Climbing the Steps Toward a Successful Cooperating Teacher/Student Teacher Mentoring Relationship

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Abstract

Agricultural education cooperating teachers (mentors) are idealized as seasoned professionals, proficient in their craft, and able to transmit tacit knowledge to pre-service teachers (mentees) through demonstration, conversation, and coaching. When the relationship is successful both parties experience positive outcomes that may last a lifetime. Agricultural educators report that cooperating teachers are one of the most important influences on the development of new teachers. The research reported here used instrumental case study design to identify three steps that underpin successful mentoring relationships between cooperating teachers and student teachers in school-based agricultural education. The steps are personality, community and access, and trust and communication. Subthemes of personality included compatibility, similar values, mutual interest in growth, successful conflict resolution, and appreciation of differences. Subthemes of community and access included feelings of belonging and having access to cooperating teachers. Subthemes of trust and communication were based on delegating responsibility, providing accurate feedback, and supporting student teachers to assume the role of teacher. Based on the findings, it is recommended that university-based teacher educators increase opportunities for informal mentoring pairs to emerge. Future research could explore the impact of informal pairing on the development of new teachers compared to formal pairings.

Keywords: student teachers, cooperating teachers, mentoring, student teaching, agricultural education

Cooperating teachers (*mentors)* are idealized as seasoned professionals, proficient in their craft, able to transmit tacit knowledge to pre-service teachers (*mentees*) through demonstration, conversation, and coaching. The mentor/mentee relationship exists to transmit knowledge, skills, attitudes, and culture regarding the mentee's career choice. When the relationship is successful, both parties experience growth, learning, and development (Turban & Lee, 2007). Agricultural educators report that cooperating teachers are one of the most important influences on the development of new teachers (Garton & Cano, 1996; Deeds, Flowers, & Arrington, 1991; Harlin, Edwards, & Briers, 2002).

Mentoring is situated in a career context for the purpose of nurturing novice employees and providing pedagogical support. Mentors also support the novice emotionally with interpersonal behaviors that strengthen the mentoring bond and are critical for success in many career fields. The benefits of mentoring may extend over one's lifetime (Bierema, 1996; Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009; Ragins & Kram, 2007).

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Russell and Russell (2011) stated, "Promoting successful mentoring relationships is a very important step toward developing student interns into effective practitioners" (p. 18). Roberts and Dyer's (2004) model of cooperating teacher effectiveness included five foundations that effective cooperating teachers used during the student teaching experience: instruction, advising, professionalism, cooperating teacher/student teacher relationship, and personal characteristics. These characteristics can be traced back to Kram's (1985) idea of career and psychological functions that mentors provide mentees.

There are two types of pairing mentors and mentees: formal and informal. Formal pairings are generally arranged by organizational agents using various characteristics of both the mentor and mentee, while informal pairings emerge from both parties interacting together informally and choosing to create and participate in a mentoring relationship (Lee, Dougherty, & Turban, 2000). Many factors play into successful formal and informal mentoring relationships including personal characteristics (Turban & Lee, 2007). Personality traits deeply influence mentoring relationships and have linked to informal pairings. In other settings beyond student teaching, informal pairings are often more productive than assigned pairing because social attraction and common interests drive people to affiliate with each other (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). The exploration of pairing is underrepresented in the agricultural education literature and served as a focus issue for the case study reported here, which outlines a successful mentor/mentee relationship by building upon themes embedded in the case (Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992).

Focusing the Case

The purpose of the case study was to understand factors that contribute to successful mentoring relationship between cooperating teachers and pre-service teachers in school-based agricultural education using the fall 2011 student-teaching cohort as the bounded case. We described 1) the relationship between pre-service teachers and their cooperating teachers from an *emic perspective* (that of the participants themselves, using their words and descriptions as part of the rich, thick descriptions), and 2) the influence the mentoring relationship had on pre-service teachers' overall experience while in the field.

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative, instrumental case study was used to describe and elucidate how three pre-service teachers' experienced a mentoring relationship with their cooperating teachers and its influence on their field experience and subsequent placement in the profession. Instrumental case study focuses on a specific issue within a case to gain a deeper understanding of how and why the issue impacts participants (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995).

