

# The Mock Interview

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The Education Department at Robert Morris University (RMU) places value on promoting real-world experiences that support our future teachers and principals. Designing and facilitating relevant teaching and learning is necessary to enter today's diverse classrooms and schools. The teacher education program strives to provide rich and varied opportunities for preservice teachers and future administrators in developing a Community of Practice to engage in challenging conversations. One activity within this Community of Practice is a mock interview. The outcome of the mock interview activity was to create a safe learning space for teaching and

learning as our students enter the field of education embracing diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. This article discusses a university collaboration between the preservice teacher and the principal preparation program and local education administrators.

Teacher education has looked at many strategies to develop future educators. Community of Practice research has been utilized across professions and, more recently, in education (Hwang, Noh & Singh, 2021). Community of Practice can be an effective tool to develop communication skills and support experiences in the field of practice (Wilson, Wilson & Witthaus, 2020). RMU faculty worked together to develop a Community of Practice within this seminar. The seminar Community of Practice brought preservice teachers together who shared concerns and challenges faced by school communities. The Fred Rogers Foundational practices (Rogers & Head, 1983) inspired the student teaching team to develop an intentional and systematic Community of Practice philosophy (Parker, Grooms & Tepe, 2023). Fred Rogers' foundations are built upon developing our students' ideas around self-worth, curiosity, looking and listening for our future helpers. The faculty at RMU expanded this philosophy in directed activities, such as the mock interview, developing a means to increase feelings of emotional safety.

The principal preparation program at RMU also has embedded the Community of Practice. Principals must understand the complexities of organizational life, building bridges through relationships and utilizing best practices to enhance teaching and learning. Additionally, principal

candidates need a vision communicated to all stakeholders. Implementing components of a Community of Practice developed trusting relationships among colleagues and the community at large.

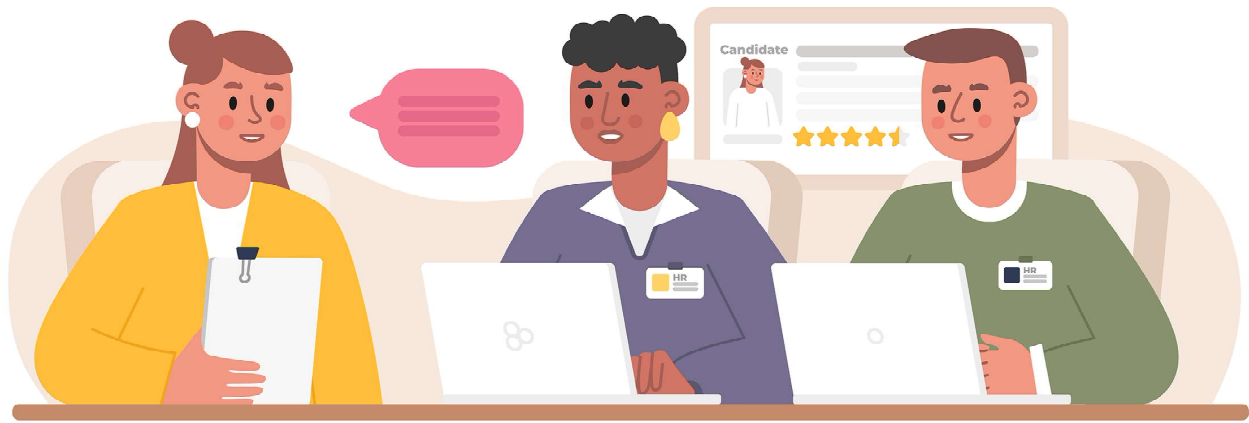
The faculty at RMU expanded these practices in directed activities, such as the mock interview, developing a means to increase feelings of emotional safety. As the mock interview developed, the learning outcome shifted from a practice session to building a Community of Practice. Thus, preservice teachers and principal candidates were able to practice tough conversations developing the skills needed to enter the field. The ultimate goal challenges the faculty to break down silos to bring RMU teachers and learners together.

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Leading up to the mock interview, there were planned and sequential preparations for the preservice teachers. The seminar instructor(s) partnered with the Fred Rogers Institute developing a Community of Practice that encouraged discussions that included classroom management and equitable teaching practices. The partnership brought instructors and students together to reflect deeply and examine topics that had traditionally been challenging during the mock interview. The Community of Practice was an intentional strategy to embed layered systems of self-reflection. The mock interview provided a culminating experience serving as a bridge to link the end of the student teaching experience to entering the professional workforce.

