

Rocks, Paper, Scissors: Best Practices in Peer Mentoring

Learn how to identify and support peer mentoring in your early childhood classroom.

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As a kindergarten teacher for 14 years, mentoring has been my teacher research focus. I was mentored by my mother (who was a kindergarten teacher for 33 years), college professors, supervisors, coworkers, and parents of the students in my classroom. Most importantly, I observed and came to value the peer to peer mentoring relationships among my kindergarten students which they formed and maintained. These mentoring relationships supported my students' learning. In my role as their teacher, I acknowledged, valued, and put to good use peer mentoring as in the following example.

Dade writes: haos (inventive spelling for the picture of his house).

Chris: "Hey! That's a good house! Give me five!"

Chris holds up his hand as Dade smiles and responds with his own high five.

In my kindergarten classroom, students mentored one another in both *social* and *academic* situations. Social mentoring occurred when students helped classmates open milk at snack and during center time and worked together building skyscrapers with wooden blocks. I observed academic mentoring most regularly during daily journal writing time. Together students realized that their talk became the inventively spelled words they wrote in their journals, spending sometimes as long as two hours crafting their stories. Students exchanged questions of spelling, punctuation, character development, conflicts, and story lines.

Since I wanted to support my students' mentoring, I followed Cambourne's (1988) conditions of learning--a model that comprises the following components:

- Immersion
- Demonstration

- Expectation
- Responsibility
- Use
- Approximation
- Response

Children's engagement with learning connects these components. I saw my students' social and academic interactions as significant teaching and learning experiences not only in isolated teaching times such as journal writing, but all during our daily schedule (Bowden, 2005). For example, shared reading with big books of rhyming, repetitive, and predictable text encouraged students' discussions of and play with emergent literacy learning. Students understood they were real writers and readers not through teaching with scripted lessons but in engagement with stories and words that helped create our print rich classroom environment.

**Peer to peer
mentoring provides
significant learning
opportunities.**

In this article I share new stories of *peer-to-peer* and *teacher-to-teacher* mentoring relationships I found and experienced in Mrs. Forrest's kindergarten classroom at Mills Elementary School. (All names have been changed to protect the participants' identity.)

I had been a kindergarten teacher at Mills for four years and chose Mrs. Forrest (a teacher for nine years) to become a part of this story based on our shared beliefs and practices of early childhood education as she struggled under our southern state's requirement of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

NOTE: While many states are moving away from NCLB, the idea of balancing accountability vs. developmentally appropriate practice continues as a pressing issue for teachers.

One of Many Stories

As an educator for over twenty-five years (now as a college professor), I have used the stories of my teaching, and others, to document mentoring in educational settings (Bowden, 2004; Hudson, 2000; Corrigan, 2013). Telling stories and reflecting on them provides an understanding of the characters, settings, and conflicts unique to each. Graves (1998) indicates that from the time we get up in the morning until we retire in the evening, we are surrounded by teaching/learning events. Thousands of stories become part of us during our lifetime. The questions are:

- Can we recall these stories with any profit?
- Can I reach back and recall stories that might help me not only to understand myself but also to assist others in teaching and learning? (p. 5)

As humans, we are all storytellers, yet we may not feel adequate enough to paint the most impressionistic tales. However, painting by the numbers others have scripted

will not depict the creativity our classroom stories and we, as teachers, have to share.

Originally, this story of mentoring was going to be simple enough. My experiences of five months in Mrs. Forrest's class would help me answer questions I generated including:

- Do peer mentoring relationships continue to exist in kindergarten classrooms?
- What influence does the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law play in such relationships?
- If these interactions do exist, does the teacher's role help or hinder this mentoring?

