

Warning! This is not your typical mentor training: an invitation to explore a video-based mentor training to prepare mentor teachers for their roles in the classroom

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this conceptual paper is to define and explore the roles of mentors, the responsibilities and even misconceptions of their position in partnership schools, the characteristics of effective mentors, the gaps that exist in current mentor training and the need for updated and forward-thinking flexible and accessible mentor training as it relates to improvements in University Teacher Preparation Programs and their partnership schools.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors detail the process of interviewing a diverse population of mentors and teacher candidates (TCs) who have participated in our professional development (partnership) schools. See Appendices A and B for parallel questions posed during each interview process. Following the interviews, data were gathered in both text and video-based formats to create mentor training video modules to improve the current state of mentor training in our program. Themes were identified following an analysis of both interview intakes, and modules were created to align with these themes.

Findings – Following the first rounds of implementation, the authors have reflected and noted that a need for an even more diverse population of both mentors and interns to be interviewed is necessary moving forward. The authors do note an appreciation by mentors and university partners in the quality, flexibility and accessibility that this new video module-based mentor training program provides.

Practical implications – The video-based mentor training modules that the authors detail honor the needs of both new and returning mentors. Via the interviews with teacher candidates, mentors are able to empathize and understand how to be better mentors to their future TCs. Via the scenarios and questions that follow each thematically driven module, mentors are able to independently reflect on their current practices and ways to improve their roles. At any point in the internship year, mentors can return to the video training modules to review and thus improve their practice.

Social implications – Mentors, university supervisors, teacher candidates and site coordinators (those individuals who identify mentors in their buildings) note improvement in their ability to communicate effectively as a result of being presented with video modules and reflections about the role of mentors from both mentors and TCs.

Originality/value – The authors were called on by leadership in the College of Education at the University to create this original mentor training video module. It is unique to the College of Education at the University. Great value exists in its accessibility, adaptability (we can upload new videos at any time) and representation of both the mentor and TC perceptions, suggestions and experiences in our program.

Keywords Mentor, Teacher candidates, Mentor training

Paper type Practitioner Paper



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Mentors, also known as mentor teachers or cooperating teachers, play a critical role in the development of teacher candidates (TCs). For the purpose of this paper, teacher candidates are the individuals (“interns”) participating in the internship, also known as the final year or the “Professional Year,” in a teacher preparation program. Mentors are the individuals who welcome TCs into their classrooms to observe their practice and to eventually take on greater teacher responsibilities as the internship year progresses. The internship is the time when TCs are matched with mentors, stepping foot in the classrooms they have been excited to explore, observe and eventually teach.

Mentors graciously open their classrooms to TCs so that these experiences can begin to unfold. TCs observe their mentors’ pedagogical decision-making, their abilities to manage classrooms and build communities, the ways in which they foster relationships with children and parents and their modeling of being a professional in the field of education. Further, mentors gradually step back, allowing TCs to slowly assume responsibility for their classrooms; they assist in planning with TCs and observe TCs as they take on more teaching responsibility. They model what it is to be a reflective practitioner and help TCs begin to become proficient in reflecting on their own pedagogical decision-making in the classroom. The responsibilities are endless; one could identify many more.

Why is it then that more care is not put forth toward the training of these “first responders” in the field? Zeichner goes even further in reminding university partners that mentors ought not to be treated as “second-class citizens who only provide places for our students to teach” (2002, p. 63). The authors of this manuscript know that the internship year is crucial in preparing TCs for their first years of teaching. They know that mentors, for better or for worse, influence the decision-making of the TCs as they enter their own classrooms in the near future. In sum, the relationship between the mentor and TC is consequential.

