ABSTRACT

Mentorship has been identified as an influential factor in retaining new nursing faculty. A mentor-protégé program for novice faculty was implemented to promote development of the protégés in their role as nurse educators. A qualitative research study conducted to illuminate the meaning of experiences of mentors led to the emergence of four patterns: The Significance of the Mentor-Protégé Relationship, Communication as Important Between Mentor and Protégé, The Mentor-Protégé Program—Protégé’s Perspectives, and The Mentoring Role as Expert Educator. The data from the study support the significance of providing mentorship to novice or new nurse educators. The data suggest that mentors benefit from participation in a mentor-protégé program as much as the protégés. Similar programs are needed in nursing if we are to mentor and encourage faculty to begin and remain in the role of educators to combat the future nurse educator shortage.

D uring this era of economic downturn and nursing faculty shortage, preservation of human resources is essential. Mentorship has been identified as an influential factor to retain new nursing faculty. Johnson & Johnson’s Promise of Nursing grant funded a mentor-protégé program for novice faculty. The purpose of the program was to provide opportunities for faculty mentors and protégés to engage in activities to promote development of the protégés in their role as nurse educators.

An interpretive phenomenological research study of the faculty’s experience of participating in a mentor-protégé program was conducted. The stories of the protégés are depicted in our previous article (White, Brannan, & Wilson, in press). This article describes the experiences of faculty members who served as mentors during a year-long program. The data from this study will provide insight into the meaning of being a mentor to novice nurse educators and may be useful in planning similar mentorship programs.

LITERARY CONTEXT

Many authors from the practice setting have identified mentoring as a retention strategy, as well as a method to promote competence and patient safety (Bally, 2007; Funderburk, 2008; Hurst & Koplin-Baucum, 2003; McKinley, 2004). Considerable effort and expense has been devoted to developing programs that provide better outcomes for new graduates. Several studies (Beecroft, Kunzman, & Drozek, 2001; Halfer, 2007; Williams, Goode, Krsek, Bednash, & Lynn, 2007; Zucker et al., 2006) have demonstrated higher nurse retention rates with concurrent cost savings.

Mentoring for novice faculty has also been shown to have value in retention (Brown, 1999; Cangelosi, 2004; Chester & Espelin, 2003; Peters & Boylston, 2006; Smith
& Zsohar, 2007). The authors reported anecdotal descriptions of relationships and programs as methods to foster commitment between novice faculty and the university. Little research in the literature documents the effects of formal mentoring programs for nursing faculty.

Thorpe and Kalischuk (2003) described a collegial mentoring model for nursing faculty as a relationship that provides personal and professional growth for both the mentors and protégés. However, the model “evolved in relation to [both] authors’ experiences over time, and as such, has not been tested with other colleagues and in other settings” (Thorpe & Kalischuk, 2003, p. 11). Although mentoring in nursing education is often described in terms of relationships and interactions (Blauvelt & Spath, 2008; Cangelosi, 2004; Morin & Ashton, 2004) or as a path to tenure (Byrne & Keefe, 2002; Jacelon, Zucker, Staccarini, & Henneman, 2003; Morrison-Beedy, Aronowitz, Dyne, & Mkandawire, 2001), models to describe the process and structure for mentoring roles and functions are limited.

Missing in the nursing literature is research that explores the mentoring experience from the perspective of those who participate in formal programs. Research to shed light on the support and skills needed by a mentor is needed. Experiences, satisfiers, and other benefits of serving as a mentor are rarely addressed. The findings of this study will inform not only our program, but may also assist other schools in developing formal programs that have the potential to recruit, retain, and strengthen their faculty.

MENTOR-PROTÉGÉ PROGRAM

A formal mentoring program was developed in response to a combination of events that occurred during the previous 3-year period. The initial concern was the arrival of 17 new full-time and part-time nursing faculty who had limited teaching experience. In addition, many of the seasoned faculty were considering retirement within the next few years. A formal mentoring program was designed, implemented, and evaluated to address these concerns. The program consisted of two off-campus retreats and four all-day workshops that provided a forum for connecting, discussing, and learning. Program topics included mentoring, teaching and learning strategies, curriculum development, clinical teaching, assessing and evaluating learning outcomes, and tenure and promotion issues. The purpose of the program was to create and maintain a mentoring culture for nurse educators to enhance faculty and student learning.

Experienced and novice faculty were paired based on their requests. Due to the limited number of mentors, most had two protégés during the year. Although this was not ideal, the experienced faculty committed to this additional responsibility. The mentor-protégé dyads were expected to meet bi-weekly and use monthly journaling. Nursing education textbooks and journals were purchased for all participating faculty.

