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Exploring the Impact of E-Mentorship on EFL Preservice Teachers' Experiences and Perspectives

Eunjeong Park

Department of English Language Education, Sunchon National University 255 Joongang-ro, Suncheon, South Korea

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***Corresponding author:** Eunjeong Park

Department of English Language Education, Sunchon National University 255 Joongang-ro, Suncheon, South Korea

Abstract

Mentorship can be described as a “democratic process” (Arnesson & Albinsson, 2017, p. 203) of sharing thoughts and reflections between a mentor and a mentee. Mentorship is implemented through the process of reflecting and analyzing discussions, building on the voluntariness of both mentors and mentees (Arnesson & Albinsson, 2017). Therefore, mentorship is particularly necessary for mentees to consider and prepare for a future career in higher education. Particularly in this era, technology enables us to implement e-mentoring. The aim of this study is to investigate e-mentoring experiences and perceptions of both mentors and mentees so that e-mentorship can be implemented and undertaken as a pedagogical means to incorporate theory and practice in teacher education at a medium-sized national university in South Korea. The implementation of the e-mentoring program would have its starting point in a continuing conversation about the transition from higher education to life-long career within the academic discourse community. Thus, this study would be of help in investigating the effectiveness of the e-mentoring program and the ways to make it more systematic and pedagogically useful.

Keywords: *e-mentorship, mentoring programs, preservice teachers, teacher education*

1. Introduction

Mentorship can be described as a “democratic process” (Arnesson & Albinsson, 2017, p. 203) of sharing thoughts and reflections between a mentor and a mentee. Mentorship is implemented through the process of reflecting and analyzing discussions, building on the voluntariness of both mentors and mentees (Arnesson & Albinsson, 2017). Therefore, mentorship is particularly necessary for mentees to consider and prepare for a future career in higher education. Particularly in this era, technology enables us to implement e-mentoring. The aim of this study is to investigate e-mentoring experiences and perceptions of both mentors and mentees so that e-mentorship can be

implemented and undertaken as a pedagogical means to incorporate theory and practice in teacher education at a medium-sized national university in South Korea. The implementation of the e-mentoring program would have its starting point in a continuing conversation about the transition from higher education to life-long career within the academic discourse community. Thus, this study would be of help in investigating the effectiveness of the e-mentoring program and the ways to make it more systematic and pedagogically useful.

2. Literature Review

Banks' (2010) study investigated the community-based mentoring program with middle school girls. Twenty-five undergraduates participated in the study as mentors to encourage middle-school girls to be interested in math and science. Through qualitative-oriented interviews, several themes emerged across the mentors' reflections, including valuing and setting, recognizing culture, navigating group dynamics, affirming abilities in general, and providing career guidance.

Linden et al. (2011) investigated the ways doctoral students, their mentors, and their supervisors depict what they learnt and their experience with learning during higher education while as well compared the students' learning outcomes to those identified in Lankau and Scandura's (2007) typology of learning outcomes in mentoring relationships. Three case scenarios of mentorship among doctoral students, mentors, and supervisors were presented in this study. The findings revealed that there were variations in reciprocal learning among the participants. Doctoral students desire meaningful learning experiences through mentorship. In two cases, mentorship is regarded as complementary to supervision. All three cases showed that the mentors tended to undervalue the significance of doctoral students' learning.

The purpose of Arnesson and Albinsson's (2017) study was to expand e-mentorship as a pedagogical means to integrate theory and practice in the field of social science at a Swedish university. The results showed that mentorship enables both mentors and mentees to develop theoretical knowledge and its application, suggesting that the mentoring program may promote the integration of theory and practice in higher education.

Ssemata et al.'s (2017) study explored the functions of mentorship such as improving mentees' capacity and skills and enhancing the ability to generate desired outcomes. Twenty-three postgraduate student mentees and eight faculty members from the college of health sciences in Uganda. The results showed six themes including: 1) defining the mentor role, 2) features of an e-mentoring relationship, 3) overlaying roles of mentors and supervisors, 4) issues of the mentoring processes, and 5) challenges of mentoring. Ssemata et al. (2017) found that the e-mentoring relationship is susceptible to some challenges that may hinder the effectiveness and sustainability of mentorship. This study also implied that mentoring programs and practices should be well-aligned with the desirable characteristics of mentors and mentees.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research design

A qualitative design including interviews and focus group discussions was employed. Interviews were conducted with the faculty members who are the mentors of the individual mentoring sessions. The focus group discussions were done with the undergraduate students in the e-mentoring program with their mentors. As this study is based on exploratory-oriented research, the interviews and the focus group discussions were intended to trail the lead of the individual participants to recognize and comprehend the disposition, and the perceptions of how the participation in the mentoring program affected mentees' lives and conception of future career.