Literature review

Missing link: addressing the gap between theory and practice in mentor training

With these thoughts in mind, the authors were curious about what findings the current literature presents on both the importance and role of the mentor in relation to the development of TCs during their internship year. Further, the authors questioned and thus explored what the literature suggests concerning effective qualities of mentors. Finally, the authors explored current gaps that exist across mentor training programs. As a result of this exploration, the authors returned to their own program and crafted a series of interview questions to ask of the mentors, site coordinators, TCs and supervisors across their programs in the College of Education. The responses were then used to create an interactive, meaningful and practical set of mentor training videos. Though not a research paper, the discussion that follows invites the reader to explore not only current literature related to mentor training but also the context of one College of Education program and the process the authors moved through to update its current mentor training. The authors share the process they moved through to select and interview the stakeholders as well as the responses collected from the interview process. A discussion concerning the authors’ reflection on current mentor training practices as well as future implications is also offered.

The importance of the mentor

Field placements, clinical experiences and internships are the pinnacle of one’s teacher preparation program. Singh (2017) notes the importance of the clinical experience due to its influence on all aspects of TC’s preparation. It is in these classroom placements where teacher candidates are able to apply the content and knowledge in a hands-on, authentic learning environment. Here, they obtain real-world experiences in teaching, navigating the challenges

of the classroom, planning and implementing the curriculum, developing skills related to classroom management and learning the importance of reflection. Despite this incredible influence mentors often have on shaping the TC, Clarke *et al.* point out, “they are not always fully aware of the extent and strength of this influence” (2014, p. 182). The value of a mentor cannot be overstated. Four decades ago, Karmos and Jacko (1977) noted that cooperating teachers were identified as the most influential relationship a student teacher had in the field. More than 40 years later, others have reported similar findings (Singh, 2017; Baartman, 2020).

The mentor: roles and responsibilities and misunderstandings

How can we expect a mentor to be effective if we do not afford them the time to unpack their practice, thereby helping TCs develop their own practice more effectively? Sowell (2017) suggests that a lack of balance exists between the ability of the mentor to teach vs the ability of the mentor to actually mentor TCs. According to Sowell (2017), many mentors feel unprepared and lack confidence in their ability to mentor. The mentors in Sowell’s (2017) study expressed the need and desire for ongoing training. Mentors need time to explore and define their roles as mentors with their university partners so that a clear understanding is outlined prior to TC entering their classrooms. Additionally, mentors must realize that they are not only responsible for modeling practice but also for teaching our TCs how to implement a wide range of pedagogical skills. These roles and responsibilities are often overlooked by the university and the school-based partners responsible for training its mentors. Grimmitt *et al.* highlight that “Shifting the focus to the teaching and learning of teaching, allowed mentor teachers to draw on their understanding of their usual position as teachers of children” (2018, p. 350). The pandemic and thus shift to online learning reiterated just how important a role mentors play in the development of TCs and that clear communication and on-going training related to their own mentoring practices are essential. Zibold *et al.* (2021) found that mentors appreciated online mentor training formats due to the opportunity they presented for mentors to engage in conversations about shared experiences more often.

Effective mentors

For mentors to be effective and thereby beneficial to TCs in their preparation, merely being a “good teacher” and modeling such teaching is insufficient. Mentors must also develop a relationship with TCs, collaborate with them and support them as they practice all duties and responsibilities of a teacher. Bradbury (2010) suggests that effective mentoring takes place when TCs are pushed to take risks and be challenged in the classroom, but only with the proper support provided by mentors creates a safe risk-taking environment for TCs. As a result, Bradbury (2010) finds that mentors begin to identify more strongly as more effective educative mentors. Providing feedback is also a vital component of supporting TCs. Grimmitt *et al.* reveal that mentors appreciated the process of “unpacking their own teaching practice with the pre-service teachers (I as teacher of teaching), and collaboratively explore with them what ‘good practice’ actually means (I as supporter and co-constructor of pre-service teachers’ learning)” (2018, p. 350). As described by Bradbury (2010), mentors must use effective communication to aid in the reflection processes, such as the one Grimmitt *et al.* (2018) state above.