METHOD

Approval for the study was obtained through the university’s institutional review board. The purposes and procedures of the proposed research were fully explained both verbally and through written informed consent at the beginning of the mentorship program.

Interpretive phenomenology was used to understand the experience of faculty who participated as mentors in a mentor-protégé program for novice faculty. A phenomenological approach guides the researcher in identifying themes and enhancing descriptions of the common meanings and shared understandings embedded in the narratives of everyday experiences (Diekelmann, 2001). This approach was used to describe the lived world as experienced by the informant and provided the opportunity for uncovering the shared stories of the mentors.

Informants

Fifteen individuals served as mentors in the program. Three of these were also coordinators of the program. In addition to the 3 coordinators, 8 other mentors were available for the focus group session at the final retreat. Therefore, informants in this study consisted of a total of 11 mentors (10 women and 1 man). Ten mentors were Caucasian and 1 was African American, and ages ranged from 48 to 60 years. The informants had been teaching for an average of 15 years at the university where the study occurred.

Data Generation

The research team consisted of three nurse educators with qualitative research expertise. One of the researchers, who was employed outside the university, conducted two focus group interviews. Focus groups were chosen to “take advantage of group dynamics for assessing rich information in an efficient manner” (Polit & Beck, 2004, p. 342). The mentors were interviewed first, followed by interviews with the program coordinators. This approach was used to ensure informants’ comfort level and to encourage candor because the program coordinators also served as mentors. Saturation of data was achieved during the second interview. Pseudonyms chosen by informants were used in reporting findings to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The audiotaped focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed hermeneutically by the research team as outlined by Diekelmann and Allen (1989). The researchers read the transcript multiple times to fully grasp the essence each informant’s story. Dialogue among the research team continued during numerous meetings. A consensus was reached regarding the shared story of the informants, which led to the emergence of essential themes with related sub-themes that reflect the researchers’ interpretation of the data.
Methodological Rigor

Methodological rigor was achieved using the trustworthiness criteria (credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability) described by Guba and Lincoln (1989). Credibility was achieved through the use of a reflective practice in which data were shared with the informants for verification and clarification. The initial findings were e-mailed to informants, who were asked to validate the interpretations. Through this process of member checking, informants commented on the fairness and accuracy of the interpretations and confirmed descriptions. Peer debriefing with the members of the research team also provided evidence of credibility for the findings. Multiple team meetings were held in which the research team discussed the data analysis findings, reaching consensus on the interpretation. Transferability of the findings relies on the interpretation of the reader. The description of the findings will include a richness of data that will allow the reader to make a judgment regarding transferability.

FINDINGS

The study of the experience of mentors participating in a mentor-protégé program led to the emergence of three main themes: Significance of the Mentor-Protégé Relationship, The Challenges of Mentoring, and The Mentor-Protégé Program: Lessons Learned.

Theme 1: Significance of the Mentor-Protégé Relationship

The story of the significance of the mentor-protégé relationship focused on the importance of communication, as well as a sense of collegiality in the development of the mentor-protégé relationship. Differences in relationships were recognized and attributed to several factors and are described in three subthemes: communication and connectedness, collegiality and reciprocal learning, and differences in relationships.

Communication and Connectedness. The mentors viewed communication as a significant component of establishing a feeling of connection with protégés. Being open and available was seen as important to achieving a connection. However, the descriptions of what it meant to be open and available varied slightly among informants. Margaret indicated:

I think it says something about availability, one of my protégés said that “OK I’m your protégé and that means I can put you on speed dial on my cell phone and my home phone, because if I have any questions I can hit speed dial... and I’m warning you I may use it.”

Alice described being open as:

just giving license.... If you have questions, go to people, but it becomes spontaneous, so I think the faculty...we are open, we are willing to help deal with some of these questions.

Gamma broadened the view of openness to include faculty other than the protégés’ mentor:

We are open and accessible.... You don’t have to necessarily go to your mentor for guidance.

Journaling was seen by some informants as an opportunity for communication and connection with protégés. However, some mentors felt that journaling was not beneficial. Miss DeDe felt that journaling was helpful in communicating with her protégé:

In terms of the content of some of the journals that I received, I think there’s a component of it that was very helpful, because both of them (protégés) were able to talk about situations that they had encountered with students at the time that it happened, and really explain their feelings and then that allowed me to, when we were face to face, kind of open up some of that and talk about it.