During an initial visit in Mrs. Forrest's classroom in August, I witnessed *social mentoring* as Lucy, a small girl with long, blondish hair falling over her smiling face, approached us to report she had just taught her classmate Paul how to tie his shoes. I also planned to observe and document examples of *academic mentoring*, if they existed, during journal writing time from 8:00-8:30. As a teacher researcher, I took many notes from my observations and discussions with Mrs. Forrest; yet, as themes emerged, what I had not planned on was my personal shift in character as I left my role of observer to take on a participant mentoring role with Mrs. Forrest and her students who asked, "How did you, how do you write, make stories...?"

In early August I observed Mrs. Forrest writing words under the pictures her students drew. When I asked her if she enjoyed this approach, she told me not really but she just "fell into doing it this way." She encouraged inventive spelling, yet only six of her 18 students demonstrated or attempted it during journal writing. She suggested,

"Maybe you can help me make the break." While watching her students, many times they would ask, "Can you help me draw a cat, dog, house, etc. on my paper?" Although my intent was to simply observe, the answers I generated to my questions became this story's curtain call.

In this setting, teacher research became a reflection of my own kindergarten experiences as I wrote this original story of kindergarten mentoring, *peer-to-peer*, and *teacher-to-teacher*. The answers I found to each question reflected the children's game, *Rock, Paper, Scissors*. No matter what we as educators try to cover with accountability and are forced to cut away from our beliefs and practices, it is our students' own voices which remain rocks--rocks we must acknowledge and build upon.

Students should be active members of the classroom culture.

Characters and Setting

In August, Mrs. Forrest and I quickly settled into a comfortable teacher/observer relationship. During journal writing, I sat on the small kindergarten sized chairs among students while Mrs. Forrest first collected juice and lunch money at her desk. She then mingled among students, writing their stories for them under the pictures they had drawn. At six feet tall, Mrs. Forrest towered over her kindergarten students in height but not in power. She expected her students to be active members of the classroom



Photo by Elisabeth Nichols

Peer to peer mentoring can assist children in developing writing and reading skills.

culture they built together, a community of respect for teaching, learning, and mainly social mentoring.

Storytelling was valued as students retold their lives with one another. Consider these insights students shared.

Quentin: My mom pulled my tooth out last night and I couldn't even taste the blood.

Chris: My lips keep on ripping, does anyone have some Vaseline?

Sam: I got my tonsils out at the hospital.

Joshua: That's where I got my brother out too!

In August and September students drew pictures representing their verbal exchanges; however, there was little time to finish stories as Mrs. Forrest reminded students at 8:30, "It's time to change class. Please stop writing now!" There was also little indication of peer academic mentoring. To address the levels of student progress mandated by NCLB (intensive, strategic, and challenged), what little time Mrs. Forrest scheduled for journal writing time (thirty minutes) was cut short at 8:30 as

she and the four other kindergarten teachers moved children from room to room based on testing results. In August Mrs. Forrest as "the challenged teacher," the teacher with the children that were lowest in test scores, kept only four out of the 18 students she greeted each morning at 8:00 as her homeroom children. The others (14) designated by scores of lower levels of progress, moved to coworkers' classrooms. After the shift, Mrs. Forrest was the teacher of 29 students. When the number reached 30, Judy, her coworker, also became a challenged teacher, sharing the number of students with her. Mrs. Forrest followed and taught the required scripted program of phonics which included having students repeat such sentences as "The pink pig has on a wig." The majority of books in the classroom library that Mrs. Forrest read aloud were also parts of the scripted program. One book which was not part of the program, *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* was a class favorite and was requested and read weekly with its repetitive predictable text. This book appeared to be the only book students could actually read.

Mrs. Forrest believed in peer academic mentoring but struggled with the schedule and the effects of the accountability paper trail as she explained, "The idea is lost in the shuffle and even worse children in the lower groups (intensive) have no one to follow or ask for help. I want to do things I know are right, like more journal writing time, but I struggle every day with time and schedules. If they draw a picture, at least they've had 30 minutes of creativity." Judy agreed with the struggles, "We had a boy in kindergarten last year. He went on to the first grade and then was going to move. His first grade teacher asked the teachers he had had in kindergarten to join him for a picture so he could remember all of them (his teachers). There were nine teachers in the picture. In two years this child had nine teachers and he still was not reading on grade level!"