Gaps in current mentor training

With the shared understanding of the critical role mentors play in TCs’ development as well as the skills of being an effective mentor, the authors note findings from Franks and Krause (2020), who remind us that unfortunately, there is a significant lack of support for mentors who take on such a responsibility. Franks and Krause shed light on the fact that “CTs [mentors] lack specific preparation to enable high-quality and developmentally appropriate support for student

teachers, as they tend to be underprepared for their work as mentors” (2020, p. 358). [Clarke et al. \(2014\)](#) highlight an example of the lack of preparation, describing mentors’ lack of training related to providing feedback to TCs. [Clarke et al.](#) more specifically state that “cooperating teachers seem to have difficulty in varying the nature and substance of their feedback according to the stage and level of the student teacher’s development over the course of the practicum” (2014, p. 176). [Ross \(2002\)](#) further builds on the findings of [Clarke et al. \(2014\)](#) and argues there is a need for focusing on a skill like reflection during potential mentor training. [Ross \(2002\)](#) also highlights the need for a focus on reflective practice instruction in mentor training programs, which may result in a stronger connection between the school and university partnership programs. Another area of concern noted by mentors in regards to their training (or lack thereof) relates to that of technology. [Meda et al. \(2023\)](#) shed light on the importance of providing both mentors and TCs with training in technology use to improve their communication and their ability to co-teach in the classroom. Beyond this specific gap, there are many others that exist in our training of mentors. [Simsar and Dogan](#) capture the magnitude of these gaps when they call on the need for “training through in-service programs on how they can better give mentoring experiences based on the mentoring practices on the pedagogical knowledge, system requirement, personal attributes, modeling and feedback” (2020, p. 109).

Importance of university and school-based communication

The research is clear that the university must support mentors in their roles; the partnership is essential. [Baartman \(2020\)](#) explains the supporting research for the need for mentor training programs, with the higher education institution working in partnership with the mentor. The quality of the mentorship is improved by working “hand in hand” with one another. When higher education institutions provide little guidance, it leaves mentors feeling isolated in their roles ([Baartman, 2020](#)), roles that are crucial. [Zeichner \(2002\)](#) further acknowledges this isolation and notes the significant disconnect that exists between both stakeholders. [Zeichner](#) comments, “Cooperating teachers and university instructors are often mutually ignorant of each other’s work and the principles that underlie it” (2002, p. 61). For internship experiences to succeed, [Sumrall et al. \(2017\)](#) also advise the importance of communication between cooperating teachers and the university. [Lesham \(2014\)](#) describes a study that showed the link between a mentor’s self-perception and the level of involvement in professional development. Offering PD may strengthen and support mentors in developing their own professional identities. [Hobson et al. \(2012\)](#) also acknowledge the need for university supervisors to focus on work related to mentoring.

The need for flexible and accessible mentor training

The literature casts a bright light on the need for more effective communication between university and school-based partnerships. This directly correlates to the need for universities to provide flexible and accessible mentor training for their PreK-12 partners. [Zibold et al. \(2021\)](#) suggest the need for offering online mentor trainings so that mentors can exchange experiences more frequently and learn from one another more often. Shared experiences will result in mentors learning different methods to apply with their TCs in the classroom. [Sowell \(2017\)](#) mentions the dangers that can result if mentor trainings are not easily accessible for those who play this crucial role; mentors may rely on outdated practices with their TCs and thus will not be as effective in their roles as mentors to them. More consequentially, [Sowell](#) states, “Without effective, trained mentors, programs will fail to meet their goals of improving instruction and retaining teachers past their induction year” (2017, p. 134).

Developing the mentor training videos

Both authors are teacher educators in the College of Education at a university known for its stellar educator preparation programs. The University first started as a Teachers College,

a state “Normal School,” in 1866. It remains the largest and oldest teacher-producing institution in the state. The institution prides itself on preparing its TCs to be highly effective teachers who enter the field as competent reflective practitioners, pedagogical decision-makers, community relationship builders and professionals. The programs are successful not only due to the professors who prepare the TCs but also as a result of the Professional Development School (PDS) structure that supports strong relationships between PreK-12 partners and the University. In a PDS, the intern, mentor and supervisor relationship fosters a collaborative and innovative culture in the school environment (Coler *et al.*, 2022). At the heart of PDS are communication and reciprocation of service. The PreK-12 partners provide site coordinators who help liaisons identify qualified mentors to serve as role models for the TCs, and in turn, the University provides services to the schools such as professional development, tutoring and more.

