

Developing Mentor Teachers to Support Student Teacher Candidates

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This article shares development of a mentor teacher training program to support teacher candidates in their student teaching internship. The mentor teacher training program includes three parts: (a) online training on internship processes and procedures, co-teaching, and a department developed Framework for Extended Oral and Written Feedback, (b) face-to-face orientation session to clarify co-teaching and feedback framework, and (c) co-observation of intern candidates by faculty supervisor and mentor teacher. The goal of the mentor teacher training program is to orient mentor teachers to the internship and to train them in providing high quality, actionable feedback that leads the teacher candidate to improved practice.

Teacher candidate preparation typically culminates in an extended field experience under the guidance of a mentor teacher. Teacher preparation programs often use local school sites and practicing classroom teachers to provide the extended field experience for teacher candidates. Practicing classroom teachers are considered ideal mentors for teacher candidates because they can offer practical experience and the opportunity to bring together all that has been learned (e.g. classroom management, assessment, instructional strategies, etc.) in a real classroom setting. However, does being a good classroom teacher translate into being a good mentor for preservice teachers? Teacher education faculty and leadership at a small college in northwest Florida, took a closer look at the mentor teacher role in the student teaching internship to answer this question.

In 2010, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation published a report on improving

clinical preparation. Partnership between the local school district and the teacher preparation program was deemed a critical area for needed change. NCATE (2010) argued, “All teacher preparation programs and districts have to start thinking about teacher preparation as a responsibility they share, working together” (p. 3). The benefits of teacher preparation programs and local school districts working closely together are twofold. First, there is an opportunity for teacher preparation programs to better use program coursework to prepare teacher candidates for the authenticities of teaching in local school district classrooms. Second, teacher candidates bring to local school district classrooms an awareness of recent research-based, innovative professional practices.

In fall 2017, the director and faculty in a teacher education department serving three Bachelor of Science Education degree programs (Elementary Education, Middle Grades Mathematics, and Middle Grades General Science) implemented a three-part mentor teacher development training

program to better prepare mentors to support intern candidates. There was no argument about the quality of mentor teachers selected to support teacher candidates from the program's two partnering school districts. Mentor teachers must meet the following requirements, per Florida statute [1004.03(5b)(1)]: (a) teach a minimum of three years (though most have taught longer), (b) complete a Florida Department of Education approved Clinical Educator Training, and (c) receive a rating of highly effective or effective on their most recent teacher evaluation.

The program recognized these mentor teachers as masters in their teaching area. The ability to tap into this expert knowledge that brings together instruction, strategies, management, and assessment for teaching elementary and middle grades students makes for an invaluable resource. Mentorship in the student teaching internship experience is also important so that interns get not only teaching experience but also support, guidance, and quality feedback that helps them to improve their practice. Hudson (2014) explained that "the type of relationship which the mentor has with the mentee and the ways in which the mentor guides the mentee's development become crucial to confidence-building" (p. 63). The mentor teacher training program emanated from a need to ensure that student teaching intern candidates receive the support and feedback necessary for actionable change that leads to improved practice.

Beginning December 2017, the teacher education program began providing a new training program for mentor teachers. Before this new training model, mentor teachers attended one face-to-face orientation that focused on the logistics of the 15-week semester-long student teaching internship (e.g. how to complete forms and evaluations, teacher candidate time sheets, procedures, etc.). While the previous orientation did

provide a structural overview of the student teaching internship, it did not provide specific information or training on how to provide teacher candidates with support, guidance, or focused high-quality, actionable feedback. The new mentor teacher training program included: (a) an online training module to familiarize mentor teachers with internship processes and procedures, co-teaching strategies, and the department developed Framework for Extended Oral and Written Feedback, (b) a face-to-face orientation session to practice the co-teaching strategy, and (c) a training for alignment on the teacher candidate observation tool. Each of the parts of the mentor teacher training is discussed.

