Becoming a Positive and Effective Special Educator

Lessons Learned from a Special Education Mentor

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I will never forget the day my principal walked into the copier room and inquired,

> Can you come to the office with me for a minute? There's a retired teacher that wants to meet you. She would like to volunteer.

Stunned, I jumped up and headed toward the office. In my four years in special education, no one had actually requested to volunteer in the resource room. Is she sure she wants to help in special education? Could this be someone I know?

Waiting by the office was a short, gray-haired woman with a bright smile on her face. After introductions, we walked to the single-wide trailer that served as my classroom and talked through the rest of my lunch. That day was the beginning of a very special friendship that blossomed into an unforgettable mentorship.

Mentors affect our lives from the earliest of days. Often, the first mentors who we have are parents and other family members. As we enter our school-age years, we find mentors in our friends, teachers and administrators. Mentors serve as a guide and as an advisor. The role of an effective mentor in the life of any educator, and particularly in special education, can make the difference between a teacher that stays in the field, and one who leaves.

The role and purpose of mentors will be outlined in this article as well as a few of the simple, yet powerful, lessons learned about teaching from one such mentor, Miss Lynn. Each lesson is first illustrated

through a brief example that is based on my teaching experiences in public schools. Finally, each teachable lesson is then supported with current research from the field.

What is a Mentor?

Mentor relationships are most often formed in the work environment with a more experienced or higher ranking person and a less experienced person (Bierema, 1996). Within education, this wisdom and knowledge from years in the classroom serves as the mentor's foundation. Rooted in social constructivism, the process of mentoring allows a new teacher to grow as a professional in the classroom, school environment, and as a person through the auspices of a veteran teacher (St. George & Robinson, 2011).

Mentors, whether in formal roles that have been assigned, or in informal relationships that have developed, provide pedagogical, emotional, and mental support to their mentees (Anderson & Shannon, 1988; Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009). Often serving unpaid and voluntary roles, mentors have a desire to give back to their profession and share what they know, in hopes that it will help the next generation of teachers.

Why a Special Education Mentor Matters

The role of a mentor in the life of any educator, and particularly in special education, can make the difference between an average teacher and an outstanding one. With one of the highest rates of attrition, the struggle to hire and maintain special education teachers has been well documented for a number of decades (Boe & Cook, 2006). While the demand for special education teachers has continually increased, approximately 8% leave during their first 3 years of teaching (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008). Compared to other beginning teachers, special education teachers are 2.5 times more likely to leave teaching (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Commonly cited reasons for leaving the special education field include limited professional development opportunities, lack of support from principal and teachers, and stress due to the job design (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001).

The special educator faces demands unique to the field (Billingsley, Israel, & Smith, 2011; Gehrke & McCoy, 2007). The newly-minted special education teacher must wear many hats, including: teacher of multiple grade levels and subjects, disciplinarian as well as behaviorist, facilitator of special education meetings and advisor of legal requirements, supervisor of paraprofessionals, and collaborator of curriculum and goals

(Billingsley, 2002; Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004). This organizational structure results in relationships that must be formed within the school between the parents, teachers, therapists, and administrators. Outside the school building, one must learn to navigate relationships with district or county special education directors, related service providers, and social workers. Essentially, the new special education teacher becomes the "lead collaborator" with a range of professionals (Mamlin, 2012). Having supports for new special education teachers, such as induction programs and mentors, have been proposed as effective ways to maintain these teachers in the classroom (Billingsley, 2002). In addition, the support of a special education mentor, ideally within the same school building, has been shown to be an effective resource for helping new teachers, as opposed to no special education mentor (Whitaker, 2000; White & Mason, 2006).

Six characteristics of effective mentors, whether in regular education or special education, have been identified: competency, willingness to give positive and negative feedback, honesty, willingness to share knowledge, directly dealing with the mentee, and a willingness to let the mentee grow (Knox & McGovern, 1988). Additionally, Knox and McGovern cited the importance of treating the mentee as a colleague (p. 40).

The sharing of information and direct work with a mentor can result in crucial knowledge for the mentee. Learning to balance the multiple roles in special education can start with a few crucial lessons that set the tone for a teacher and her teaching: Get to know the family, find the source of a problem, and motivate kids to take ownership.