Concurrently, as the mock interviews approached, the principal candidates discussed qualities that define a great teacher. The principal candidates reflected on attributes that distinguish a good teacher from a great teacher (Tucker, 2019; Whitaker, 2020). Discussions led to the development of interview questions based on research and classroom discussions. The interview questions were then



shared with the preservice faculty prior to the mock interview.

Each mock interview group consisted of a principal candidate, an acting principal and a preservice teacher. Principal candidates were encouraged to take notes and preview the preservice teacher's resume prior to the mock interview. The evening consisted of three rounds of interviews per principal candidate. After the interview, the principal candidate with the acting principal and input from the RMU student teacher faculty, developed two "Glow" and two "Grow" for each preservice teacher. The group also provided notes and reflections for the university seminar faculty regarding student teachers' responses of not feeling comfortable discussing questions pertaining to diversity, inclusion and equity. In addition, the acting principals provided feedback to the principal candidates on items related to the mock interviews. The university seminar faculty and the coordinator/faculty of the principal program reviewed the information provided to assemble and gather data to report to each group during their next class.

Of all the many competencies and activities that preservice teachers engaged in, they reported that the mock interview had been the most impactful during the semester. As the activity developed the learning outcome shifted. The equal partnership and opportunity for both sets of students to learn and grow has been highlighted. Through the Community of Practice exercise, preservice teachers and principal candidates were offered opportunities to rehearse and develop tough conversational skills.

During mock interviews, both preservice teachers and principal candidates collaborated with each other on strategies to improve interviewer and interviewing skills providing both support and feedback. For the principal candidates, the mock interview was a rich learning opportunity in interviewing and receiving instruction, encouragement and advice from both university instructors and current principals.

As faculty and leaders, we have observed and intuitively built separate Communities of Practice within our indi-

vidual programs. Together as a cohort of faculty, students and community principals we have expanded to collaboratively support novice teachers and principals. Our next steps are to expand on the Community of Practice in a more intentional process that creates connections and feedback loops beyond the mock interview. RMU's mock interview activity will continue to be inspired by the work of Fred Rogers to build a strong Community of Practice.

The partnership has developed multi-level strategies assisting both our preservice teachers and principal candidates' professional development. The mock interview includes both formal and informal strategies for our students to reflect and discuss the many aspects of their development. Four strategies have been developed to expand on the mock interview activity:

**Strategy 1: *Equitable partnerships that value the educational hierarchies.***

Historically, our education systems have operated under hierarchies that distribute power in a traditional top-down pattern. Our school systems have been stressed due to multiple factors including the COVID-19 pandemic, increase in childhood mental health challenges and difficulty attracting and retaining new teachers to the field of education. Therefore, Strategy 1 is devised to furnish both the preservice teacher and the principal candidate an opportunity to practice leadership skills needed to create school communities defined by equitable relationship building and collaboration.

**Strategy 2: *Practicing tough conversations and improving communication skills.***

In addition to reflecting on hierarchies and partnerships, the mock interview was designed to create safe spaces for tough conversations. For example, during the Community of Practice sessions, students were encouraged to discuss both positive and challenging interactions between adults they have observed in their classrooms and schools.

### **Strategy 3: Develop different modes of feedback.**

The feedback from the mock interview is scaffolded in a hierarchical fashion starting from university faculty, acting principals, principal candidates to preservice teachers. The key to feedback was open communication and collaboration between the groups and the willingness to embrace difficult subject matter within and throughout groups.

### **Strategy 4: Expanding the Community of Practice**

We have developed a three-pronged relationship with the principal program, preservice teacher program and the community partners. In future years, data collection will be targeted to key areas established as “needs improvement,” namely expanding on the real-world experiences of integrating the Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education (CR-SE) Framework. The integra-

tion would specifically focus on “providing rigorous learning experiences relevant projects in culturally supportive spaces that integrate advocacy skills, deep listening and thinking collaboration, resource gathering and strategic action.” (PDE, 2022). Data will then support the development of a Community of Practice providing both programs with a robust, culturally sensitive foundation.

The mock interview has been a connecting activity between the preservice teachers and principal candidates at RMU. The integration of the Community of Practice into the mock interview process along with encompassing the four strategies for future planning will guide the mock interview activity. For further information, please contact [kardambikis@rmu.edu](mailto:kardambikis@rmu.edu) or [tepe@rmu.edu](mailto:tepe@rmu.edu). ■

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