Research Participants

Participants were pre-service agricultural education teachers from the fall 2011 cohort enrolled in a teacher preparation program at a major land-grant university in the mid southern region of the USA. This cohort was chosen because they were the most recent cohort to have completed their student teaching experience. The participants (*n* = 3) were purposively chosen (Stake, 1995) for variety of parings and included a male cooperating teacher in a rural setting (Mr. Ray) with a male pre-service teacher from a rural background (Kyle); a male cooperating teacher in an urban setting (Mr. Afton) with a female pre-service teacher from an urban background (Macy); and a female cooperating teacher in a rural setting (Mrs. Pierce) with a female pre-service teacher from a suburban background (Amanda). Note that only the pre-service

teachers were interviewed for this study, as the focus was on the experiences of the pre-service teachers, not the cooperating teachers. Qualitative research is rooted in constructivist emic perspective of participants, not triangulation from an empirical stance (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake 2010). The study was approved by the university institutional review board (AG-12-4) and adhered to the federal guidelines for the ethical and responsible conduct of human subjects research.

Data Sources and Collection Strategies

The primary data sources were verbatim transcripts resulting from recordings of three semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with the three pre-service teachers. The list of interview questions were developed through a combination of methods based on guiding participants to thoroughly explain their experiences while student teaching including their relationship with their cooperating teacher and the influences the cooperating teacher had on their experiences as a student teacher. Furthermore, certain questions were selected based on the need to gather more information on participants' backgrounds, as well as their perspective on mentorship that they received during their student teaching experience. Additional notes were added to the transcripts to capture the meaning derived from body language expressed during the interviews. Data was then coded using a software program (ATLAS.ti®) following a deductive, constant comparative stance to analysis (Creswell, 2013; Corbin & Straus, 2007). The participants' weekly reflective journals that were created during the field experience were requested and used to confirm emerging themes and to add textual richness to the data (Stake, 2010). The journals were a required course assignment and captured daily activities along with commentary about participants' field experiences.

Quality Criteria

Tracy (2010) outlined several practices for enhancing quality in qualitative research studies. To enhance the truth-value of the findings and subsequent interpretations, we inserted participants' quotations in context, giving the reader a better understanding of participants' experiences from an emic perspective. An extensive audit trail was retained throughout the study to document observations, thoughts, and justification for actions taken during the data collection, coding, and reporting phases of the study. This led to "the thick description and concrete detail to allow the cases to show rather than tell" (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). As members of a qualitative research club, we participated in weekly peer-debriefing sessions with fellow agricultural education graduate students and qualitative research experts, over a 10-week period. My peers gave substantive feedback about research quality and actions.

In order for the reader to understand the case holistically, Creswell (2013) stressed the significance of giving rich, thick descriptions to demonstrate personalization of participants' experiences. The extensive descriptions should assist the reader in putting the cases in context to determine transferability of findings to similar situations. While qualitative case studies are not generalizable, the findings could be transferred to scenarios similar to this one "through the process of naturalistic generalizations, [where] readers make choices based on their own intuitive understanding of the scene" (Tracy, 2010, p. 845).

Ethics

Research that includes multiple voices and varied viewpoints (multivocal) demands researchers to bracket their experiences. "Qualitative researchers do not put words in members' mouths; rather attend to viewpoints that diverge with those of the majority or with the author" (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). One member of our research team came to this case with previous

experiences as a member of the cohort under study, she listened closely to participants' stories to capture their experiences from their perspective, bracketing out her own (Moustakas, 1994).

"Situational ethics ask that we constantly reflect on our methods and the data worth exposing" in terms of risk versus reward to the participants and the reading audience (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). Along with situational ethics, we practiced relational ethics by emphasizing reciprocity between researchers and participants, including our responsibility to not coerce participants to get the story (Tracy, 2010). As part of retaining an ethical stance, we helped participants understand the purpose of the study and remained transparent with our intentions (eventual publication of findings). Participants agreed to allow us to share their mentoring experiences. Finally, we practiced sound exiting ethics by allowing participants to act as co-researchers through member reflection and encouraged them to edit the manuscript prior to publication (Tracy, 2010).

Researcher Reflexivity

We maintained reflexive journals to identify and bracket out bias (Moustakas, 1994) during the conduct of the study. A short synopsis of our background is warranted for transparency (Creswell, 2013). The leader of our research team completed a Bachelors of Science in Agricultural Education at the university in December 2011. As an undergraduate, she volunteered at many competitive and non-competitive FFA activities, as well as taught micro-lessons in several different high school classrooms. Her pre-service teaching experience was completed at a small, one-teacher program in a rural setting with a male cooperating teacher fall 2011. She graduated high school from a suburban city near the capital city and was a member of a large agricultural education program. Her high school agricultural education program had three male teachers. Although her research agenda has just begun, she is focusing on the role of women in agricultural education from the lens of feminist and critical theory that questions the severe disparity between the number of women training to become secondary agricultural education teachers (over 50% of recent cohorts) and those actually placed and retained in the field (7%) in the state of Oklahoma. The other two members of our research team previously taught agricultural education at the secondary level and are now university faculty members in agricultural education.