In the beginning, Gamma found journaling:

to be beneficial because I think before you had the well-established interpersonal relationships, the journal was beneficial. I found it to be less beneficial as the time has passed.

For mentors who felt the journals were not beneficial, the preference for face-to-face interaction was seen as more relevant. Susie “found the journals to be very artificial” and described how: “we did journal but it was just really as a requirement. It was very, very brief.” Donna agreed:

They’re [journals] not as personal as the one-to-one communication. I agree they’re artificial. I think they are stilted, not relaxed or whatever.

Collegiality and Reciprocal Learning. For the mentors, the stories of the relationships with the protégés focused on the concepts of collegiality and reciprocal learning. Gamma talked about the retreats that were a component of the mentor-protégé program as “a wonderful opportunity for building relationships and collegiality.” Donna said that through reciprocal learning: “I learned as much from her as she learned from me I’m sure, maybe more.” Miss DeDe described collegiality as sharing:

stories about what you’re doing and some of the teaching strategies you use, so for me that’s what I really liked about it.

The mentors verbalized the importance of the opportunity to get to know other faculty. As Donna stated:

It meant for me, other than just the relationship with those two individuals...I was able to meet the new faculty. Otherwise I would never have been able to meet not even half of the people that teach in other courses.

Alice acknowledged the:

value of these get-togethers and retreats is that we can co-mingle and learn about other people that we aren’t closely connected with, and we really don’t have any other time, other than the faculty meetings.

Differences in Relationships. Stories of the differences between mentor and protégé relationships were related to three factors: the previous relationship with the protégé, the protégé’s status regarding full-time or part-time employment, and geographic location (main campus or external site). There were difficulties in establishing a close relationship with part-time faculty or faculty who were in a different location than the mentor. Some faculty indicated that they were able to step into the role of mentor more easily because they already knew their protégé.
Susie described her experience:

My protégé [part-time] said to me how valuable this was... I didn't realize how much effort it took her to make this free time with her schedule.

Pat echoed Susie’s story:

I think a lot of the assumptions [about part time faculty] that we had probably were changed by this... You can’t assume people [part-time faculty] don’t want to move on, and you can’t assume that they do.

Pat also felt that the geographic location of her protégés was an issue “because they were located in another building on campus.”

**Theme 2: The Challenges of Mentoring**

The informants described challenges in the mentoring role related to a lack of time to engage in meaningful activities with their protégés and the potential for power imbalance. Stories of the challenges of mentoring are described in three subthemes: maintaining the power balance, trying to do a good job, and sharing our own wisdom.

*Maintaining the Power Balance.* Although the mentor and protégé roles called for the mentors to provide guidance to the protégés, these were faculty members working together as colleagues. This created the potential for an imbalance of power in the relationships. Alice stated:

I have two people [protégés] who are extremely independent, have taught before, and are solidly secure in their own skin. They know what they need. They know when they need to call me, and so I’ve had to let go of that “I am the mentor” kind of attitude.

Margaret discussed the desire to make sure there was not a perception of imbalance in her relationship with her protégé:

A mentoring role and a protégé role...sometimes that can be seen as “one down” for the new faculty.... I think by sort of formalizing it [the mentor-protégé program] in a way, it was expected, so you didn’t have to kind of play up or play down kind of thing.... It’s hard to be a new faculty and think that everybody else is smarter than you are, and we all remember being that way. I mean I thought I needed to get new saddle shoes (laughter) [to] join the group.

*Trying to do a Good Job.* The desire to do a good job within the role of the mentor was frequently linked to guilt and frustration over time. Miss DeDe indicated:

I just felt there wasn’t enough time. When I look at what the expectations are for me as a faculty...expectations I set for myself, as well as expectations of the Dean and commitment to the School of Nursing...I felt that I was not giving the protégés the time that they deserved.

Pat reiterated Miss DeDe’s view:

I felt that too...the time issue was a big factor. Just not being able to mesh our schedules.

Margaret stated:

The thing that I missed is having the time to touch base with people. We’ve tried on three different occasions to get together for dinner and we haven’t been able to work it out...and that was with considerable effort to do so.

The mentors also expressed the desire to do a good job with their protégés while voicing concerns and fears about their ability. As Miss DeDe stated:

What I didn’t like is that over the months...it’s like where did the time go? Did I do a good job? I’m not sure I did a good job.

Gamma described this:

Sometimes I wondered if I was doing anything at all for my second protégé, because I thought...she just sort of had it together and knew what she was doing.

