The Physical and Health Education Canada National Mentorship Program: An Inquiry into a Meaningful Experience for Mentors

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Abstract

Mentorship plays a crucial role in one's education. Recent research has shown that mentors can benefit from participating in mentorship experiences. Physical and Health Education Canada (PHE Canada) recognizes the value of mentorship and its vital role in developing expertise and supporting the physical education community. This study examined the effects of the PHE Canada National Mentorship Program on those who volunteer to act as mentors. The research utilized a mixed-methods case study incorporating quantitative and qualitative data sources. Data collection involved multiple sources of information and identified case-based themes. In analyzing recurring patterns across surveys, individual interviews, and focus group interviews, four themes emerged concerning mentors' participation: aspirations for mentorship, benefits of mentoring, advantages of virtual mentorship, and professional consciousness upon student learning. An additional theme emerged from the data, highlighting the program's potential to significantly enact and promote equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility in physical and health education (PHE).

Keywords: mentorship, Physical and Health Education Canada, professional development, virtual mentorship

Résumé

Le mentorat joue un rôle crucial dans l'éducation d'une personne. Des recherches récentes ont démontré que les mentors peuvent également tirer des avantages de leur participation à des expériences de mentorat. Éducation Physique et Santé Canada (EPS Canada) reconnaît l'importance du mentorat et son rôle essentiel dans le développement de l'expertise et le soutien à la communauté de l'éducation physique. Cette étude a examiné les effets du programme national de mentorat d'EPS Canada sur les individus qui se portent volontaires pour agir comme mentors. La recherche a adopté une méthodologie d'étude de cas à méthodes mixtes, intégrant des données quantitatives et qualitatives. La collecte de données a impliqué de multiples sources d'information, permettant d'identifier des thèmes liés aux cas étudiés. En analysant les tendances récurrentes issues des sondages, des entrevues individuelles et des discussions de groupe, quatre thèmes principaux ont émergé en lien avec l'expérience des mentors : les aspirations au mentorat, les bénéfices du mentorat, les avantages du mentorat virtuel, et le développement de la conscience professionnelle lors de l'accompagnement des élèves. Un thème additionnel s'est dégagé des données, mettant en lumière le potentiel du programme à promouvoir et intégrer significativement l'équité, la diversité, l'inclusion et l'accessibilité en éducation physique et santé (EPS).

Mots-clés: mentorat, Éducation Physique et Santé Canada, perfectionnement professionnel, mentorat virtuel

Introduction

The importance of mentorship in education cannot be overstated. Indeed, as prominent mentorship scholar Daloz (1986) has suggested, if mentors "did not exist, we would have to invent them" (p. 16). Bridges (2010), appreciating the same significance, has explained that many mentorship scholars recognize "mentoring is more than simply a 'good idea,' arguing instead that mentoring is actually an ethical or moral obligation for those more advanced in their fields" (p. 185). The mentorship literature generally agrees that the primary purpose of a mentoring relationship is to develop the expertise of mentees, while acclimatizing and acculturating them in the ways of an organization (Hobson et al., 2009; Ragins & Kram, 2007). Given this primary purpose, much of the related research has unsurprisingly focused upon outcomes related to mentees, rather than related to mentors (Allen & Eby, 2010; Goshi & Reio, 2013; Ragins & Kram, 2007; Walters et al., 2019). Notwithstanding this focus, there is a small but emerging body of research literature that also attends to how mentorship relationships and experiences might have an impact upon mentors (e.g., Chambers, 2015; Walters et al., 2019).

Physical and Health Education Canada (PHE Canada), Canada's leader with respect to supporting the nation's physical and health education (PHE) community, understands the value of mentorship and has recognized its potential to play a key role in developing expertise in PHE. More specifically, PHE Canada recently launched a national mentorship program that aimed to support those entering the field. With this mentorship program, PHE Canada offers aspiring PHE professionals an opportunity to be mentored by volunteer experienced professionals.

Given this scenario (i.e., a longstanding focus upon mentees rather than mentors, and PHE Canada's newly designed mentorship program for PHE teachers), we recently implemented a timely and fitting study. More specifically, our research attended to the PHE Canada National Mentorship Program, as we investigated it from the perspective of the mentors. Focusing upon the mentors, we attempted to better understand why they engaged with this mentorship opportunity. Of more significance to mentoring programs, and perhaps operationalizing mentorship as a form of professional development, we also sought out the perceived/experienced benefits that were made possible to mentors in and through the mentoring partnership. Additionally, we wondered what these mentors—many of whom have previously benefitted (as mentees) from mentorship themselves (some within programs offered by PHE Canada)—would suggest how the national mentorship program could improve to provide greater service to the PHE community.

Research Question

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of the PHE Canada National Mentorship Program on those who volunteer to act as mentors. The primary research question investigated was "How does the role and/or act of mentoring influence PHE mentors?" Related sub-questions included:

- Why does someone volunteer their time to mentor/share their experience with a person they do not know?
- How does the role and/or act of mentoring influence mentors' teaching practice/work life?
- In what ways can mentoring be used as ongoing professional development for mentors?
- How are mentors inspired by their mentees and is there a resulting shift in mentors' PHE-related understandings and/or practices?