The first author is a former high school English teacher who taught in the local county and graduated from the teacher preparation program at this University. She is a full-time faculty member in the Department of Secondary and Middle School Education, where she teaches several of the courses TCs take in the semesters leading up to their internship year. Additionally, the first author serves as a PDS Liaison. In this role, author one works directly with site coordinators and mentors in the PDS across two high schools and two middle schools, where her cohorts of roughly 15 interns per year are placed.

The second author is also an alumna of the university’s teacher preparation program. She began as an elementary educator, then moved into teaching in higher education. She has supervised multiple field placements and internships across various subject areas and teaches several required education courses. Currently, she serves as a Graduate Program Director in the Department of Special Education, where she oversees the faculty supervising MAT interns in the Professional Year. Serving as the program advisor, she is directly involved in ensuring the interns are prepared for certification.

The collaboration

Due to their experiences working closely with mentors in the field across each of their sites in their PDS cohorts and because of their involvement preparing TCs in various coursework across different departments in the College of Education, the authors were identified and asked by the Associate Dean of the College of Education to develop an engaging video-based training to better prepare mentors for their roles in their PDS partnerships. The intention was to serve mentors, and supervisors would also benefit from the shared content and best practices. Fostered collaboration among departments would promote more universal and consistent training across the EPP.

The collegewide need. Since its inception, the teacher education program and PDS partnerships that provide support to the program have increased dramatically. There are more than 120 partnerships across the state, many serving multiple interns and hosting myriad internships. The collaborative nature among the mentors, supervisors and interns in the PDS network is a strength of the EPP. Continuous professional learning, as described by NAPDS, is a norm for systems (2021).

The Associate Dean and the Center for Professional Practice realized, however, that while mentor training was taking place at most sites and being led by liaisons like the authors, uniformity and possibly even the quality of mentor training was lacking. Being true to Essential Nine of the NAPDS Essentials (2021), it was important that the partners offered EPP-wide support to strengthen the collaborative work in the PDS network. The Assistant Dean had also worked in the past with both authors and additional members of a workgroup to create a series of modules that landed in a daunting set of text-filled PowerPoint slides; these proved to be ineffective and lacked key engagement necessary to train mentors.

Childre and Van Rie (2015) found that improved training for mentor teachers is crucial in building a solid approach to preparing teacher candidates. The goal of improved formal training for mentor teachers in the PDS network drove the development of more dynamic modules.

The authors not only worked on the original call for mentor training materials but were known for their strong partnerships and their robust mentor training programs. Both were recognized for their strengths in technology and communication. As DiCicco *et al.* (2023) state, “Partnerships require collaboration and effective collaboration requires communication.” For these reasons, the authors were brought together to serve one purpose: create interactive and engaging mentor training videos that would be communicated across the EPP to provide relevant material for all levels, disciplines and districts.

The authors approached the creation of these videos with a vision of featuring diverse voices from the field, allowing mentors, site coordinators, university supervisors and even TCs to share their stories and experiences with new and returning mentors. Through shared stories, these important stakeholders who represented similar demographics of current and future mentors would inspire their peers to not only learn about their roles and how to effectively mentor, but to realize the impact they have on TCs.

Intentional selection of interviewees. It is important to note that the authors were deliberate in selecting mentors, TCs and colleagues as they entered the early stages of the new video-based mentor training (see Appendix A). The interviewees’ professional backgrounds (general education, special education and grade levels), gender, race and levels of experience were considered. The interviewees were also selected to represent the diversity of the school sites; the authors traveled across three counties to interview TCs, mentors and supervisors.