*Sharing Our Own Wisdom.* Other challenges in the role of the mentor included the opportunity for sharing wisdom and experience and trying to guide the protégé appropriately. This represented a challenge for mentors as they sought to engage in dialogue with protégés and validate their feelings and actions while providing guidance in becoming an expert educator. Alice indicated: “It] would be helpful, I think, for us to share our own wisdom.” Miss DeDe described sharing her wisdom as:

Having a mentor allowed them [the protégés] to get some validation regarding what they were doing, because they would share with me certain situations related to their students clinically that arose, and they would tell me their story, and I was trying to be a good listener, and then in my response to them I was able to validate how appropriate they were, and for them [I believe] that was very reassuring.

A part of the challenge for the mentors as the expert nurse educators in sharing their wisdom also lies in knowing how to teach the unwritten rules involved in “playing the game” within an organization. Susie’s story exemplifies this:

A full-time person would always say, “What do I need to know that people don’t necessarily write down and tell me formally?” You know, “How do I play the game,” they always say or “what are the unwritten rules,” and there are always unwritten rules somewhere, so I try to just be honest about it.

**Theme 3: The Mentor-Protégé Program: Lessons Learned.**

Three subthemes describe the stories of the mentors related to the lessons learned during the mentorship program. The subthemes included: What was beneficial?, What comes after?, and Wish I had this when I started.

*What was Beneficial?* Stories from the mentors regarding the benefits of the program included participation in the educational activities, the opportunity for interaction with other faculty and protégés, and the retreats. The mentors verbalized the belief that they benefited from the formal educational activities as much as the protégés.

Gamma indicated:

I think the programs, they’ve been a good refresher for me.... It was beneficial for me to sit through and listen again, I enjoyed that.
The mentor-protégé program was also seen as an opportunity to dialogue, as Joanne stated:

I think that the strength of the program has been the fact that it grants people permission to dialogue...whether it’s to reflect and to problem solve, it’s an opportunity to get to do that.

Gamma felt that:

One of the best things about the program was that it brought people together and promoted camaraderie.

For Alice, the retreat was important:

I love the mentoring process, going away from the university, getting away... We could have meetings on campus, but it's not the same as getting away in a lovely place like this.

Being willing to engage in self-reflection about one’s own educational practices was also viewed as a benefit. The mentors talked about their role as expert educators and their own journey that led them from novice to expert (Benner, 1984). Margaret described her experience:

One of the things that I liked the best was that, as I was mentoring, it made me re-evaluate what I was doing...why are you doing it...let me think.

Gamma described examining:

My role as a mentor. I did a lot of reflection on the several wonderful mentors that I had in my career, and I thought about what they did for me that helped me the most.

Susie indicated:

I haven’t really always thought about what I’ve done for so many years... I hadn’t really thought about some of the positive things that have worked and this has been good for me as far as exploring, reflecting, affirming, and then thinking about things that haven’t worked, and thinking about why they haven’t worked...which has been a very, very good experience for me.

What Comes After? The mentors definitely felt that the program should be continued and that it was particularly important for part-time faculty. Susie had ideas on how to continue the program:

I think we might be able to use this as a model...with a shoe-string amount of money, what we could do in the future, because it would be a shame to have this one great year and then never do anything.

Joanne also talked about why the program should continue:

I think the formalized program for new faculty would be very beneficial...and if we continue to do that mentoring process with formal individuals assigned, I think that’s an excellent tutor [for the protégé].

Miss DeDe also spoke about part-time faculty:

I had several [part-time faculty] say to me that they really found this to be beneficial because it made them feel like they were a part of the faculty, and when we look at the number of part-time individuals that you have to have in order to run a successful program, that’s extremely important.

Wish I Had This When I Started. The mentors verbalized the desire for a similar type of program when they began as novice educators. Susie stated:

I think that I would have enjoyed having had this experience if I had been a new faculty member, and when I think about the ways that I learned how to teach, I don’t think I had maybe more than one course ever in instruction, test writing, any type of skill whatsoever; it was always learning informally from somebody who was more experienced.

Alice described her experience:

I wish I had this kind of program when I was a new person, a new faculty member, even though I had taught elsewhere, coming into a new group, not knowing just where you fit, not understanding how things are done.