Related Literature

Herein, mentorship is defined as "the complex developmental process that mentors use to support and guide their protégé through the necessary transitions that are part of learning how to be effective educators and career-long learners" (Sweeny, 2008, p. 2). Generally, the traditional sense of a mentoring partnership finds mentors coaching mentees in the workings of an organization, supporting and challenging them as mentees to achieve career-related outcomes (Ragins & Kram, 2007). Mentees are supported in their organizational socialization as they are acculturated in the ways of the organization (Higgins & Kram, 2001) while mentors are trusted to provide emotional support for their mentees, acting as advisors, friends, and role models. With this mentorship understanding, here we offer some summary literature related to four topics related to mentorship: fostering community, nurturing a shared network, mentor preparation, and virtual mentorship.

Fostering Community: PHE Teacher Isolation and Retention

Within the mentorship literature, particularly as it relates to the benefits of mentoring upon mentors, teacher isolation has emerged as a common theme (Cothran et al., 2009; Gordon, 2017; Spicer & Robinson, 2021). PHE teachers are often physically and psychologically isolated from colleagues and, consequently, lack community (Spicer & Robinson, 2021). A reciprocal relationship from participation in a mentorship program can be a purposeful initiative to reduce this sort of teacher isolation (Spicer & Robinson, 2021). At the same time, such mentorship need not include actual direct contact between mentors and mentees; mentorship via electronic communication can also provide a "viable means of alleviating feelings of isolation" (Cothran et al., 2009, p. 554).

According to Gordon (2017), "an effective mentoring process should benefit both parties and can be a key component in retention of new teachers, including physical education educators" (p. 31). Building relationships supports positive mentoring experiences and thus contributes to the retention of teachers (Gordon, 2017). Fostering meaningful connections within the PHE community is vital to empower mentors in strengthening their ties with others. This, in turn, can lead to various advantages for mentors, including improved career performance, recognition, and trust-building with mentees (Kram & Ragins, 2007). These experiences result in a sense of fulfillment and purpose that revitalizes mentors and reminds them of their reasons and passions for teaching (Kram & Ragins, 2007). With these benefits, mentors engage in learning communities that offer professional and personal development potential for themselves as well as for their mentees (Armour et al., 2012).

Nurturing a Shared Network: Professional Learning for Mentors

PHE teachers are often overlooked and forgotten in whole-school approaches to professional learning (Spicer & Robinson, 2021; Walters et al., 2019). Mentoring has been found to provide PHE teachers with professional learning experiences (Walters et al., 2019). Mentorship opportunities are beneficial for mentoring teachers because they support fostering "community building, widespread opportunities for growth and development, and the creation of a network for education professionals to reflect, collaborate, and work in partnership with one another" (Thorner, 2017, p. 10). When veteran and newer PHE teachers can engage in their work, network, and connect in communities of practice, there is an opportunity to develop mentor teachers as learners through enhanced means of reflection (Armour et al., 2012; Walters et al., 2019). In a mentorship relationship, mentors can continually learn from their teaching, be challenged to question and

reflect on their knowledge, and develop their pedagogies for best practices (Armour et al., 2012). By nurturing a shared journey of learning and facilitating a reciprocal exchange of knowledge and skills, mentors can enhance their teaching practices by participating in interactive and in-the-moment learning alongside their mentees (Ambrosetti et al., 2014; van Manen, 1994).

According to the literature, although there are vulnerabilities that can surface when reflecting on one's teaching identity, many mentors see mentoring as a positive professional learning experience, from developing their communication and leadership skills to gaining a sense of fulfillment from observing the positive impact they have upon the professional growth of mentees (Ponte & Twomey, 2014; Richards et al., 2017). Mentorship opportunities benefit mentor teachers by exposing them to new teaching methods through professional growth. They can gain a renewed and rejuvenated sense of teaching by recognizing what their expertise can offer to their teaching community (Ponte & Twomey, 2014). A shared, nurturing, and collaborative partnership focused on supporting mentors' and mentees' development ultimately leads to increased positive experiences for student success and learning (Rikard & Banville, 2010; Walters et al., 2019).

Mentor Preparation: Educating Readiness

Mentees within mentorship programs often discuss dissatisfaction with their learning via ill-prepared mentors (Richards et al., 2017; Rikard & Banville, 2010). Research suggests there is a lack of consistent training programs for mentors that adequately prepare them to feel confident and competent with the mentorship process (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Hobson et al., 2009; Ponte & Twomey, 2014; Rikard & Banville, 2010). Also, veteran teachers who mentor new teachers do not always feel they have sufficient knowledge or information to share with their mentees (Ayers & Griffin, 2005; McCluney et al., 2018; Ponte & Twomey, 2014). Those teachers who are highly educated and hold many years of practical teaching experience—but little-to-no mentoring or coaching interactions—find it difficult to make mentoring meaningful for their mentees (Richards et al., 2017).