Mentoring and accountability can co-exist.

From August to September I reflected on my own kindergarten teaching while questioning how Froebel's "children's garden" was so negatively transformed. My notes included questions such as:

- How have we gotten so far away from Froebel, Piaget, and Vygotsky?
- What about developmentally appropriate practices (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997)?

I also questioned whether my beliefs and former practices could uncover and cut through the NCLB

“paper.” In early October the mentoring plot thickened.

Mentoring, Peer-to-Peer, Teacher-to-Teacher, and Literacy Begins

In reflection of the popular movie *Field of Dreams*, I was the pitcher believing teaching emergent literacy must be accomplished through natural and children’s play with language. After many attempts of maintaining my observer role and, with Mrs. Forrest and her students’ continuing questions, I offered to put my beliefs into practice. As in the movie, if I could rebuild it (my experiences), positive results would occur through natural engagement with stories and words. Statistics representing student progress were not as important as the process itself. I was in search of real writers and readers and students that would see themselves as both with their intrinsic engagement of literacy. Teachers would support their efforts. With Mrs. Forrest’s agreement and total support, I began to implement Cambourne’s (1988) conditions of learning. I also incorporated characteristics of good mentoring strategies which included acknowledging mutual respect and trust among mentors and those being mentored (Chu, 2012; Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009) while establishing mentoring pairs within close proximity to one another.

My first goal was to immerse students, with their help, in the idea of peer mentoring. On October 5, I individually asked students who were already using inventive spelling, “If you could sit next to anyone in the class and help them during journal writing time, who would you help?” I recorded their answers in my notes and provided Mrs. Forrest with the



Photo by Elisabeth Nichols

Mentoring can take many forms in an early childhood classroom.

mentoring pair information. For example, and in light of respect among mentoring pairs, Hannah asked to help Tommy, Quentin asked to help Dade, and Chris asked to help Elliot. Now at 8:30 and at an end of our journal writing time on this day, Mrs. Forrest and I planned to reassign students to new seats the next morning placing mentoring pairs next to one another. As I began to leave the classroom, Chris met me at the door running from his seat to stop me before I left for the day. In his soft sincere whisper he asked, “Do you want me to go help Elliot right now?” Acknowledging academic *peer-to-peer* mentoring now truly existed, I explained we would begin helping one another the next day. This immersion idea was not contained to Mrs. Forrest’s classroom. The next day two parents stopped by to see the “new seats” their children told them they would get this morning.

Although students did begin to initiate mentoring conversations, I also provided a mini lesson on the stages of writing-scribbling, inventive spelling, and correct spelling and discussed how many words have

a beginning, middle, and ending sound. I suggested to the students that many words were like a sandwich with bread, meat, and another slice of bread. In the days to come, Hannah quickly mentored Tommy saying, “You need some meat in that word! You need a middle sound!” Additionally, on a day Mrs. Forrest did not have to change classes until 9:30 due to a planned school-wide fire drill, we gathered on the rug and watched a video of my own kindergarten journal writing time. Children on the tape talked about what they were writing and helped one another with spelling, punctuation, and story ideas. Mrs. Forrest’s students commented “They drew good pictures and nice words,” and “They are real storytellers.”

I also saw and documented Cambourne’s responsibility component transferring from social to academic mentoring as many students in Mrs. Forrest’s homeroom class were actively involved in helping “raise” Larry, a small brown hair, brown eyed child dealing with Attention Deficit Disorder. Students provided social mentoring for Larry by holding his hand and making sure he did

not get lost during the scheduled class rotations. Academically, students began to mentor Larry too. On one occasion during journal writing time, Matt told me Larry, a scribble writer and picture drawer, could not write like the other children. Quickly Matt added, “We need to help him learn how.” By December, Larry was a letter stringer adding l’s, r’s, and other letters under the pictures he drew.