Description of the Mentoring Pairs

The agricultural education pre-service teacher program capstone experience consisted of a 12-week field experience preceded by four weeks of instruction (160 hours) and practice teaching on campus. Pre-service teachers were then placed in the field at a cooperating site. Sites were chosen based on the mentoring potential of cooperating teacher (number of years taught, program success, curricular diversity, and involvement in FFA events), and faculty in the department matched cooperating sites and teachers with pre-service teachers (formal pairing).

Pair 1, Mr. Ray and Kyle: Male Cooperating Teacher/Male Pre-Service Teacher

West Village High School agricultural education program serves 70 students; the total enrollment is 377 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). A single teacher, Mr. Ray, taught at rural West Village for over 20 years, and has mentored many pre-service teachers. Mr. Ray welcomed another pre-service teacher, Kyle, for a semester-long student teaching experience fall 2011.

Kyle came from a relatively large rural school with two male agricultural education instructors. As a farmer's son, Kyle considered himself proficient in the subject areas of cattle,

forestry, and crop production. During high school, he took all of the courses offered in the agricultural program and was active in FFA, SAE, and classroom activities.

Kyle was offered three placement sites by the university coordinator, Dr. Dyson. He was advised that West Village would be a good fit for his goals, which included learning more about training Career Development Event (CDE) teams and expanding his knowledge in unfamiliar agricultural courses. Dr. Dyson spoke highly of Mr. Ray and outlined his expectations and areas of expertise. Kyle agreed that West Village would be a good cooperating site and initiated a relationship with Mr. Ray and the West Village community the summer before his field experience.

When Kyle began his field experience, he was comfortable with his relationship with Mr. Ray. During our interview, Kyle reflected on his overall experience at West Village and spoke a great deal about the practical experiences that emerged from his time in the field. Although he acquired theoretical knowledge at the university, he lacked practical knowledge that comes from working in the teaching profession. Lessons of administrative paperwork, classroom management, and dealing with parents were learned during his field experience. Those experiences were carefully facilitated and supervised by Mr. Ray.

Kyle's overall pre-service teaching experience was positive. His weekly reports reflected his reluctance to leave starting three weeks before his last day. "I cannot believe my experience is coming to an end. I am really going to miss working with Mr. Ray and interacting with all of my students." Mr. Ray was mentioned six times throughout the twelve weekly reports, always in affectionate and positive terms.

Pair 2, Mr. Afton and Macy: Male Cooperating Teacher/Female Pre-Service Teacher

Mr. Afton was a certified florist who taught floral design and was in charge of the rabbit and poultry projects at an inner city magnet agricultural education program in Fredrickson. He also worked with the agri-science fair participants. He was a non-traditional instructor, never having participated in FFA or 4-H as a youth. Unlike many of the programs in his state, Fredrickson was focused on educating students about agriculture through classroom and lab situations. Fredrickson faculty knew that a majority of their students were enrolled for science credit as opposed to a passion for agriculture and emphasized their role as educators before advising FFA events or supervising Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) projects. Fredrickson and Mr. Afton welcomed their first out-of-state student teacher, Macy in the fall of 2011.

It was no surprise when Macy was placed in a non-traditional agricultural education program. With no youth experience with 4-H or FFA, she was drawn to agriculture because of her passion to teach in an urban setting. Because of Macy's background and future goals, she sought placement out-of-state in an urban program to work with non-traditional students. Because her placement was unique and finalized late, Macy did not contact Mr. Afton until her required visit two weeks into the four-week block experience.

After a week of observing, she assumed control of six courses including professional communications, scientific research and design, three floriculture courses, and freshmen-level principles of agriculture class. In addition to classroom instruction, Macy worked closely with students involved in fundraising by selling flower arrangements. During these after school activities, Macy learned many informal lessons about teaching agriculture through Mr. Afton's mentorship. Macy enjoyed freedom while teaching in the classroom and advising students.

The overall pre-service teaching experience for Macy was extremely positive. Her weekly journals documented her excitement during the student teaching experience and her appreciation of the Fredrickson facility. She remained busy and engaged throughout her 12-week stay, as reflected in her weekly journals. Macy mentioned Mr. Afton five times in her journals, always in a positive and grateful manner.