To make the mentoring process valuable for both mentors and mentees, there is a need for an adequate mentorship program that prepares mentors for the experience and allows for the building of collegial relationships and a supportive environment where professionals can develop critical friendships (Ayers & Griffin, 2005; Walters et al., 2019). The literature suggests there is a need for mentorship programs that prepare mentors for the process and provide materials they can use during the mentoring engagement (Ponte & Twomey, 2014). Ayers and Griffin (2005) have discussed a mentor training program that allows for an opportunity to investigate and understand the needs of the mentee, and arranges time dedicated for mentors to meet and collaborate with others to converse about experiences, problems, and ways to improve situations, ultimately promoting feelings of empowerment and growth. Such a mentor training program might inform mentoring policy revisions and the subsequent creation of effective training programs to prepare mentors for mentorship (Chambers et al., 2012).

Virtual Mentorship: Benefits of Connecting Online

To develop rich mentorship programs, there is a need for invested financial support, time, space, and willing participants (Ayers & Griffin, 2005). Virtual mentorship provides logistical, geographical, and financial benefits because there is less need for paid release time and/or covering the costs for travel (Cothran et al., 2009; Owen, 2015; Tinoco-Giraldo, 2020); geography and time are the highest ranked obstacles within formal mentoring programs (Cothran et al., 2009). In removing the space and time obstacles, virtual mentorship allows for a broader mentorship experience where mentors and mentees can connect with and learn from others in different regions

(Cothran et al., 2009; Owen, 2015; Tinoco-Giraldo, 2020). This, in turn, enables the expansion of knowledge outside of mentors' home school or school district (Cothran et al., 2009). Virtual mentorship also allows for a secure conversational platform where mentees can feel more comfortable expressing vulnerabilities with others outside their organization (Cothran et al., 2009; Owen, 2015).

Some mentors have shared they feel unprepared with the mentorship process when faced with questions or situations where they have limited content or subject knowledge (Ayers & Griffin, 2005). Questions posed via an online platform allow for a wider range of reflection and research time for mentors to feel poised and knowledgeable about a response; virtual mentorship allows for greater reflection time for both mentors and mentees (Cothran et al., 2009). An additional benefit to virtual mentorship includes a reduction in the perceived hierarchical status, something that may allow for further sharing between mentors and mentees (Cothran et al., 2009). It has been noted that mentors and mentees feel more comfortable connecting through an online platform (Cothran et al., 2009), allowing for more profound and enriching conversations and learning. Other equally essential advantages include flexibility in meeting times and locations (Owen, 2015; Speer et al., 2021) and allowing mentors to increase their skill sets while broadening the mentorship community (Speer et al., 2021).

Research Design

Case Study

The PHE Canada National Mentorship Program supports pre-service and in-service teachers, who are in the first three years of their professional careers, allowing for mentees to connect one-on-one with a PHE community mentor. This mentoring process fosters the practical and educational growth and knowledge of both the mentor and mentee. The mentorship program allows for in-the-moment networking and capacity building for professionals in the PHE community nationwide.

This research utilized an explanatory/sequential mixed-methods case study (Creswell, 2014), using quantitative and qualitative data sources focused on the PHE Canada National Mentorship Program. Case study methodology seeks participants' understanding of a phenomenon under study (Geering, 2006). As is the practice in case study research, we focused on a "bounded system (a case)… over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information and reports a case description and case-based themes" (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). This bounded system includes all PHE Canada mentors who served in this role in one academic year. The study received ethics approval.

Case study is beneficial when looking at a process and hopes to answer "how" and "why" questions (Stake, 2000), which was the intent of this research. As a bounded case study, this research "[sought] to understand them. We would like to hear their stories" (Stake, 1995, p. 1).

Research Methods

In this investigation, the initial data source was an online survey sent to those who had volunteered to act as mentors in the PHE Canada National Mentorship Program. PHE Canada provided researchers with an email list of 80 approved mentors. Hoping for a diversity of perspectives, experiences, and geography, 48 mentors received invitations to participate in the survey. This purposeful sampling resulted in 29 participants who identified as female and 19 who identified as male, representing all teaching levels from elementary school to university. Additionally, we sought representation from across the country, resulting in participants from

Northern, Western, Central, and Eastern Canada. One mentor in the study lived in the northern United States. Of the 48 mentors invited to participate, 15 completed the survey. After the initial surveys, we invited 12 respondents to individual interviews, again seeking a purposeful representation. We further selected a representative sample of six from the ten mentors who completed individual interviews to participate in a focus group. Four mentors participated in the focus group.

Mentors selected by PHE Canada to participate in the National Mentorship Program must complete a program induction, comply with PHE Canada's Code of Conduct, and commit to facilitating a minimum of three to four conversations (virtual due to the pandemic) over one academic year. The program allowed for the flexibility of mentors and mentees to devise schedules and determine when best to connect. As part of the initial induction process, all mentors agreed to the following statement from PHE Canada, "I wish to participate in this PHE Canada mentorship program as a mentor which may involve being interviewed and participating in surveys."

Following the end of the one-year program, participants with expertise in PHE and/or teacher education and across elementary, middle, and high school contexts were invited to complete a survey intended to investigate why they volunteered, and if this experience influenced them as mentors. Mentorship survey questions were guided by our previous research (see Walters et al., 2019). Answers were given using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The online survey provided data that was subsequently quantitatively analyzed. The themes that emerged from the data analysis informed the finalizing of an existing bank of individual and focus group interview questions, initially developed as part of our university's Research Ethics Board application.