Lesson One: Get to Know the Family

As the principal, classroom teacher, therapists and I waited for the parents to arrive at the initial placement meeting, the principal began telling a story about Alex's father. "I remember his dad. He attended this same school. One day, he decided he was done with fifth grade. He stood up and walked out. I jumped in my car and began searching for him. I found him walking toward his house."

When attending meetings, the parents should feel comfortable with at least one member of the school personnel. The special education teacher can provide that bridge for the family. We are the conveners of the meetings and the first contact for most families. Building a rapport so that a parent can ask any question is imperative. The ultimate goal becomes the parent understanding that you have the best interest of their child in mind.

One tool that can help the special education teacher is the Positive

Student Profile (PSP; "Positive Student Profile," n.d.). The PSP, whether used in full or in part, allows parents the opportunity to explain the personal and school-related goals they have for their child. Similar to an interest inventory, the forms ask parents to articulate their child's successes and strengths, both social and educational, as well as their biggest challenges and supports that are needed. Each piece of information can help bridge the relationship between the home and school.

Miss Lynn and I would carefully examine each profile completed by a parent. We pored over their descriptions, lists of accomplishments and future goals for their child. She taught me that parents of children with exceptionalities want the same thing that any parent wants: happiness for their child. We used the information as conversation starters when the parents would pick up their child. We also used the information for writing prompts (e.g., Write about the first time that you read a book with your grandmother and the special prize she had for you). Finally, we used this as a guide during meetings for writing special education goals that mattered to the entire Individualized Education Program (IEP) team. The PSP offered unique insight to the parents' perspectives and helped increase the volume of their voices at the IEP meetings.

Lesson Two: Find the Source of a Problem

Riley and his sister were in the same second grade classroom. While both of them were identified as students with learning disabilities, Riley's needs, both emotionally and educationally, far exceeded those of his sister. His teacher had reported that he seemed to get along well with his peers, but lacked self-confidence. Additionally, his demeanor changed whenever academics, particularly reading, occurred. He would ask to go to the restroom, want to get something from his book bag, or ask to be skipped when reading aloud. He was slowly becoming more withdrawn from the classroom environment. A meeting with the IEP team resulted in a change in educational setting to a more restrictive environment in a self-contained setting.

The description of Riley is not uncommon. Riley was able to form positive peer relationships, but his academics were the source of his struggles and his self-confidence was taking the hit. The first step in identifying the source of the problem for Riley began by observing his school day. Through observation, we were able to identify patterns and develop solutions.

Observations revealed that Riley had frequently asked the teacher to repeat instructions. On numerous occasions, Riley had drainage from his ears that was dried on the side of his face. After failing a hearing

screening at school, we called his parents and suggested a visit to a doctor.

Next, we took a careful look at Riley's academics. His struggles, particularly in reading, were affecting his self-confidence. After observations in the classroom, it was clear that the material was far beyond his present abilities. Administration of an informal reading inventory revealed a child with listening comprehension abilities that were above his grade level but word identification, particularly decoding, that was below first grade. As a result, he had great difficulty reading a passage and then answering comprehension questions. After carefully designing appropriate instruction on his level, Riley emerged into a confident reader over the next two years.

Knowing his self-confidence was low, Miss Lynn had taken note of his personal interest in technology. She proposed a special role or class job for Riley each morning. He would serve as my "technician" by unloading my laptop from my bag, powering on and entering the password, plugging in the various cables for the interactive white board, syncing the board to my computer, and opening the notepad for morning message. Riley eagerly assumed the role. Within a week, the demeanor of this student had changed. I had a cheerful student greet me each morning for the next two years with the following: "Good morning, Miss A! Do you want me to hook up your computer?" A child with confidence was emerging. This simple task gave him a purpose in our classroom.

Sometimes, we, as teachers, want to end the problem so quickly that we cannot see the underlying issues. The classroom teacher had not examined Riley's issues and the number of problems was increasing with each day. These three examples show how Miss Lynn never blamed the student but sought the source for the problems.

Lesson Three: Motivate Kids to Take Ownership

Jamie's life had been complicated. Living with an alcoholic parent, she was often begging for money with her mom before she was in Kindergarten. After being removed by social services, Jamie had been fostered, and consequently adopted, by a single mother. Her life had changed dramatically. She had a consistent parent, food to eat, a place to sleep and all the toys she could ever play with. Jamie had a happy demeanor but was very needy in the classroom.