Mentor Teacher Development

The mentor teacher training program began with a three-part online training. This training was designed to familiarize the mentor teachers with the student teaching internship processes and procedures. Additionally, the online training front-loaded the upcoming face-to-face orientation session. Prospective mentor teachers applied within their districts to mentor intern teacher candidates. Once selected, districts notified mentor teachers of the assigned teacher candidate. Approximately a month before the face-to-face orientation session, mentor teachers were provided access to the online mentor teacher training using the college's Blackboard online course management system. The mentor teachers completed three modules in the online training and the average completion time for all of the modules was about two and a half hours.

Online training. Module One included a 20-minute video that reviewed the processes and procedures of the program's student teaching internship. The video clarified the roles and responsibilities of the mentor teacher and the intern teacher candidate, and reviewed general policies and

forms (e.g. schedule for completion of the internship, intern timesheet, and observation and evaluation documents). Policies and documents were available online and readily accessible for reference while watching the video.

Module Two introduced the co-teaching internship model recently adopted by the teacher education program. The term co-teaching comes from Cook and Friend (1995) in special education, where originally it was developed as an instructional model for work between the general and special education teachers. Both the general and special education teacher worked in cooperation to deliver instruction to all students in the classroom, while using specific strategies to support those students with special needs. Bacharach, Heck, and Dahlberg (2010), at St. Cloud State University, researched the idea of co-teaching in student teaching through a Teacher Quality Enhancement Partnership grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

Co-teaching in student teaching allows two teachers to work together, the mentor teacher and the teacher candidate in teaching, planning, and assessing (Heck & Bacharach, 2015). This approach differs from the traditional student teaching model, where intern candidates take over teaching responsibility for subject areas after observing the mentor teacher for several weeks. Because mentor teachers remain a part of the classroom as co-teachers, they can guide interns by modeling, thinking aloud, questioning, prompting, and probing for support. This is helpful when interns get stuck and may be unsure of actions to take. In a traditional student teaching, mentor teachers may leave the room feeling as if intern candidates must handle problems on their own.

In a co-teaching in student teaching internship, interns first ease into teaching through supporting roles in co-teaching

strategies such as One Teach, One Observe or One Teach, One Assist. Later, interns move into the lead teacher role using these same strategies or other strategies such as Parallel, Station, Supplemental, Alternative/Differentiated, and Team Teaching (Heck & Bacharach, 2015). The co-teachers use these seven strategies for teaching together, with strategy choice dependent upon student needs and teacher goals (see Table 1). According to Heck and Bacharach, some of the benefits of a co-teaching in student teaching approach include: (a) two teachers in the classroom working toward the objectives of lessons, (b) a reduced student to teacher ratio with more time to focus on individual questions and needs, and (c) a consistent model of expert teaching because the mentor teacher is more present, not only to assist in teaching but also to explain the thinking behind instructional decisions.

Another benefit of a co-teaching in student teaching model is that mentor teachers remain a part of the instructional process. This was a huge selling point to the teacher education program's partner school districts. Some teachers were hesitant to accept interns in state accountability tested grade levels, as they had concerns that the intern could negatively impact student results. Prior to implementing a co-teaching in student teaching model, one elementary school principal from a partnering district informed the teacher education program that no interns would be accepted in the spring semester in state accountability tested grade levels. Bacharach, et al. (2010) actually showed that P-12 learners in classrooms with co-teaching pairs outperformed P-12 learners in traditional student teaching classes and individual certified teachers, in both reading and math.

Co-teaching in Module Two of the online training included a program developed video walk-through of each of the seven co-