After the initial surveys were complete, individual interviews further investigated themes revealed through the survey. Interviews were completed via Zoom, recorded, and transcribed. One focus group interview was conducted to further explicate issues related to mentorship and allow for the social construction of knowledge related to themes revealed through the survey and the individual interviews. Data from the individual interviews informed the questions used to guide the focus group interview. The focus group interview was also completed via Zoom, recorded, and transcribed.

Data Analysis

All data from the interviews and focus group underwent analysis by two researchers, who looked for critical issues, similarities, differences, recurring ideas, clustering, patterns, and relationships in the responses. Where there was not perfect agreement/alignment with these two researchers, two additional researchers engaged with the data so that, together, the four researchers could come to consensus. According to the methods outlined by Creswell (2005) and Miles and Huberman (1994), the main two data analysis researchers combed through the verbatim data using a deductive process. The two researchers went word-for-word and line-by-line through each individual and focus group interview transcript, highlighting all notable information while generating a legend to make sense of colour-coding and categorizing the similarities that came about through thematic trends. The deductive approach allowed for the intentionality to discover reoccurring concepts, ensuring all pertinent information was pulled from the transcripts. From this, the researchers were able to form dominant themes with consistency in relation to the research questions and commonalities among individual and focus group interviews. Mentors' sharing of experiences allowed for further analysis and interpretation, which revealed four themes: aspirations for mentorship, benefits of mentoring, benefits of virtual mentoring, and professional consciousness upon student learning.

Results

Online Survey

The survey was focused on the mentoring process and the mentors' professional learning and personal development (see Table 1). All mentors who completed the survey expressed enjoyment in mentoring, and 92% agreed that their aspirations for mentoring and giving back to others were because of positive mentorship experiences in their past. The same percentage validated their desire to mentor within the program again. The survey found most participants felt confident in their role as mentors, while all were comfortable sharing professional knowledge and experiences with their mentees. Over 84% of the participants were comfortable with self-expression as a mentor and believed they inspired change within their mentee. Each participant felt confident they had effectively mentored their mentees.

All survey participants agreed they learned from their mentees during the mentoring process. More than 84% also acknowledged their professional and personal benefit in relation to the mentoring partnership, and 92% felt professionally and personally rejuvenated because of the mentoring program. From these experiences, 77% of mentors noted they would remain in contact with their mentee beyond the program. While the survey provided a broad overview of our inquiry, delving into the transcripts from individual interviews and the focus group interview allowed for a better capture the narratives behind the effects of mentoring on the mentors.

Table 1
Survey Responses (n=15)

Survey Question	SA	A	N	D	SD
I enjoy sharing experiences and what I've learned with those with less experience.	84.6	15.4	-	-	-
I felt confident in discussing my knowledge and experiences with my mentees.	76.9	23.1	-	-	-
Others mentored me, so I feel the need to give back and take on the role of a mentor.	84.6	7.7	7.7	-	-
I am comfortable expressing to others that I am mentor.	61.5	23.1	7.7	7.7	-
I am confident that I was effective as a mentor in this program.	38.5	61.5	-	-	-
I learned from my mentee.	53.8	46.2	-	-	-
I benefitted professionally from this mentoring partnership.	53.8	30.8	15.4	-	-
I believe I inspired change in my mentee(s).	38.5	46.2	15.4	-	-
At times during our meetings, I lacked confidence in my role as a mentor.	-	7.7	7.7	69.2	15.4
I benefitted personally from this mentoring partnership.	-	53.8	30.8	-	7.7
I will volunteer to act as a mentor in this program in the future.	84.6	7.7	7.7	-	-
I will continue to engage with my mentee(s) beyond this program.	46.2	30.8	15.4	7.7	-
This experience supported my professional confidence.	46.2	46.2	7.7	-	-
I felt rejuvenated personally and professionally following my mentoring.	53.5	38.5	7.7	-	-
I questioned my practice during the mentorship program.	23.1	15.4	7.7	23.1	30.8

Note. Data is recorded in percentages.
SA–Strongly Agree, A–Agree, N–Neutral, D–Disagree, SD–Strongly Disagree

Individual Interviews

Individual interviews were conducted after the mentors completed the one-year PHE Canada National Mentorship Program. In analyzing recurring patterns across individual interview transcripts, four themes emerged in relation to mentors' participation: aspirations for mentorship, benefits of mentoring, advantages of virtual mentorship, and professional consciousness upon student learning. By considering these transcripts, we were able to gain valuable insights into the role and/or act of mentoring and its influence on PHE mentors.

The interview questions included:
- Could you describe the mentoring partnership between you and your mentee?
- How did you build a relationship between you and your mentee?
- In your view, what is the act or role of mentoring?
- Describe what it is like to pass on your teaching knowledge and experience to your mentee.
- In what ways were you able to share your philosophy of education/teaching with the mentees? Did working with mentees influence your philosophy of education/teaching?
- In what ways did mentorship cause you to reflect on the profession?
- Can you suggest why others may choose not to take part in a program such as this one?
- What is the mentor's role in bringing about the kinds of understanding and practices that you would like to see in your mentee(s)?
- Were you able to reflect on your practice and those strategies and ideas your mentee(s) brought to this program?
- What did you learn about teaching, the system, and your practice as you shared your knowledge with your mentee(s)?