In addition to being a student identified as having a mild intellectual disability, her difficulties in school centered on relationships with peers and teachers. While Jamie would explain that she never meant to yell, shove a kid, or say ugly things to friends, she did. She would often blame

the other child or the teacher and plead her innocence. Her social skills were clearly below her age level. This was most evident during recess.

In the classroom, Jamie struggled to complete a task independently. She rarely worked for more than a few minutes before raising her hand and asking for help or for her work to be checked. Inclusion teachers complained that she would never remain in her seat and required more attention than the other students. She was in jeopardy of being removed from some of these settings.

Children like Jamie often want to please the adults in their lives and do want to have friends, but have limited experience in both of these areas. Miss Lynn knew that continually receiving negative feedback from her teachers would not motivate Jamie nor increase her opportunities for inclusion. Jamie needed a behavior plan. Jamie needed to learn how to accept ownership of her actions and learn that saying "But she made me do it" was no longer acceptable.

Miss Lynn and I, along with Jamie and her mom, discussed the critical areas that we wanted to begin working on: accepting responsibility for herself and keeping her hands and feet to herself. After blocking off a chart for teachers to check "yes or no" as to whether Jamie had been successful doing these two things, we then chose her goal of "one or fewer no's" and her rewards, which included lunch with the principal or her mom. Each day, we would follow up by discussing the problems that week with Jamie and sending feedback to her mom. This process draws on the principles of a behavior support plan or behavior intervention plan by collaborating to develop a set of procedures for changing inappropriate behaviors and replacing it with appropriate behaviors (Alberto & Troutman, 2013).

Miss Lynn had essentially combined a variety of behavior management approaches and best practices to formulate a plan that worked for Jamie, promoted student involvement in the process, and ultimately led to positive behavior outcomes. Like instructional methodology, one behavioral intervention method will not meet the needs of all students (Sebag, 2010). Special education teachers who can utilize multiple strategies for behavior management are crucial to the modern day classroom.

Jamie's involvement in the process represents the belief that an integral part of education is the notion of self-determination. If we, as teachers, believe that one of our primary goals is to produce independent citizens who can problem solve and take care of themselves, then involvement in their goals, including behavioral and social, and even at the elementary-age level, is a worthwhile venture. The process of self-determination teaches students about goal setting, decision-making,

choice selection, problem solving, and self-advocacy as they take an active role in the process (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000). The self-determination approach in the context of a functional assessment has been proposed as being a logical type of positive behavior intervention (Wehmeyer, Baker, Blumberg, & Harrison, 2004).

The power of positive behavior supports led Jamie to take ownership of her actions and improved interactions with peers over time. Jamie's loving demeanor soon evolved into many positive relationships with other teachers and her own set of friends.

Closer Examination of Lessons Learned

Bronfenbrenner (1994) looked at human development by examining the ecological systems surrounding the individual. These five systems range from the microsystem level, which includes family, school, and community, to the macrosystem level, which includes one's culture in relation to the customs and economy. Lesson one highlights the importance of taking a close look at the stakeholders involved in the development of an individual. Parents or guardians attending special education meetings or IEP meetings need to feel like valuable contributors. In her keynote address at the Division of Early Childhood's Annual Conference on Children with Special Needs, Janice Fialka, whose son has a disability, described the partnership with professionals who work with her son in the form of the metaphor of a dance (1997). Much like a dance partner, the relationship can be awkward at first, with stepping on toes and different rhythms. She points to the importance of team members getting to know one another, and particularly, the parents. The PSP provides one method. By incorporating the voices of all individuals working with a child or adult with a disability, including that individual, a better overall view of the person is understood by the team. Ultimately, a support team should be built around the child, which lends itself to the idea of Person-Centered Planning. Particularly as an individual with a disability becomes older, person-centered planning promotes the total individual and his/her interests and goals for future outcomes by engaging in continual problem solving (Mount & Zwernik, 1988). Starting at an early age, schools can support these ideas by empowering the voices of the parents and children.