Pair 3, Mrs. Pierce and Amanda: Female Cooperating Teacher/Female Pre-Service Teacher

June is a small, agriculture-based community. June High School had 244 students enrolled in 2012 with 37 of those students enrolled in agricultural education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Mrs. Pierce, the sole teacher, has led the program for seven years and has hosted two pre-service teachers. She is regarded as able to balance career and personal roles, making this an ideal placement for Amanda, a soon-to-be mother seeking a career in agricultural education. The June FFA program participated in speech contests and a few members showed lambs at livestock shows; however, the focus of the program was on community involvement.

Amanda grew up in a suburban neighborhood and attended a large high school. She was active in her high school FFA program for four years. Her home program had a male teacher and a female teacher, and the program served 100 students. Along with showing livestock, Amanda was active as an FFA officer who participated in numerous CDE and public speaking contests. She considered her two agriculture teachers as second parents and the agriculture building her second home. Because of her family commitments, she was placed close to her home in an urban area. Amanda did not seek contact with Mrs. Pierce until her day-long visit to June during the four-week block experience.

Amanda's pre-service teaching experience predominately took place in the classroom and lab setting. By the third week, she had taken over all classes. She expressed how well-behaved students were, serving as a key component to her positive experience. Mrs. Pierce gave her guidelines about what she taught, and asked Amanda to complete all units and objectives during her experience. Amanda was given freedom to develop unique lessons and units to achieve the goals, and was able to choose the order of instruction.

As Amanda reflected on her experience, she focused on the similarities between Mrs. Pierce and herself. Both were married with growing families and were passionate about teaching agriculture at the secondary level. Because of this connection, much of the experience revolved around how Amanda could balance the expectations of teaching agriculture and home life. Because neither of the women were talkative, Amanda made sure to ask questions when she felt unsure of her role in particular situations. Amanda was also goal directed, which helped Mrs. Pierce better facilitate her experience. Although Amanda's experience was positive, she did not mention Mrs. Pierce in her weekly reports.

Findings and Assertions

Three major themes were identified that emerged to describe the mentoring relationships between the pairs: *personality; community and access; trust and communication*. Each theme is discussed and supported with the use of participant's words to add textual richness. A metaphor of a staircase is woven throughout the findings and conclusions to illustrate the case (see Figure 1).
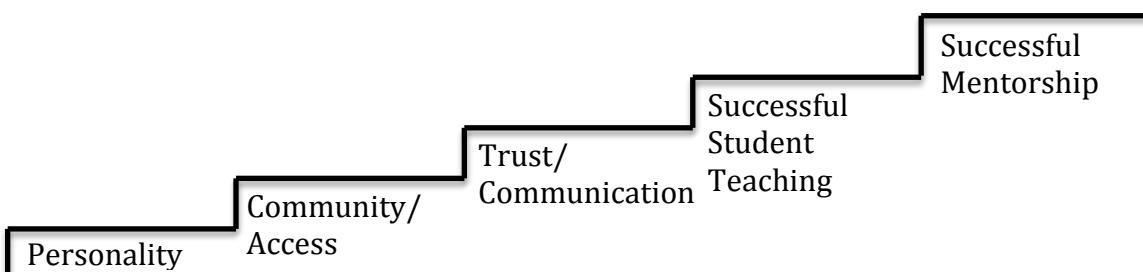

Figure 1. Metaphorical stair steps representing themes for successful mentoring relationships.

Elaborate descriptions are used to elucidate themes and illustrate the particulars of the case, leading to assertions (claims) regarding the nature of the mentoring relationship between pre-service teachers and their cooperating teachers (Stake, 1995; 2010). After each pair is described within the theme's context, we offer assertions that tie the pairs together through the use of thematic analysis. Creswell (2013) recommended that the assertions for a case study be presented as a summary of what we understood about the case, and whether initial conclusions have been changed or conceptually challenged.

Personality

Personality was the first level on the staircase. It was the simplest level to achieve and was the basis for the other steps to build a strong and stable mentoring relationship. Personality was defined as "the relatively stable dispositions (traits) of individuals that contribute to consistency in their thoughts, behavior, and emotions" (Turban & Lee, 2007, p. 24) and is described in the context of the experiences between the pairs.