To continue demonstrating immersion in literacy learning, I shared many examples of rhyming, repetitive, and predictable text with the class. Book titles included *The Monster’s Party* (What can this little monster do?) and *Who Will Be My Mother* (Lamb said, “My mother has died, will you be my mother?”). We also listed stories, sentences, and words of different topics such as December Vocabulary To Know (cold, snow, icicles) on language experience charts and hung them about the classroom at student eye level. These teaching strategies, books and charts, became references for spelling words in students’ stories.

Lauren: How do you spell monster? Mon star. That’s funny! There’s a star in it.

Hannah to Tommy: Balloon needs an “s” on it like in The Monster’s Party because there’s more than one.

As the students mentored one another, Mrs. Forrest and I grew in our own mentoring relationship. I offered ideas for her questions concerning expectation, use, approximation and response. We discussed writing correct spelling for students’ inventive spelling. We agreed that if our expectations were for students to see themselves as writers, we must accept their approximations and emergent use of literacy. Our response would support their journeys as writers and readers.

My mentoring attempts were not without challenges. I imagined my own “field of dreams” as I struggled with the 30 minutes allotted for journal writing time. I expected Mrs. Forrest’s students to reach the same level of successful writing and reading as students had in my classroom. As a teacher I provided up to two hours a day for writing and incorporated literacy throughout the daily schedule and the entire school year. Yet, even within the 30 minute time frame, my notes reflected many success stories of students’ writing, peer mentoring, and reading. With support, even incorrect mentoring was resolved:

Chris to Dade: How do you spell you?

Dade to Chris: How do you spell me?

Chris to Dade: Yes, how do you spell you?

Dade to Chris: M-e.

Susan (author): I believe the word you need is y-o-u!

Chris/Dade: Ah! You! Y-o-u!

Give mentoring peers time to practice their skills.

Students came to see themselves as writers and readers and their voices revealed their successes. “My story is like a sandwich. I have a beginning, middle, and an end.” “This *Monster’s Party* book is easy to read!” By December, from Mrs. Forrest’s homeroom class of 18 children, all remained with her in the challenged group except two. One student was

in the strategic level: Larry remained in the intensive.

Best Practice: What Our Students Taught Us

Peer to peer mentoring relationships continue to exist in kindergarten classrooms.

While NCLB accountability covered Mrs. Forrest’s beliefs and practices, we were able to cut away from mandates and documented natural and intrinsic emergent writing and reading. Mrs. Forrest continues to “struggle with finding a happy mix between what I believe and what I have to do.” There is no indication peer-to-peer, teacher-to-teacher mentoring or the teaching strategies we implemented helped place students in specific reading levels. Yet with developmentally appropriate beliefs, modeling, and practices, students, respected by peers and teachers, came to see themselves as storytellers, writers, and readers with natural exploration and success with literacy learning. **Figure 1** provides mentoring ideas for teachers to use in their classrooms.