Aspirations for Mentorship

Mentors' personal desires and aspirations to mentor were omnipresent components throughout individual interviews. Many times, mentors expressed their ambitions to join, suggesting some degree of social responsibility toward supporting the PHE community. The power of shared experiences to combat isolation as well as a desire to share knowledge to build valuable connections were also communicated.

When asked why mentors agreed to take on the mentorship role, Gordon explained "I always felt a sense of responsibility." Also feeling a sense of duty, Rebecca shared:

> I've had mentors throughout my teaching career, so I thought I would apply and see if I could help somebody else. I know there aren't a lot of teachers out there who have had positive mentorship experiences. I hope that I can change that narrative to a certain extent.

Likewise, Dani offered "I believe the best way to make a difference is to give back my positive experiences as a teacher." These statements echoed other participants' responsibility towards the PHE community.

Participants discussed their experiences of isolation as PHE teachers and emphasized the importance of mentorship for new teachers. Jamie reflected on his first-year teaching in Northern Alberta, stating:

> It was challenging to start as a first-year teacher without any resources and references for understanding the Program of Studies, and how to assess all those pieces. I never would want any other human, let alone a first-year teacher, to experience what I felt.

Jade also expressed her feelings of isolation and how that inspired her to sign up to mentor: "I have a desire to mentor because when I first became a teacher, I was alone." These mentors were driven by a genuine desire to support others based on their experiences.

Many mentors sought to share their expertise with others in similar isolated specialist roles. Jamie reflected on the potential of his reach, explaining "if one or two or 10 or 20 teachers take something from my resources, I'm reaching that many more kids who are now experiencing a quality PHE program. That fueled my desire to get involved." Similarly, Keeley stated:

> I wanted to volunteer because I've been in the field for a while now, and I feel like I have experiences and ideas that I can share with our board. PE specialists in elementary schools are very, very rare in Ontario. It's lonely. I have been trying to immerse myself more in the PE world. I looked at this as an opportunity to give back and share my experiences and connect with other PE-minded persons.

Benefits of Mentoring

Throughout the individual interviews, mentors shared various benefits of mentorship to their own practice. The power of connection, enhanced reflection, and varying forms of professional development, largely related to inspiration and enriching one's professional toolbox, were common themes articulated by the mentor participants. Because PHE teachers continuously feel isolated in their profession, becoming a mentor and building capacity and community allows specialists to feel part of a team. Theo shared that "it's just great to connect with folks." Nate explained that mentoring is "an awesome opportunity to meet new people." Keeley conveyed an ideal partnership where a mentor and mentee can "reach out to each other when we need." Simultaneously, Jade mentioned the fulfillment of having a friend within the same line of employment that allows for professional insight, stating "to have someone in the Phys-ed area, to bounce ideas back and say hey, why don't you try this."

Jade expressed in her interview that she can be set in her professional ways but discussed how reflecting on interactions with her mentee allowed her to find a refreshed passion for her work: "sometimes you get caught in a rut and my mentee can just help to bring you back into life and into like, oh, this is exciting again!" She also shared thoughts about her practice while interacting with her mentee, and how this was a powerful process for reflection and growth; one must be "cognizant of what you're doing. I think it always improves your teaching, what you're doing, and your focus." Rebecca noted having more profound reflective practices because of the mentorship process. It helped her to reflect on her PHE program, stating "to the extent where we're going to kind of redo things for next year." Ted echoed the benefits of reflection and enhancement of his practice, offering "it does enable me to reflect on my practice and enables me to access some new strategies and ideas."

Mentors expressed an abundance of learning, due to new ideas gathered from their mentees. Jamie talked about the joy of learning because "these teachers are coming out with the up-to-date pieces." Rebecca elaborated on this point and gave voice to the experience of collaborating with her mentee, sharing "talking to somebody who is a new grad or about to graduate, with their new ideas from their cohorts—I'd say that's probably the main thing that I've gotten out of it." She also described feeling "encouraged and inspired to do some things differently within my own programming." Ted expressed the positive effects of learning via reciprocal relationships:

> I learned just as much from them, and sometimes more than they learned from me. So, it's a reciprocal relationship. It makes me look at my own career and teaching research with a more critical eye. It's just a recognition that we can learn from each other's experiences. We can learn from each other's successes and failures.

Jade talked about her professional lens being heightened because her mentee presented many new approaches to planning and teaching:

Because they are just out of university, they're so fresh with all this excitement and fresh, new ideas. She had some cool things that she was doing or heard of, and I had never heard of before. It just got me excited about wanting to do more.