More specifically, featured in the mentor training videos are a total of 11 interviewees. Four TCs were interviewed to share their experiences working with and learning from their mentors over the course of the internship year. Three of the TCs were white female candidates, and one was a white male. Of the four mentors interviewed, three were white females and one was an African American male. Finally, three supervisors from the University were selected. One supervisor was a white female, one was an African American female and the final supervisor was a white male. The authors insisted on having representation from a diverse set of voices. It was important for all stakeholders involved in this process as well as those learning from it, to see themselves represented in this important work. It was equally important to interview and feature mentors and TCs, who work with diverse communities. The PDS sites served represent the incredible diversity that exists across the state. The authors felt it important to reiterate the equity that ought to exist in the training of the dedicated mentors and TCs who in turn will teach thousands of students sitting in front of them each day. All stakeholders, including the students, will be directly affected by this partnership. The students will in turn learn more successfully from a strong partnership between their teacher (the mentor) and new teacher (the TC). A stronger mentor training experience will result from those engaging in the video training identifying with the interviewees featured.

Process. The interviews. Soon after identifying the diverse sampling of TCs, mentors and supervisors, the authors requested permission to conduct and record interviews with the mentors; they shared an extensive list of outlined prompts for mentors. Questions related to four main areas would serve as the framework for interview questions: Building relationships, the Gradual release process, Providing feedback and Supporting the intern (see Appendix B). The authors framed the interviews around these four topics based on the literature reviewed. The importance of the influence a mentor has on their TC was highlighted across various articles, as was the need for mentors to allow risk-taking in the classroom, followed by the support of their TC when they do so. The ability for mentors to unpack their own practice and to co-reflect with TCs was a benefit mentioned in the literature and was

discussed in relation to improving mentors' ability to provide feedback to their TCS. This is also another way mentors can improve their support of TCS.

The authors next requested permission to interview the TCS who had been selected earlier to capture their experiences and perspectives as to what they needed and wanted from mentors. Similar to the process for mentors' interviews, they shared a list of prompts with the TCS (see [Appendix C](#)). These were derived from the same four themes as the mentors' questions but were written from the TCS' perspective. For example, "How does your mentor support you when you need assistance 'in the moment' of teaching?" was asked of the TCS, whereas mentors were asked, "How do you support interns when they are teaching, without undermining their authority?"

The authors also thought mentors would appreciate seeing both mentors and TCS interviewed together, showcasing their partnerships. Pairing them for interviews not only showed the relationship between the mentors and TCS but also it captured authentic discussions. Mentor trainings can share ways for mentors to build relationships with their TCS, but showing mentors what respectful conversation looks and sounds like by bringing our mentors and TCS together is much more impactful. As the pairs discussed their views on topics such as giving and receiving feedback, welcoming the TC to the school community and gradually releasing the TC into the mentor's classroom, both the mentors and TCS often nodded in agreement, smiling as one reflected on their experiences related to a particular topic or even jumped in with an "Oh yeah" moment, inspired by the other. These meaningful mentor training moments and powerful, diverse voices could not have been captured in a series of PowerPoint slides. By embracing a new medium to present the voices of both mentors and TCS, a more realistic training is now available to all stakeholders in a flexible, online format.

Finally, the authors requested permission and interviewed the final stakeholder featured in the mentor training videos: the university supervisor, the professor who observes the TC during the full-time internship. The supervisor facilitates three-way conferences among the mentor, TC and supervisor. The authors knew the supervisor's perspective concerning the mentor's role and responsibility was valuable; it also provided an opportunity for mentors to learn about the supervisor's role, as the two stakeholders would develop relationships. Further, given that it is the supervisor who is most responsible for addressing struggling interns and handling the most significant challenges presented in internships, the authors designed interviews to capture supervisors' suggestions for mentors to support interns, troubleshoot concerns and navigate conflict resolution. The authors identified colleagues across the College of Education, secured permissions and then, shared discussion topics with these supervisors.