Kyle and Mr. Ray - Kyle reported that he and Mr. Ray had complementing personalities. After years of teaching, Mr. Ray was well adjusted to the challenges of teaching agricultural education at the secondary level. Mr. Ray's veteran experience coupled with his disposition towards an "easy going and laid back" (2; 133:135) personality made for a relaxed atmosphere at West Village. Kyle described himself as a more excitable and energetic teacher. His tendency to be easily stressed when a situation was not organized posed many situations where Mr. Ray would step in and advise Kyle on a better way of handling a situation. "The things that Mr. Ray was really good at may not be the things that I am really good at, but there were a few things that he learned from me" (1; 328:330). Because of their complementing differences in personality, they were able to deepen respect for each other.

Macy and Mr. Afton - Macy and Mr. Afton also had complementing personalities. Macy was more driven than Mr. Afton and pushed students to do their best. She described herself as serious and focused on making sure students performed. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Macy described Mr. Afton as having a "mellow" (2; 134) personality. He remained laid back in his interactions with students. Macy noted their differences in personalities while traveling out-of-state with students for competitions. "It was definitely an adjustment because you are spending so much time with someone, but then you really learn how to adapt and rely on one another" (3; 129:131). Because Mr. Afton was normally the sole chaperone, he sometimes struggled with supervising female students. This need allowed Macy to bring a new dimension for students who were traveling with Mr. Afton. "Even if we didn't always see eye to eye, he had a lot of perspective to bring to the table and it was an excellent opportunity to gain more insight" (3; 355:357). Macy was able to hone her supervising skills and find a balance between the passive personality of Mr. Afton and her own demanding personality.

Amanda and Mrs. Pierce - Amanda described Mrs. Pierce and herself as having similar personalities. Both were unexcitable and flexible, neither engaging in extraneous talk. Amanda expressed that both women would "only speak if there was something to be said… so our conversations were always relevant or meaningful" (3; 200:204). Not only did their similar personalities show through their communication styles, but also how they worked through critiques on lesson plans. There was no structured time to review Amanda's teaching. Instead, Mrs. Pierce filled out evaluation forms to inform Amanda about her strengths and weaknesses in the lesson. Amanda felt this was most effective because "if we had talked about it, she would have just restated what she had written and I think I would have been put on the defense trying to rationalize why I did what I did" (3; 194:196). Understanding their similar personality and engagement style strengthened the mentoring relationship and positively affected Amanda's pre-service teaching experience.

Theme conclusion. When pre-service teachers thought their personalities were similar to their cooperating teachers, their satisfaction with student teaching increased (Kitchel & Torres, 2007). Although two of the three pre-service teachers described their personalities as divergent from their cooperating teachers, it was clear they shared similar values in regard to the teaching and learning process. None of the students reported discomfort with personality differences.

It is important to note that whether the student teacher and cooperating teacher had similar or different personalities, they understand how they could find common ground. In instances where personalities were different, both Kyle and Macy recognized how they could learn, adapt, and grow from the relationship. The key point with personalities lies in whether the student teacher and cooperating teacher recognize those differences and adjust to enhance the experience. Conflicts occur when neither party accepts or recognize them, and may turn the personality differences into a hindrance within the mentoring relationship (Turban & Lee, 2007).

All three pre-service teachers were able to identify strengths and weaknesses in personality and adapt accordingly to benefit from their experiences. After the pre-service teachers successfully reached the first level of the staircase, they were ready to experience the second level: community and access.

Community and Access

After compatibility and understanding of personalities had been established between the pairs, the next step toward a successful pre-service teaching experience was developing a sense of *community and access*. We formed emic definitions for community and access based on codes that emerged from the data. Community was expressed as a feeling of acceptance and emersion in the cooperating site and greater community. Access was defined as availability of the cooperating teacher, including access to resources and opportunities.

Kyle and Mr. Ray - Kyle prioritized gaining acceptance with Mr. Ray and acclimating to the community. He recognized the importance of working with a seasoned professional who was highly respected in the agricultural education profession. "I wanted to get an idea about where I would live and learn Mr. Ray's expectations of me, the community, and discuss how Mr. Ray wanted me to teach" (1; 73:79). Kyle was the only participant who sought to blend into the community. He felt it was an easy transition and that it increased his success as a pre-service teacher.

Kyle received full access to Mr. Ray's resources and time for debriefing. Because of the openness of their relationship, Kyle was able to prepare all assignments for the university without difficulty. Mr. Ray was keen on making sure the assignments were completed in a timely fashion and were high quality. "Mr. Ray was there to help me with both my resource file for the university and building lessons for the classroom" (1; 62:67). Kyle believed Mr. Ray prioritized him and did not feel like a burden when he needed resources such as Mr. Ray's time or curriculum and books.