Benefits of Virtual Mentorship

From participating in the virtual mentorship program, mentors learned that online and distance experiences have advantages. Mentors recognized the virtual program's potential to transcend geographical boundaries, a feature that sets it apart and enhances its capacity to foster growth within the PHE community. Rebecca, for instance, found immense value in forging connections with professionals across Canada, a benefit that is distinct to virtual mentorship:

Making connections with other professionals in different provinces supported my professional development. Having that connection with my mentee may benefit me at some point when she's in a job and I need resources or have questions about something related to PE and health. I would say that's probably the best professional development, just making those connections. As PE teachers, we don't get to do that kind of stuff like in other industries—let's say oil and gas. When you go, you have your business dinners, and you make those connections with people from different companies. We don't have many opportunities for that, except maybe at teachers' conventions, and then that's such a short time that building connections doesn't happen.

Jamie highlighted the role of technology in virtual mentorship, appreciating the program's ability to connect people, even when in-person meetings are impossible. The virtual program holds value in developing professional relationships because its capacity extends beyond one's immediate social circle, thereby broadening the scope of learning and interaction. As Jim explained:

It's nice to get to know others in the profession outside of your bubble because, depending on where you are geographically, you can get stuck in small bubbles. Sharing your viewpoints of units and your programming can be valuable in other places.

Like many mentors, Jamie recognized the significance of virtual mentorship as a means of exchanging ideas and developing and communicating best practices. He emphasized the value of fostering an environment of collaborative learning and sharing knowledge through virtual platforms, stating:

We can be an open book, talk about hurdles, talk about challenges, talk about whatever it is that we're dealing with and then say, hey, here's my Google Drive. Sometimes, it's just seeing and grabbing something you like to support your learning and develop your teaching.

Jamie elaborated on this point, as he explained that exchanging virtual resources and materials stimulates further conversation and collaboration toward developing best practices.

Rebecca echoed the importance of such learning from conversing and building quality online/distance mentorship relationships with her mentee. From her virtual experience, she was able to focus on being more reflective as a teacher as her virtual mentorship relationship developed over time:

I think the reflection that I did was more. I was able to reflect on the new teacher mentorship program I was doing at my school, so the line of questioning that I used with my mentee and this program then transferred into the program here. It kind of directed me too, because I was on maternity leave. So, not being in a school was different last year, and because of COVID and being in and out of the school, I realized things needed to be adapted or reworked. That came out of the reflection piece after meeting with my mentee and our various emails back and forth. It encouraged me to continue revamping things.

Professional Consciousness upon Student Learning

Individual interviews revealed that mentors developed a deeper professional awareness of themselves and their environments. Because of interactions with their mentees, mentors could relate to topics such as the lack of fundamental movement skills their students were presenting and focus on new ways of planning for student development. These interactions also highlighted the importance of relationships for holistic balance.

In working with her mentee, Rebecca reflected on the insufficiency of physical literacy amongst their students, and the need to move away from traditional sports skill planning: "these kids are coming in with less physical literacy and body awareness." Rebecca discussed the importance of focusing on skill practice, physical literacy, and spatial awareness to enhance student development. Meanwhile, Jamie shared the cruciality of focusing on one's practice, his mentee, and the whole child, and how working with his mentee and impacting other professionals will ultimately assist with better health and wellness for children and youth:

You're seeing an impact amongst many other teachers and students, and those students get a quality health and physical education program because of it. Knowing that it's helping a teacher, therefore, it's helping kids at an exponential rate. Let's start focusing on the whole child and focusing on all our kids, so that they can give their best.

Mentors acknowledged the value of relationships, addressing the balance of professional and personal growth. Jamie mentioned the need to find professional and personal balance while investing in his career. Isaac also agreed that this experience has allowed him to refocus on the value of quality relationships. Keeley discussed her new genuine approach to relationships because of her experience, explaining "nobody is the knowledge holder" and "there's no one way to do things." Keeley also reflected that it has allowed her to let go and be more open and vulnerable within relationships. Dani gave detail to relational development and working with his mentee, which enhanced intentional planning and mental progress:

Mentally, it changed my job and career because it allowed me to be more intentional in what I'm doing with my students. I need to take note of my career path by having more reflection on what I'm doing every day. I wanted to make things better in the classroom and in the gymnasium every day. It allowed me to be more intentional. I want to improve, even though I'm at the upper end of my career right now. Mentoring will be a big part of my career onwards.

Trent voiced the knee-down approach, getting to the students' level, while he observed his mentee engaging with students. This was a reminder of the importance of authentic relational development which is pivotal in mentor, mentee, and student relationship building. The significance of relational quality that brings people together, creating an opportunity for personal and professional growth while manifesting work on an ethic of care, are essential.

Focus Group Interview

Following the individual interviews, six participants were invited to participate in a focus group to further explore themes derived from the individual interviews. Of the six participants invited, four participated in the group interview.

Focus Group questions included:
- Could you describe why folks like yourself volunteer to act as a mentor?
- In what ways did the mentee(s) inspire you?
- How many interactions with your mentee did it take to result in a paradigm shift in your mentee or in you?
- Could you describe any benefits to you in your role as a mentor during this program?

- Did you or would you recommend your friends or colleagues engage in the PHE Canada mentorship program?
- Since engaging in the program have you looked for other opportunities to act as a mentor?
- Could you describe your prior engagement with PHE Canada, e.g., did you participate in the Student Leadership Camp as a student or mentor, are you active in the organization?