Video format. After conducting and recording the interviews, the next stage was organizing the data and incorporating moments of interaction for mentors to move through during the training. As planned, the authors designed the videos with the following key themes: Getting acquainted, Building relationships, Supporting the teacher candidate via Gradual release and Addressing concerns. For each section, the authors selected clips that represented voices from the field: mentors (some of whom also served as site coordinators), TCS and university supervisors. They composed captions and concepts to reiterate key ideas shared by the stakeholders in their videos. Also, to allow for the intended audience to engage with the material, the authors designed reflective questions called "It's Your Turn." These questions prompt the audience to consider how the presented material directly relates to their mentoring philosophies, practices and situations. Examples of such interaction call on mentors to consider three activities they could plan to expand their TC's experience beyond the four walls of the classroom, to create their own series of gradual releases into the classroom in preparation of the TC's arrival, and to list different ways to immerse their TC into the school community. The "It's Your Turn" questions were embedded into the video

modules, and final edits were made to polish the finished product. The University's brand mark, distinguished colors and fonts provided the finishing touches, creating a professional appearance that the mentors would recognize as the signature look for the university's productions.

Implementation. The polished videos were shared with the Center for Professional Practice (CPP), the department that oversees all aspects of internship placements at the University. Additionally, the authors shared the finished products with the interviewees since they were the future target audience. The mentors, TCs and university supervisors featured in the videos presented positive reactions, agreeing that the mentor training was unique but also universally applicable to any mentor training at any school site. The video modules were published to the university website and are shared at annual mentor and supervisor retreats. [Meda et al. \(2023\)](#) reinforce the importance of virtual collaboration in the field experience. They note that "the level of collaboration between faculty members and school mentor teachers was enhanced due to the development of relationships and information sharing through the use of technology" (32). The Supervisors support the findings of [Meda et al. \(2023\)](#) by incorporating the videos in their mentor training materials as important supplements to their individual methods of mentoring mentors. With approximately 500 education majors graduating each year from the institution and each having a mentor for both the part-time and full-time internship, hundreds of mentors may benefit from these videos.

Reflection. Upon reflection, the authors recognize that this mentor training video is really only the first iteration of its kind. As the mentor trainings continue to be implemented, the modules and videos will need to remain relevant and useful. As program requirements and interns' needs evolve, revision of the modules will be helpful. Mentors' competency and skill needs may also drive changes to the work. More work needs to be done to continue to respect the professional development needs of the mentors. More work also needs to be done to find even greater representation from the field. They plan on conducting a second round of interviews of mentors, TCs and supervisors in an upcoming academic year. In this second mentor training video iteration, they intend to interview more mentors, TCs and supervisors of color to provide an even more accurate representation of the TCs entering the program and the field of education. They wish to also address the mental health of the mentors and TCs in this next edition. With the arrival of COVID-19, more mentors and TCs struggle with issues related to their mental health than ever before. It is now apparent that in order to enable mentors to succeed, it is crucial to focus on aspects of self-care in the creation of professional development opportunities. Finally, the authors intend to continue to ask all stakeholders for anecdotal feedback after they view and engage in the video mentor training. The authors recognize the power of feedback to continue to improve not only the content of the mentor training videos but the accessibility as well. If mentors wish to access videos beyond their current location on the University site, then they will explore additional accessible platforms. The authors have also discussed the potential to embed QR codes in other documents given to mentors at the start of the internship year as well as providing videos at the district level for leaders to post to their individual county mentor training sites.

In addition to using the feedback to improve the design and delivery of the trainings, the findings from this feedback might bring about ideas for research; this could involve designing surveys for data collection to analyze the effectiveness for both mentors and TCs. Such surveys could be helpful in determining gaps or misalignment in one or more of the four module categories, thus providing an opportunity to further improve the modules.

Conclusion

Mentor teachers play a critical role in the development of TCs. Recall that the mentors in [Sowell's \(2017\)](#) study expressed the need and want for ongoing training. Time, effort and care

must be given to the training of these individuals who dedicate their own time, experience, classrooms and so much more to help develop TCs to become the next generation of highly effective educators. This article has made the case that both Pre-K-12 and University Partners are not doing enough to respect the role of our mentors. However, it does highlight just one way that they can start recognizing and respecting this role. By providing a glimpse into the process and delivery of a more robust, advanced mentor training to help develop the skills mentors need to be more effective, the authors hope to inspire other education preparation programs to revisit their current mentor training programs and to then put forth the same energy in the revision of them to better meet the demands our mentors and interns so very much deserve.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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