Macy and Mr. Afton - While Macy did not explicitly mention a feeling of belonging in Fredrickson, she did express feeling part of the school-based community. In her weekly report, she talked about "helping other teachers finish tasks." By week four, she ended her weekly report with this statement: "I am becoming really comfortable at Fredrickson. I feel like a real teacher and am more grateful every day for being at this facility" (2; 40:45). She viewed the other teachers as mentors, "It was nice being mentored by people who have been in the agriculture industry for so long" (2; 335:339).

Macy relied on Mr. Afton for resources to create units in the floriculture class. Beyond curriculum, she had structured meetings three times a week to debrief on the week's activities and plan for the future. Macy's consistent access to Mr. Afton created a strong mentoring relationship. Macy felt that Mr. Afton prioritized her and knew he was available to listen and give advice that would help her navigate better the pre-service teaching experience.

Amanda and Mrs. Pierce - Many of Amanda's community experiences were conveyed through her weekly reports. Because the classroom was modeled after community needs vs. CDE events, the students were motivated to be involved in the town's affairs. Although Amanda attended all events in the community, she did not feel a part of the community of June. This could be attributed to her commute from another city and she was not completely engaged in June, unlike the other two participants who lived in their communities. However, she was able to assimilate into the school community. She assumed all teacher duties including lunch duty, monitoring and supervising homeroom, and advising period, giving her visibility with other teachers and administrators at June High School.

Access was established from the beginning between Amanda and Mrs. Pierce because both women were transparent with their thoughts and feelings throughout the experience. Amanda believed Mrs. Pierce prioritized her throughout her pre-service teaching experience. When she talked about their relationship, Amanda said, "She made sure that I was always around to learn from new and unique experiences" (3; 137:138). Because of the prioritized access to Mrs. Pierce, Amanda felt very comfortable as a new educator.

Theme conclusion. "The student teaching center and the supervising teacher are the most important ingredients in the student teaching experience" (Norris, Larke, & Briers, 1990, p. 58). All three pairs experienced varying degrees of feeling a part of their communities. The perceived feeling of community was expressed both within the school and townships. Belonging to the school and community helped build pre-service teachers' credibility, as well as their self-confidence as new educators.

In order to climb the stairs to a successful mentoring experience, the pairs experienced feelings of belonging to the school and community, and had open access to their cooperating teachers. Researchers generally agree that the cooperating teachers should support pre-service teachers through constructive feedback and emotional support (Maynard, 1996). All three pairs reported being a priority to their cooperating teachers. "Cooperating teachers must be conscious of the moves they make and the access they provide (or deny) student teachers to the work of teaching and teachers" (Cuenca, 2011, p. 126). If student teachers do not believe they can approach their cooperating teachers, they will not progress to the next level: trust and communication.

Trust and Communication

In the previous theme, we established that access and a sense of community were critical for a successful mentoring experience. The first theme of personality established that while personalities may differ, each party can learn from the other to grow a successful mentoring relationship. Our final theme, trust and communication, will tie the foundational steps of personality, access and community to the final step for achieving a fruitful pre-service teaching experience.

Three psychological functions assist in career development between colleagues; they are counseling, acceptance, and friendship (Hall, 1986). These functions surfaced as the steps toward communication and trust within each pair. Communication encompassed counseling functions and occurred when the cooperating teacher provided, "a helpful and confidential forum for exploring personal and professional dilemmas" (p. 162). Trust was expressed through actions, feelings, and reflections on the relationship between the pairs. Trust was modeled from friendship and acceptance. The pairs in this study experienced friendship through "mutual caring and intimacy that extends beyond the requirements of daily work tasks" and is "sharing experience outside the immediate work setting" (p. 162). The acceptance function was shown through, "providing ongoing support, respect, and admiration, which strengthens self-confidence and self-image" (p. 162).

Kyle and Mr. Ray - Kyle trusted Mr. Ray and felt it was reciprocated. Their trust was built on the daily operations both inside and outside the classroom. Kyle felt Mr. Ray perceived him as an equal and believed he had a "position right beside" (1; 205) Mr. Ray instead of being regarded as a teacher-in-training. This bond empowered Kyle and allowed him to make more decisions without fear of making mistakes or disrupting the established program. "I felt like I was actually responsible for creating a lesson, teaching it, and the kids learned from it, instead of taking something that had been changed so many times that it wasn't my lesson anymore" (1; 171:174).