The idea of person-centered planning in lesson one weaves into the notion of self-determination found in lesson three. As described in the lesson, self-determination promotes active involvement of the individual with the disability in the process. These same principles of self-determination can be put into practice in multiple ways. For example, students

with behavior goals can engage in the process of self-monitoring. With this strategy, a student is self-assessing behavior and recording the results (Rock, 2005). When a combination of approaches incorporated by a teacher does not suffice to address a more serious behavior issue, a teacher can request a formal analysis of the behavior that can result in an intervention plan (Alberto & Troutman, 2013).

Finding the source of the problem in the scenario described in lesson two speaks to the resourceful, observant, and intuitive teacher. A teacher who can see the many facets of a child or situation has greater problem solving ability than one who sees a child or situation in an uncompromising manner. "Cut and dry" decision-making seems quite ineffective for teachers and leaders given these decisions are affecting individual human beings. Unfortunately, current special education practices, such as Response-to-Intervention (RTI), seem to lack a multi-faced approach to problem solving. While RTI is widely practiced across the country, this approach still lends itself toward blaming the child for not progressing (i.e., failure to respond to intervention). RTI requires the use of research-based practices, yet this does not guarantee that the teacher will implement this practice with fidelity or that the intervention is a match for the child's actual need (Williams & Koppenhaver, 2014). An approach like Miss Lynn took in lesson two could have the potential to address the whole child rather than isolate one area.

What We Know from Research

While the above lessons clearly represent teacher and student benefits from a practical standpoint, it raises the question as to what mentoring research has revealed. Ingersoll and Strong (2011) found empirical support for the positive effects of mentoring programs on beginning teachers and pointed to the higher commitment, satisfaction and retention of beginning teachers who participated in some form of a program.

These programs often have reciprocal benefits for both the mentor and mentee. Findings from a structured analysis of 159 mentoring studies revealed overwhelmingly positive mentee outcomes that were identified by four categories: the value of support, specifically in the form of encouragement and empathy; assistance with classroom teaching strategies, such as content and discipline; contact with others and discussion, including the sharing of ideas and information; and feedback, both positive and constructive in nature (Ehrich, Hansford & Tennent, 2004).

Likewise, the outcomes for mentors were identified across four areas: collegiality and networking; reflection or reconsideration of beliefs, ideas, and practices; facilitation of mentors' professional development; and

personal satisfaction, growth, or reward (Enrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004).

With such strong support from mentors and mentees, it seems as if mentoring or induction programs should be a part of every school in the country. Unfortunately, the sustainability of mentoring programs can be volatile due to funding issues and the direction of federal legislation. Interest spiked in the 1980s, and by the year of 1987, only three states were not participating in some type of pilot or planning stage of a program (Brown, 2003). However, the political climate, and particularly No Child Left Behind (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002), has appropriated little funding for more than accountability and student testing.

Yet districts heavily invest in new teachers through their tasks of recruitment, professional development, and administrative time commitments, and frequently must repeat the process due to loss of teachers (Kelley, 2004). Given the overwhelming benefits found in the literature on mentoring, there seems to be a mismatch between maintaining prepared, thoughtful educators and the push toward assessment. Without the possible option of a mentoring program or other supports, the high national attrition rates of special education teachers will likely remain unchanged.

Models for Mentoring Programs

The National Education Association Foundation for the Improvement of Education (1999) highlighted three models of mentoring programs: basic orientation, instructional practice, and school transformation. Basic orientation models tend to focus on series of workshops. Mentors may be assigned, but serve informally with minimal attention toward modeling instruction. While the instructional practice model covers necessities often included the basic orientation model (i.e., procedures, policies, etc.), this model differs in the nature of mentoring provided. Drawing on standards for mastery teaching, the assigned mentor is well trained in guiding new teachers through the use of research-based strategies. The program usually maintains the mentor-mentee relationship for at least two years.

Finally, the school transformation model encompasses elements of both of the previous models and additionally connects to the individual school improvement plan. The model places greater focus on research and data for decision-making. It also encourages the new teacher to be a part of reform within his or her school.

Variations of these models exist in the literature, with unique features and offerings. The bottom line for new teachers is finding belief

in their ability to be an effective teacher. Educators who identified with effective induction programs were more likely to persevere through difficult situations, manage demands effectively, and remain in the field (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004). This is the salient issue for special education teacher retention.