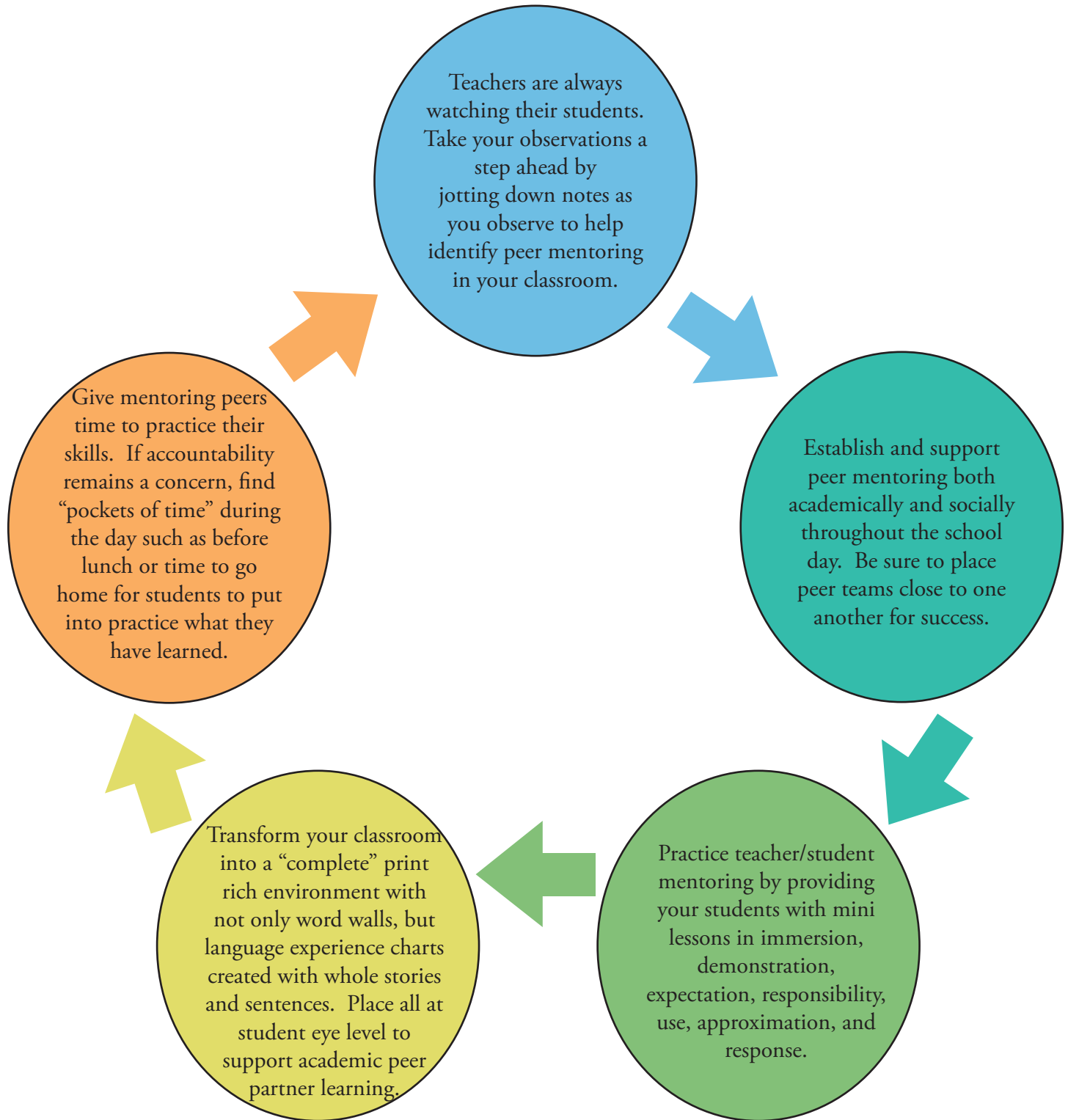
On December 15 I recorded this exchange between Laura and Halley as they read together *Who Will Be My Mother?*

Halley: What happened to the mother?

*Laura: Can’t you see the **word** died? She died!*

While this story took place in a kindergarten setting, academic and social mentoring can be practiced in all early childhood classrooms. As educators and proponents of early childhood education, we must hear our students’ voices and build upon what is right for their learning.

Figure 1. Supporting Best Practices in Peer Mentoring



In conclusion, I offer this writing/mentoring exchange between Hannah and Mrs. Forrest: *Hannah writes: I can rite and red thz wht I can do (I can write and read that's what I can do)*

Mrs. Forrest: Are you finished with your story?

Hannah: Nope! I need a period at the end.

A period ends this story but we will never need a period to end our learning--our mentoring from each child, adult experience. These stories will be the rock upon which children's gardens will grow and flourish again.

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