Kyle was the only student teacher to initiate contact with his cooperating teacher in the summer. This pre-communication strengthened their relationship and created a solid foundation for their relationship. During the student teaching experience communication between Kyle and Mr. Ray was informal. Nevertheless, Mr. Ray made it a priority to talk with Kyle after classroom lessons to discuss his strengths and weaknesses within the lesson. When miscommunication occurred, Kyle described Mr. Ray as, "a gentleman who would try and communicate when issues arise instead of just getting mad and screaming about them" (1; 234-237). Kyle felt connected with his cooperating teacher and believed he would continue their relationship because of the positive student teaching experience.

Macy and Mr. Afton - After Mr. Afton established expectations, she was given "a lot of leeway" (2; 54) on how to carry out tasks. When she struggled, he would step in to facilitate and guide her. "If I wanted to do something, he would leave me to it" (2; 55:57). The Fredrickson faculty treated pre-service teachers as equals and desired excellence in the classroom. Faculty allowed pre-service teachers to choose the courses they taught. This built trust and was pivotal to allowing Macy to test her strengths and weaknesses in a secure environment.

Macy believed communication was a priority, "We made it a big point if it was late at night or early in the morning to keep students out of the room so we could discuss and reflect on the day without interruptions" (2; 212:219). The 12-week externship also assisted in developing trust among the pairs. Macy was able to vent frustrations about her experience, as well as excitement during her successes with her mentor. "He really took me under his wing and we developed a strong relationship where I could vent to him if I was upset of frustrated about something" (2; 194:196). The mentoring relationship between Macy and Mr. Afton was built on trust, which made her overall student teaching experience a success.

Amanda and Mrs. Pierce – As a mother, Mrs. Pierce was able to mentor Amanda on an entirely different dimension. Amanda said Mrs. Pierce "was a female and understood what it was like to be pregnant. She knew the difficulties it included" (3; 41-44). Throughout our interview, Amanda expressed her need to discover how to balance her career with her new family obligations. Mrs. Pierce met this desire through a reciprocal relationship that encompassed both professional and personal information. "We talked about married life, what our lives have been like during pregnancy, what our goals were for our families, and our student teaching experiences: what hers was like and what mine was becoming" (3; 53:55).

Amanda and Mrs. Pierce had a distinct communication style; both were selective in what they talked about. Although their relationship did not start until later in the semester, they had a strong bond because they appreciated similarities between their communication styles. Most of their communication took place in the classroom and in the school vehicle on the way to students' homes or to livestock shows. Amanda's perception of their relationship in terms of communication was reflected through her response about her overall experience, "She knew how to relate to me. She was open, able to communicate her thoughts, and I didn't have to prove myself" (3; 41:44).

Theme conclusion. "Cooperating teachers are often the most influential in the development of novice teachers, as they have the most contact and communication with the student teachers" (Kasperbauer & Roberts, 2007, p. 32). Because of the transition of authority and proximity between the university supervisors and the cooperating teacher, the cooperating

teacher must be willing and ready to engage with the student teacher. Transfer of knowledge will happen when cooperating teachers allow access to themselves for pre-service teachers and voluntarily give feedback and coaching. Communication is pertinent to both the career and psychological functions that contribute to successful mentoring relationships (Turban & Lee, 2007).

Communication leads to trust, and trust is essential for a positive experience, regardless of context. Each pair exhibited mutual trust leading to a positive student teaching experience. "Cooperating teachers who generally support their student teachers by maintaining harmony, giving praise, and being cooperative and those who delegate responsibility, allow freedom for experimentation and are facilitators, positively influence their student teacher's success" (Stahlhut & Hawkes, 1987, p. 12). Each cooperating teacher displayed most of these characteristics and; therefore, built trust that allowed the student teacher to grow as a teacher. Because student teaching is a time to apply theory, it is important that the cooperating teacher build an environment based on trust through letting go and gently facilitating the experiences and situations that occur. Without communication and trust, a successful student teaching experience is unlikely. Figure 1 depicts the steps necessary for climbing toward a successful mentoring relationship in the context of agricultural education pre-service teaching externships.

Because all three cases had positive student teaching experiences, it would be incorrect to assume that each had an effective mentoring relationship. However, it was clear that the psychological functions were more often met than the career functions. Ragins and Kram (2007) stated the difference between a relationship and a mentoring relationship is the career context. Although each experience was in the 'career field,' some cooperating teachers did not fully embody the career functions (see Table 1).

Table 1, derived from Kram (1985), aligns the two functions and multiple behaviors of mentoring given by the cooperating teacher to the student teacher that was described in each pair. A check box indicates that the variable of interest was present in the pairs. Variables of interest were determined present and coded based on the experiences described by participants in their interviews and weekly journal reflections.