An Effective Mentor in Practice

Whether a general education teacher or special education teacher, the characteristics of effective mentors previously identified speak to Miss Lynn. A competent mentor is one who not only has the years of experience and certifications, but also has the soft skills or people skills necessary to work with new teachers. These are not inherent traits. Rather, effective administrators with these skills will be able to identify teachers with the same. Miss Lynn not only had the credentials and years in the classroom, but she also had experience working with people in other job settings as well as experience as a volunteer. She enjoyed people, and enjoyed teaching, regardless of the age.

Mentors can sometimes struggle with providing both positive and negative feedback. It can be difficult to discuss the lesser points of a lesson or unit with a mentee. However, without this feedback, the mentee is left to believe that the lesson was adequate and effective. This false sense of perfection can set one up for failure and make future feedback difficult to accept. Honesty from a mentor can build a new teacher into a reflective practitioner. Miss Lynn had received both types of feedback in her own teaching and knew the benefits from a discussion of both. By examining the challenging aspects of a lesson while guiding me toward more effective solutions and options, Miss Lynn fostered my ability to self-identify the parts of a lesson that just didn't work. I also learned the finer aspects of a balanced conversation about an observation.

There are many obstacles that limit one's ability to spend time working with a mentee. However, a willingness to share knowledge is a cornerstone to effective mentoring. For many mentors, this is why they want to participate in a program with new teachers. Miss Lynn felt this need to give not only to me, but also to the students, both current and future, whom I would teach. When thinking back on my work with her, this was much more than just instructional strategies and special education-related information. Rather, she brought a much broader perspective from her life that touched on what she had learned about people. Her interactions with others modeled the meaning of professionalism, whether it was with parents or other educators. When working

as a teacher, this knowledge is paramount when navigating through the school and community.

Difficult conversations make some individuals quite uncomfortable, to the point that a mentor may prefer to avoid a mentee. Rather than confront the mentee, a mentor may report shortcomings to colleagues. This can quickly set up a toxic environment. By directly dealing with the mentee, whether related to a negative or positive situation, an open line of communication can exist and make for a stronger classroom and school atmosphere. Miss Lynn made me feel secure in knowing that our discussions of shortcomings and difficulties were private. This security in our relationship allowed me to feel like I could grow in the classroom. A willingness to let a mentee grow allows one to learn from both mistakes and successes. This trust took away the pressure for perfection and created a nurturing environment for me.

While tempting for some teachers, remembering the importance of treating a mentee as a colleague will foster a better relationship than referring to the mentee as the "newbie." We can all learn from one another, whether we've taught one year or thirty years. This reciprocal relationship was something I valued. This sharing of knowledge was evident as we worked together to plan social studies and science units for the classroom. We had individual strengths that we brought to the planning and could then worked collaboratively to develop our units of study. We compromised, critiqued and differentiated together.

Concluding Thoughts

Special education teachers cite a number of areas where they need support in their initial years of teaching, including collaboration with parents and families, instructional design and implementation, and behavioral management (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Morvant et al., 1995; White & Mason, 2006). An effective special education mentor can support the new teacher while scaffolding the development of skills, and potentially keep the teacher in the field. Most importantly, "Special educators need to feel like their work is meaningful, and they must be able to focus their attention on helping their students succeed" (Billingsley, 2002, p. 64). Effective special education mentors can help the beginning special education teacher reach this aspiration.

Strangers can walk into our lives, even retired special education teachers, and provide quality, informal mentoring. What began as a volunteer activity resulted in Miss Lynn working as my paraprofessional through my first four years as a self-contained teacher in special education. We

became close friends over the years and maintained contact once she retired for the second time.

As I moved on and began my new role as a special education professor, we only exchanged cards. I ran into her a few summers ago and learned that she had been diagnosed with lung cancer, despite never being a smoker. As we talked over coffee, I asked her why she spent so much time helping me when she could have been enjoying retirement. She simply stated, "I wanted to share with you everything I knew, in hopes that it would help you and the kids." Six months later, Miss Lynn lost her battle with cancer. However, her knowledgeable lessons continue to nourish my teaching as I share the lessons that I learned from her with current and future educators.

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