

# How Today's Mentoring Relationships



## Can Influence Tomorrow's *Physical Education*

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**V**ital to the development of any physical education teacher is having the support and counsel of an experienced mentor. The first contact with a mentor for most is during their student teaching experience. But mentoring does not stop at student teaching. A young teacher entering their first full-time teaching experience can be mentored by any or all senior colleagues. Mentoring can occur formally or informally during the first few years of teaching. Conclusive research consistently finds that those who have been mentored have greater career success and satisfaction (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Bloom, 2013).

A mentor can help a protégé feel safe in growing and developing as a professional. With this level of support, protégés may feel more confident in planning and experimenting with new teaching

strategies, networking with other professionals, and utilizing more resources, all the while avoiding the feelings of alienation common to beginning teachers (Allen et al., 2004). Consequently, more positive attitudes, higher levels of motivation, and greater job satisfaction can yield increased retention rates (Stewart & Harrison, 2016). With increased career success and satisfaction, protégés are likely to engage in professional activities that enhance teaching and student learning.

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Colbert and Wolff (1992) stressed the importance of improving teachers' job satisfaction, since, at that time, approximately 50 percent of new teachers were leaving the profession within five years. However, a more recent longitudinal study investigated teacher attrition and found that teachers who were assigned a mentor during their first year of teaching were more likely retained than those who were not mentored (Gray & Taie, 2015). Therefore, establishing mentorships during the first years of instruction seems to be an effective strategy for developing novice teachers in school systems.

The mentors also benefit. They may learn as much from the protégé as the protégé learns from them. Making a positive impact on aspiring teachers, sharing experience and knowledge, and recognizing the accomplishments made in their years as a professional are all benefits gained in mentoring. Given the benefits that both a mentor and a protégé receive from an effective relationship, it appears that experienced physical educators serving as mentors would find the experience highly satisfying.

Research has discovered that producing effective mentors requires adequate training (Upson, Koballa, & Gerber, 2002). Gotion (2016) wrote, "Mentoring is a learned skill, yet few of us have had the opportunity to learn how to be effective mentors" (p. 3). The author suggested that effective mentors must possess the ability to unjudgementally determine the source of a problem, enhance communication skills, be supportive and trustworthy, and be a team player. Still, experienced teachers often feel insufficiently prepared to serve as a mentor. Consequently, many mentors do not realize the multiple roles that can enhance the development of protégés. This article, therefore, describes the effective functions that mentors can fulfill to assist in both the personal and professional development of protégés. By understanding the multiple functions of a mentor, physical educators can better serve young professionals in achieving greater success and ultimately contribute to the future of physical education.

## Mentor Functions

Protégés are best served when mentors meet their needs for both career development and psychosocial support (Kram, 1985). The functions of a mentor may, therefore, be classified according to the protégé's specific needs. Career development functions are mentor behaviors intended to advance the protégé's adjustments within their profession of teaching physical education. Psychosocial support functions are mentor behaviors that increase the protégé's self-identity, competence and affiliation with the school and profession. Within the career and psychosocial functions, a mentor can take on specific roles to meet the protégé's developmental needs (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000).

**Career Functions.** A mentor can play five distinct roles that can assist in the career development of a protégé. Each role guides protégés in becoming acclimated to the school in which they work. Further, the mentor roles can promote the protégé's career. The mentor's effectiveness in performing these roles is largely dependent on their status and influence with leaders and other members of the school and professional community. These roles are: (1) patron, (2) coach, (3) protector, (4) challenger and (5) opportunity creator.

1. **Patron.** In this role, the mentor provides public support for the protégé in professional situations. For example, the mentor may nominate and support a student teacher as they seek their first professional position or a beginning teacher as they seek tenure. Another example may occur during faculty meetings when the

mentor provides public support for a protégé's opinion and ideas. Research has found that protégés appreciate their mentors playing this role (Schempp, Elliott, McCullick, LaPlaca, & Berger, 2016).

2. **Coach.** As a coach, the experienced physical educator may assist the novice teacher in achieving professional goals. Additionally, the mentor may offer strategies to assist the protégé in learning to navigate the demands of the school, classroom and additional responsibilities. For instance, the mentor may provide practices for more efficient classroom management. He or she could also provide guidance for developing and maintaining appropriate relationships with students, parents and administrators.