Table 1

Career and Psychological Function Behaviors Observed in Each Pair

Career and Psychological Functions	Kyle and Mr. Ray	Macy and Mr. Afton	Mrs. Pierce and Amanda
Coaching	☑	☑	☑
Sponsoring advancement		☑	
Increasing positive exposure	☑	☑	
Protection		☑	☑
Providing challenging assignments	☑	☑	☑
Trust	☑	☑	☑
Intimacy	☑	☑	☑
Offering acceptance	☑	☑	☑
Confirmation	☑	☑	☑
Counseling	☑	☑	☑
Friendship	☑	☑	☑
Role Model	☑	☑	☑

Recommendations for Practice

Three steps (personality, community/access, trust/communication) were identified to lay the foundation for a successful mentoring relationship between cooperating teachers and pre-service teachers. These steps closely mirror the outcomes of informal mentoring pairs. As such, we recommend that university-based teacher educators create space for informal pairing techniques in their formal pairing procedures. "When efforts are made to ensure that criteria for matching are aligned with key objectives of the program, both career advancement objectives and personal learning objectives can be met" (Kram & Ragins, 2007, p. 659). Informal mentoring relationships are driven by similarity and attraction (personality) and involve high levels of commitment. In addition, formal mentoring relationships can invoke feelings of awkwardness, anxiety, tentativeness, and possible skepticism for both parties. In contrast, informal mentoring relationships invoke excitement, infatuation, and positive anticipation among participants (Blake-Beard, O'Neill, & McGowan, 2007). While the three pairs in this case study were successful under the formal pairing model applied, enhanced outcomes maybe realized when mentors and mentees are allowed to pick each other and is worth further examination.

For a more informal matching to take place, university-based teacher educators must facilitate multiple opportunities for pre-service teachers and the pool of cooperating teachers to interact. Collegiate FFA meetings, competitive FFA and CDE events, and district meetings provide opportunities for pre-service teachers and cooperating teachers to meet. University faculty can also facilitate social mixers to encourage informal interactions. Pre-service teachers could be charged with seeking out possible cooperating teachers during the course of their program and presenting a list of possible mentors during placement meetings with faculty. This could allow for a hybrid pairing process that implements informal pairing procedures, while still allowing the final decision to be made by the university supervisor, which maintains the formal pairing process. By allowing this exploration process, pre-service teachers may have a better

opportunity to reach the second stair-step, community and access, during their student teaching experience.

Regardless of formal or informal mentoring programs, it is vital that university-based teacher educators create a culture that encourages cooperating and pre-service teachers to invest in their relationships, not only as employee/employer but also as friend and mentor (Kram & Ragins, 2007). Only one of the three pairs profiled in the case study exhibited all psychological and career characteristics needed for true mentorship (Kram, 1985), which implies that there is room for development on the part of cooperating teachers. Informal mentoring instruction and coaching could be accomplished in a workshop setting that establishes expectations and standards for teaching and learning interactions.

The benefit of a formal pairing is that it allows the experience to be tightly aligned with organizational goals and needs (Blake-Beard, O'Neill, & McGowan, 2007). In order to keep the goals and needs of the student teaching experience transparent, a workshop could emphasize the importance of developing the student teacher not only in regard to the expectations of agricultural education, but also focusing on the career and psychological functions of a mentor. Because the study found a deficiency in the career functions, more time should be placed on the types of activities and experiences that could better foster career function behaviors.

In addition, pre-service teachers should be encouraged to explore new techniques during the field experience, allowing cooperating teachers the opportunity to coach and mentor pre-service teachers through both failures and successes. It was easier for the three pre-service teachers in the case study to experiment with new practices because they all reached the third stair-step with the cooperating teacher, trust. The pre-service teaching program plays a vital role in "determining the nature, learning process, and effectiveness of developmental relationships" (Kram & Ragins, 2007, p. 677).

Future directions for research could focus on gaining a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between cooperating teachers and pre-service teachers in both formal and a more informal mentoring pairs. Specifically, further research could explore the cooperating teacher's perspective on their role as a mentor and the university supervisor's expectations on mentoring during the student teaching experience. This case study was situated in the context of strict formal pairings, where pre-service teachers rarely meet potential cooperating teachers prior to official placement. Several authors have explored informal pairing in other settings; however, it is underrepresented in the agricultural education literature (Blake-Beard, O'Neill, & McGowan, 2007; Chao, Walz & Gardner, 1992; Kram, 1985).

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