DISCUSSION

This study seeks to illuminate the meaning of the experience of nursing faculty who served as mentors in a program for novice faculty. The mentorship program was designed to provide support and education to the novice faculty in their role as nurse educators. The literature supports mentorship programs (National League for Nursing, 2006; Smith & Zsohar, 2007; Thorpe & Kalischuk, 2003) as an effective way to assist novice faculty as they seek to move toward becoming expert educators (Benner, 1984). From this research, three overall conclusions were reached:

- Developing reciprocal relationships that foster open communication is essential for successful mentoring.
- The challenges for mentors include balancing an egalitarian relationship while sharing their knowledge within the constraints of a busy work load.
- Deliberate and planned activities over time in a formal program enhance the development of novice faculty.

The first conclusion was supported in theme 1. The theme describes the importance of the mentor’s relationships with protégés from the mentor’s perspectives within a framework of communication, connectedness, collegiality, and reciprocal learning. Differences in relationships were also acknowledged.

As a means of communication, face-to-face interactions were valued more than journaling. Mentor’s perceptions of their relationships with the protégés were described through openness and availability, which, for the mentors, included opportunities for protégés to access faculty other than their assigned mentor for help when needed. An important component of the mentor-protégé relationship may be the match between the two (Dunham-Taylor, Lynn, Moore, McDaniel, & Walker, 2008; Smith & Zsohar, 2007). Findings from this study support that relationships may be easier if protégés are matched with mentors they already know. This can occur through matching those who teach in the same course.

Another important part of their stories was related to what the mentors received from participation in the program. They viewed the experience as an opportunity for self-reflection on their own teaching practices. Also impor-
The second conclusion related to theme 2. This theme describes the need for balance among the various challenges associated with serving as a mentor. These included maintaining a power balance with protégés who were also colleagues, providing quality mentorship within a busy work culture, and sharing experiences and knowledge in a way that encouraged growth for the protégés in their role as educators.

It should be recognized that there is a potential for power imbalance in mentoring relationships with colleagues. Therefore, relationships must be constructed in ways that promote egalitarian interactions. A formal mentor-protégé program may be one way to provide guidance for new faculty without creating relationships that foster perceptions of power imbalances.

One of the challenges for mentors in their role was described as trying to find enough time to be the type of mentor that was desired. Frustrations were frequently described in relation to a lack of time to devote to the protégés. If nursing education is going to encourage and promote mentorship programs as a way to recruit and retain nurse educators, then serving as a preceptor must be considered within the framework of workload.

Another challenge of mentoring also included trying to share wisdom with novice nurse educators. The informants indicated that dialogue provides the opportunity for protégés to learn how to function within the community of educators. The National League for Nursing (2005) position statement on mentoring supports these findings and describes this as “reflective dialogue associated with co-mentoring is an important way for faculty to learn community norms” (p. 111). The role of the teacher as mentor also provides the opportunity for exploring, reflecting, and affirming. The informants talked about their own journey toward becoming expert educators. Benner (1984) discussed this transition in regard to bedside nursing, yet the application is appropriate for nurse educators also.

A final conclusion is drawn from the stories in theme 3. The theme describes the specific components of the program in answer to questions regarding the benefits of a mentorship program and suggestions for improvement. Benefits included the opportunities for interaction with other faculty and protégés, and the participation in educational programs. These benefits seem essential to the success of any mentorship program. This is similar to the findings of Dunham-Taylor et al. (2008), who noted that beyond the mentor-protégé dyad, it is also necessary for all faculty to be involved in the support and encouragement of the protégés.

CONCLUSION

This article reports the findings from a mentorship program from the perspective of faculty who served as mentors. White et al. (in press) described the findings from the stories of protégés within the same program. The themes that emerged from the stories of mentors and protégés were similar in many respects. For both groups, the mentoring relationship was significant. Critical elements were communication and a sense of collegiality. Mentors and protégés identified the need for mentorship programs in nursing education as crucial to the development of novice faculty. A common story was related to the need for nurse educators to be taught how to teach, in addition to their skills and knowledge related to nursing practice.

Stories diverged as informants discussed their roles as either mentor or protégé. Only the mentors recognized the issue of potential power imbalances in the relationships with protégés. This issue was not reflected in the stories of the protégés. Evidence suggests that a formal mentorship program deters imbalance in the relationships between novice and expert nursing faculty (Dunham-Taylor et al., 2008; Thorpe & Kalischuk, 2003).

As the shortage of nurse educators increases (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2008), recruiting and retaining qualified faculty will be crucial to maintain a quality nursing education program. One way to do this is through mentorship. Data in this study suggest that mentors benefit from participation in a mentor-protégé program as much as the protégés. Similar programs are needed in nursing if we are to mentor and encourage faculty to begin and remain in the role of educator to combat the future nurse educator shortage.

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