3.2. Participants

In this study, seven preservice teachers (5 females and 2 males) in English Language Education program participated in the

interviews and the focus group. The age ranged between 21 and 23 years old at the time of this research.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

Data for this study was collected for two semesters in order to obtain rich descriptions of the mentors and the mentees' e-mentoring experiences. Mentors were interviewed based on an interview protocol including pre-structured questions. Further questions emerged through the interview processes. Thus, the interviews are regarded as semi-structured. Focus group discussions were undertaken by researchers who were also mentors in this study. To obtain credibility of the data collection, the focus group interviewers met randomly assigned mentees (not the mentees in the same e-mentoring program). Ssemata et al.'s (2017) interview questions were selectively adapted for the interviews and focus group discussions. Then, the interviews and focus group data collected were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

To analyze the collected data, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was utilized. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis include six steps: 1) becoming familiar with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. Through the analysis process, several themes will emerge, and the researchers try to identify recurring themes and patterns, which will further be grouped and compared. In order to make the analysis of the data credible, a member checking method was also adopted for the purpose of making participants confirm or disconfirm the interpretation of the themes and categories of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We ensured accountability to all the interviewed individuals by requesting them to be present at the follow-up meeting in which the authenticity of the findings would be discussed.

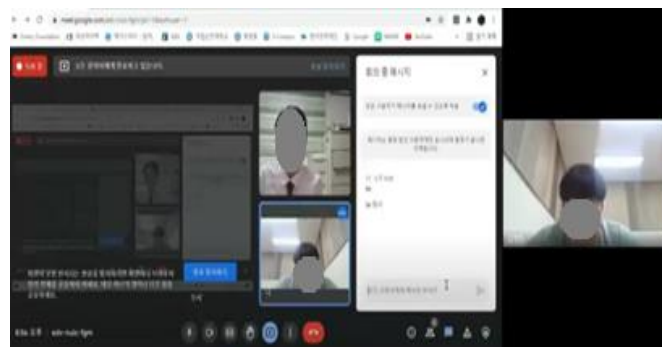


Figure 1. E-mentoring Screenshot

4. Results and Discussion

This part will report a snapshot of the entire story from the interviews and focus groups. The participants thought they had an invaluable experience through the e-mentoring program. One of the participants said:

I finally felt like a teacher in a public school, not just at a private institute. It was an authentic learning and teaching experience. I sensed that we both established rapport and fostered our relationship with the mentee throughout the e-mentoring period.

(Participant 1, individual interview)

I ensure that the online mentoring sessions were effective by utilizing the e-mentoring platform to assist my mentee in comprehending each session. Currently, I have the ability to integrate online learning when necessary.

(Participant 2, individual interview)

However, the preservice teachers felt some hurdles by implementing the e-mentoring sessions. They pertained to technological challenges, which are not unexpected. Here is from another focus group interview:

Issues with technology and system errors arose. For instance, within Google Classroom, the adjustment and automatic saving features did not work properly. I had to manually record scores for assignments and quizzes. It would greatly improve the experience if the Google Classroom platform were more manageable.

(Participant 5, focus group interview)

The preservice teachers expressed a desire for a more reliable and robust online platform for e-mentoring programs. Another challenge the preservice teachers perceived was the short length of the e-mentoring sessions. Thus, they suggested that there should be an extension of the e-mentoring programs to achieve their educational goals in the long term.

This study contributes to the development and enhancement of the e-mentoring program in various ways. First, this study provides some ideas of how to make the e-mentoring program more systematic and pedagogically useful based on shared experiences and expectations from the participating mentors and mentees. For example, there must be the need for rigorous mentoring methods or designs in the format of workshops, seminars, or formal discussions within the university. Second, mentors and mentees are likely to acknowledge their roles and characteristics through the mentoring. This study may strengthen the importance of implementing mentoring programs to preservice teachers by recognizing academic support, psychological support, goal setting, career paths, and/or role modeling (Gershenfeld, 2014). Third, this study can support continuing effort and improvements of mentoring programs at the institutional level. University administrators may realize the need of creating partnerships with researchers to accomplish higher levels of evidence-based practice of the mentoring program. The most important thing is that the mentoring program should be well-structured, practically applicable, and appropriate for college students to ensure their learning and prepare for a career in higher education.

5. Conclusion

All in all, this study not only seeks to look into the perceptions and experiences of mentors in a mentorship program in a Korean national university, but it also focuses on both the partners that are involved in such programs. Through using the qualitative methods like interviews and focus groups discussions, the research aims to understand what degree of change been brought to the mentees' lives by taking part in the mentoring and how mentees conceptualize the career in the future after the completion of the program. Such thematic data analysis enables us to extract the dispersed themes and recurring patterns providing an insight into the effectiveness of the e-mentoring program. Furthermore, the study gives recommendations for systemization and teaching utility of e-mentoring programs as its contribution to the creation and development of such programs is its goal in the given field. The results will be of paramount importance to the enhancement of e-mentorship programs that are at both institutional and individual levels, thus supporting students' learning and career preparation for higher education.

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