Mentors spoke about their aspirations to mentor, discussed the personal and professional benefits they gained from mentoring, expressed how virtual mentorship is expansive to collaboration, and communicated how the process allowed them to focus intentionally on professionalism. Mentors felt an allegiance to their mentees, holding a sense of responsibility to give back due to their own positive experiences as mentees in the past. Some also expressed feelings of isolation, not having a mentor when they began teaching, which transformed their desire to support others. Mentors built mutually respectful relationships, enhanced their professional learning and communication through the mentoring process, thus influencing a sense of pride because of the successes of their mentees. Mentoring participants discussed that being connected to others throughout Canada, because of the virtual world, was impactful on their professional development and networking capacities, where they were able to expand connections country-wide rather than solely within one's own region. In addition, mentors had an enhanced motivational force to magnify their teaching and student learning processes, because participants were driven to be at their best for themselves, their mentees, and their students.

One factor that emerged from the focus group discussions that did not align with the themes derived from the individual interviews (nor was this a specific question addressed in either the individual or focus group interviews) was the program's potential to significantly enact and promote equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (EDIA). In reflecting on the program, mentors discussed the potential reach of nurturing diverse partnerships, envisioning a future where the program's influence extends beyond the field, branching out to various areas of expertise, and ensuring a more inclusive learning community through extending invitations for mentor partnerships:

> If we can build diversity through mentorship options and expand out, not only within the education field, but by bringing different individuals into the program, whether they're minorities or Indigenous individuals, we can continue to reach out and find connections. This will only make the program stronger and lift us. (Keeley)

Mentors explained that implementing EDIA goals within the program would lead to better matching of supportive mentoring relationships, positively influence their teaching, and develop culturally responsive practices. Trent explained:

> I could learn so much more and bring more back to my classroom, and then they could take what I have that's different and bring it back to their classroom. That would be an enriching experience for both the mentor and mentee.

This highlights the importance of EDIA and how it plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality of education, mentoring, and the program's capacity to become an agent of change.

Discussion

Our findings offer documentary evidence related to how mentoring influences those who act as mentors in PHE. In unravelling quality mentorship practices and learning from individual experiences, there is also literature to support why someone volunteers their time to mentor.

Furthermore, it has been discovered how mentoring can influence mentors' practice by enriching professional development experiences and teaching pedagogies.

Consistent with the research literature surrounding mentorship, this study found that the reciprocal benefits of effective mentorship relationships can be a driving force in recruiting mentors to volunteer their time and expertise toward mentorship programs (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Parker-Katz & Bay, 2008). Although specific mentorship roles may come with compensation and promotion, within mentorship's collaborative work, opportunities to enhance one's career can arise through engagement in professional learning. This can lead to a sense of fulfilment, revitalization, satisfaction, and improved job performance, as was the case in this research (Chambers et al., 2012; Goshi & Reio, 2013; Ragins & Kram, 2007). Mentors in this study, who established a solid foundation of support with their mentees, found personal fulfilment and meaning in carrying forth a collective responsibility in supporting the new generation of PHE teachers (Parker-Katz & Bay, 2008; Ragins & Kram, 2007).

Mentorship relationships, whether past or present, have a profound impact on personal growth and motivation. They instill a willingness to participate in mentorship to help others (Gordon, 2017; Goshi & Reio, 2013; Ragins & Kram, 2007). As seen in this study, the act of mentoring influences one's practice and life by building confidence, competence, and pride in undertaking a mentorship role, primarily through seeing a mentee's success come to fruition (Goshi & Reio, 2013; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Hobson et al., 2009; Parker-Katz & Bay, 2008). The renewed sense of teaching that comes with mentoring brings purpose, community, and attention to a teacher's identity (Goshi & Reio, 2013; Parker-Katz & Bay, 2008; Walters et al., 2019). Mentoring is influential in retaining teachers, encouraging socialization, and fostering partnerships beyond one's circle when it is a well-established mentorship program (Gordon, 2017; Thorner, 2017). Similarly, research participants, through their involvement in PHE Canada's National Mentorship Program, felt as rejuvenated and optimistic about their teaching and the future of PHE as did their mentees.

Being a mentor can arguably be one of a teacher's most beneficial professional development experiences. As in this study, mentors engage in a reciprocal relationship with their mentees, where they refine professional reflection and enhance teaching performance (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2014; Cothran et al., 2019; Goshi & Reio, 2013; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Hobson et al., 2009). With this, mentors gain experience and credentials to pursue career advancement (Goshi & Reio, 2013; Hobson et al., 2009), as they acquire stronger communication skills, leadership competence, professional confidence, self-efficacy, and problem-solving strategies (Andrew et al., 2017; Cothran et al., 2019; Speer & Johnson, 2021) within their mentorship role.