3. **Protector.** Being proactive as opposed to reactive is both recommended and encouraged in mentoring relationships. However, beginning teachers often make mistakes that can prove detrimental to the school image and their own career. As a protector, the mentor may use their status, experience and influence within the school to defend the protégé from reprimands by assuming full or partial responsibility for the protégé's mishap. Suppose the student teacher, in anger, speaks inappropriately to students in class, resulting in phone calls from parents. The mentor may intervene by first speaking to the student teacher and then reassuring parents and administrators that corrective action has been taken and the incident will not be repeated.



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4. *Challenger*. Due to their experience, mentors can foresee future professional challenges that the protégé will encounter. To prepare for such obstacles, the mentor poses challenging tasks and provides feedback on the protégé's performance. An invitation to participate in a faculty curriculum committee meeting in which the mentor is a member is an example of such a professional challenge.

Another example would be the mentor challenging the protégé to organize school events such as a track and field day. This role was significantly valued by protégés (Schempp et al., 2016).

5. *Opportunity Creator*. In this role mentors create opportunities that encourage working with other experienced teachers or distinguished members of related organizations. For example, one



of the protégé's professional goals might be to advocate and promote the physical education program through active community engagement. In this situation the mentor may assign the protégé to take a leadership role in community events such as Jump Rope for Heart. The mentor may arrange for the protégé to attend a professional conference and introduce the novice to key players in the field.

## Psychosocial Functions

In the context of physical education, there are four particularly valuable psycho-social roles a mentor can perform. These roles provide the social and emotional support that a young physical educator requires at a tenuous time in his or her career. Psychosocial roles improve the protégé's self-identity, school-based relationships, and sense of accomplishment and competence. While career functions are critical to the overall development of novice physical education teachers, protégés place a greater value on psycho-social functions (Schempp et al., 2016). The four psycho-social roles are: (1) friend, (2) role model, (3) counselor and (4) acceptor (Allen et al., 2004).

1. *Friend.* A mentor as a friend induces personal social interactions relative to both work and non-work activities. As a friend, the mentor creates greater feelings of a peer relationship with the protégé rather than only promoting a superior-and-subordinate interaction. Inviting the protégé to dinner or a sporting event would be ways for a mentor to show friendship. Research has indicated that the role of friend is highly valued by protégés (Schempp et al., 2016).

2. *Role Model.* As a role model, the experienced teacher demonstrates effective professional behaviors and attitudes. As an observer of positive modeling, the novice teacher is inspired to adopt perspectives and practices conducive to the profession of teaching physical education. By way of example, a mentor's consistent praise of students is emulated by the protégé. The novice may observe a strong work ethic in their mentor and strive to mimic this disposition.

3. *Counselor.* In the counselor role the mentor provides guidance and support with personal problems that could negatively impact the protégé's productivity. Active listening and suggesting potential solutions are two strategies used by mentors. For instance, the protégé may find it difficult to establish friendships, locate opportunities for recreational activities, or adjust to an increased cost of living. The mentor may counsel the protégé by sharing his or her personal experiences in similar situations. The mentor can offer suggestions for places to meet new people, the best gyms or adult recreational leagues, or opportunities for moonlighting such as coaching sports camps.

4. *Acceptor.* The mentor accepts and confirms the protégé's ideas and activities, which, in turn, reaffirm the appropriateness of the protégé's career choice. The protégé feels like an accepted member of the physical education profession. For example, a beginning teacher develops an innovative fitness program. The mentor can accept and reaffirm the protégé's initiative by contacting the local newspaper to run a story on the new program, giving the protégé full credit. A recent study indicated that the role of acceptor was also prized by protégés (Schempp et al., 2016). The results revealed that protégés ranked *friend* and *acceptor* as the most effective mentor functions. Similarly, other studies have found the same functions to be most effective in mentoring relationships (Narcotta, Petersen, & Johnson, 2009; Weaver & Chelladurai, 2002; White,

Schempp, Berger, & Elliott, 2017). This could be due to the belief that a relationship characterized by friendship and acceptance has the potential to have a deeper level of meaning than one lacking those characteristics (Schempp et al., 2016).

## Summary

Given the powerful potential of mentoring for promoting the career success and satisfaction of future physical educators, the current corps of teachers has the opportunity to leave a legacy guaranteeing quality physical education. As a novice physical education teacher becomes more skilled, knowledgeable and experienced, he or she may assume the role of mentor and share the indispensable lessons learned during his or her own time as a protégé. Mentors adopting multiple roles have a greater likelihood of making a meaningful impact on their protégés. Understanding the purpose of each role is critical for effective mentoring. Participation in quality mentoring relationships benefits both experienced and novice physical education teachers in ways that positively influence physical education programs.

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