring.

We applaud each of these efforts and call for further inquiry that will help identify processes, contextual conditions, characteristics of individuals, as well as the beliefs and values of each participant that are critical for creating and sustaining mentoring relationships that are worthy of the name. We have also taken steps to integrate relational mentoring into the coursework for our principal and mentoring certification programs at our university (Cowin, 2013). Our efforts are beginning to provide benefit to our students and plans are underway for gathering and analyzing data on these efforts, intended to assist our students during their internships as well as later when they become APs and principals themselves. Our hope is that through experiencing the value of relational mentoring, they in turn will be able to mentor the kind of leaders needed to support and nurture the fullest development of their faculty, staff, and students.

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