In guiding and developing quality relationships with their mentees, mentors are challenged to be very intentional in their practice (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2014; Goshi & Reio, 2013; Hobson et al., 2009; McCluney et al., 2018) to effectively communicate the strategies behind their teaching. In turn, as part of this dialogue and throughout the shared journey of learning, mentors learn a great deal from their mentees. Because many mentees have recently graduated from undergraduate university programs, with a variety of new skills and knowledge to share, mentors are introduced to new pedagogies, research, and teaching approaches (Chambers et al., 2012; Gordon, 2017; Thorner, 2017). With these up-to-date insights, mentors can be rejuvenated within their practice (Goshi & Reio, 2013; Hobson et al., 2009), emerge out of a sense of isolation (Cothran et al., 2009; Goshi & Reio, 2013), become inspired to enhance their instruction (Chambers et al., 2012; Goshi & Reio, 2013; Hobson et al., 2009), and have increased job satisfaction (Ragins & Kram, 2007).

Recommendations

Based on our research and the related literature review, we highlight the following four recommendations for developing and continuing meaningful mentorship to positively influence the PHE community. These recommendations include the following: promote (this) mentoring program, highlight the benefits of mentoring, provide mentorship training, and continue practice and research with virtual platforms.

Promote the PHE Canada National Mentorship Program

Our first recommendation emphasizes the need for the PHE Canada National Mentorship Program to be promoted across all Canadian PHE networks. This could be done through various channels, including emails and monthly newsletters sent to PHE Canada community members, nationwide school divisions, and university Bachelor of Education programs. Notices can be sent to new members upon registry or when PHE Canada community members renew their memberships. Recruitment for the program can take place at teaching conventions and conferences, and/or while hosting a session about the program at PHE Canada's annual national conference. Invitations for mentorship should also be promoted by extending partnerships with key organizations, such as Ever Active Schools and OPHEA. It is crucial to ensure diversity in mentorship recruitment across the nation, from teaching experiences to levels of schooling, ethnicities, and areas of expertise. The mentorship program should acknowledge and understand the communities they serve to ensure culturally responsive learning and the promotion of EDIA in PHE.

Highlight the Benefits of Mentoring

Secondly, the benefits of mentorship also need to be advertised to boost recruitment. Those interested in participating as a mentor should know how this role can serve professional and personal growth and learning (Walters et al., 2019). Professional development incentives such as recognition of participation in the mentorship program, a certificate of professional learning through mentorship, and/or compensation towards a PHE Canada membership could motivate mentors to dedicate themselves and their time to mentorships' collective responsibility to build the PHE community's capacity (Cothran et al., 2009; Goshi & Reio, 2013).

Provide Mentorship Training

The third recommendation is to develop and introduce a mentorship training program that adequately prepares mentors for their significant role in shaping the experience of their mentees. Research suggests a lack of time and resources dedicated to formal mentorship orientations on how to be an effective mentor (Chambers et al., 2012; Hobson et al., 2009; Own, 2015; Ponte & Twomey, 2014; Rikard & Banville, 2010; Speer et al., 2021). For quality programming, it is recommended that PHE Canada create a mentor development program, providing a guidebook, including checklists, networking connections, schedules, and resources related to a host of topics, including conflict resolution, lead discussion points, scenarios, and problem-solving strategies to assist mentors throughout their mentoring journey. The organization should connect with like-minded partners to develop a sustainable mentorship model.

Continue Practice and Research with Virtual Platforms

Virtual mentoring was the method used within this particular mentorship program; however, there is limited research on the impact of virtual mentorship. The positive benefits that mentors reaped as a result of this online program, highlighted in this paper, were made possible

due to virtual mentorship. The fourth recommendation is for future practice and research to occur with virtual mentoring. For example, researchers might consider and/or compare virtual mentorship to in-person mentoring. It is understood that networking capacities are greatly enhanced in the virtual world, but online connections are not without limitations (Owen, 2015). We encourage those involved in an online mentorship program to have access to further information to guide their processes, stimulate professional potential, and equip them to be fully immersed in the experience (Tinoco-Giraldo et al., 2020).

Limitations

While this study highlights several positive outcomes of virtual mentorship programming for mentors in developing the PHE community, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The small sample size of participants used in this study may not have fully represented the broader PHE community, which could affect thematic generalization. This may have also missed opportunities to encounter more critical perspectives and voices. Participants who opted to sign up as mentors and complete the surveys displayed a willingness to provide feedback to promote or improve the program. The self-reported data from participants could introduce bias compared to those mentors who did not complete surveys. Data were also collected over the course of the pandemic, which could have enticed participants to mentor, as the value of virtual relationships may have increased in times of physical distancing and isolation. As per our recommendations, future research should address these limitations by using a larger, more diverse sample size of mentors to improve the quality of programming and enhance validity.

Conclusion

A widely promoted and well subscribed to mentorship program offers exposure to meaningful professional learning opportunities, and the socialization of those new and experienced within the PHE community. Education (and PHE) is always evolving and without fostering relationships and building community and capacity towards teaching and learning, systems risk becoming stagnant in developing teachers and students. This study's mentors have envisioned a future where a mentorship program's impact extends beyond the field, reaching diverse areas of expertise and creating a more inclusive and culturally relevant learning community. The research has provided valuable insights into the importance of mentoring, its positive influence on mentors, and its vital role in delivering professional learning nationwide.

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