Table 1
Co-teaching Strategies in Student Teaching Internship

Co-Teaching Strategy	Strategy Definition	Strategy Example
One Teach, One Observe	The intern teaches the large group while the mentor teacher observes to gather data on the specific academic, behavior, or classroom management issue recorded on the pre-observation conference form.	The intern teaches a review social studies lesson while the mentor teacher observes the cognitive level of questions the intern asks the students or observes wait time.
One Teach, One Assist	The intern teaches the lesson while the mentor teacher assists by circulating the room during guided and independent practice to provide individual assistance.	The intern introduces a new math concept and the mentor teacher moves around the room during guided and independent practice to provide assistance and answer questions for students that need help.
Station Teaching	Students are divided into three groups: one group works with the intern, another group works with the mentor teacher, the third group works independently. Student groups rotate among each of the three groups. Groups cannot be hierarchical.	Students are participating in a literature study. The intern works with a group on character attributes and understanding. The mentor teacher works with a group on plot understanding. A third independent group might focus on students working with vocabulary from the literature. Because the groups are not hierarchical, students could begin at any group.
Parallel Teaching	Students are divided into two groups. The intern and mentor teacher teach the same material to their respective groups.	The intern and mentor teacher are each teaching a small group to count coins. Because the students are in small groups there is a lower student to teacher ratio.
Supplemental Teaching	Students are divided into two groups. The intern provides grade level instruction while the mentor teacher provides re-teaching, enrichment, assessment, or other activities.	The intern leads grade level writing instruction while the mentor teacher works with a group of ELL students to write sentences.
Alternative (Differentiated) Teaching	Students are divided into two groups. The intern and mentor teacher teach the same content in a differentiated format.	The intern and mentor teacher teach a vocabulary lesson using the same words. The intern's group creates word maps while the mentor teacher's group conducts a word sort.
Team Teaching	The intern and mentor teacher share large group instruction, assist students, and answer questions.	The intern and mentor teacher share in the instruction of a science lesson. The intern may introduce the concept, the mentor teacher may direct students in reading about content, both the intern and mentor teacher ask students questions, etc.

Adapted from Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, and Shamberger (2010) and Heck and Bacharach (2016)

teaching strategies, Heck and Bacharach's (2015) article on co-teaching in student teaching, and a list of the seven co-teaching strategies with strategy definitions and examples for use in the classroom. Learning about co-teaching in this module would be helpful in the face-to-face orientation session later. Mentor teachers needed this background to prepare them to work with co-teaching in the later meeting.

Module Three of the online training focused on providing high quality, meaningful, and actionable feedback to intern candidates. The program faculty and leadership believe that feedback is a powerful piece in the student teaching internship because acting upon it may move the intern candidate towards improved practice and increased effectiveness. Hudson (2014) seemed to understand that being an effective

teacher does not automatically translate into being an effective mentor when he explained, “It may be necessary to teach mentors skills and strategies to facilitate professional conversations that lead towards improving teaching practices” (p.71).

The online Module Three feedback portion of the training included a teacher education program developed video and PowerPoint that discussed the following points for having feedback conversations: immediate and specific feedback, tone and presentation of feedback, identifying one or two concerns that will make the most difference for the intern candidate, involving the intern candidate in the feedback, and explaining how the feedback relates to goals (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). According to Hattie and Timperley, three essential questions that affect feedback answers are “Where am I going? (What are the goals?), How am I going? (What progress is being made toward the goal?), and Where to next? (What activities need to be undertaken to make better progress?)” (p.86).

Module Three on feedback also included a Framework for Extended Oral and Written Feedback that was developed by program faculty and leadership, and informed by the work of Spear, Lock, and McCulloch (1997), Hattie and Timperley (2007), Dowden, Pittaway, Yost, and McCarthy (2013), and Hudson (2014). The purpose of the framework was to establish accuracy and consistency in providing relevant, high quality, actionable oral and written feedback to teacher candidates. Hudson (2014) was concerned that, while intern candidate feedback “becomes a linchpin for advancing practices,” inconsistencies in feedback lead to inequity (p.63). This inequity becomes particularly problematic when interns are evaluated by more than one observer, as the student teaching internship includes separate observations by the mentor teacher and

faculty supervisor. Additionally, it was hoped that the framework would provide for a common understanding among observers on critical elements of feedback. The framework includes the following components adapted from Spear, Lock, and McCulloch (1997):

- Provide balance by giving an overall appraisal (teaching strengths and weaknesses).
- Provide developmental feedback by identifying one concern that will make the most difference for improving the pedagogical practice of the intern teacher candidate. Explain what the candidate needs to be able to do, as a professional educator, in the area of concern.
- Provide instructive feedback by identifying the problem, explaining why it is a problem, and giving instructions for resolving the problem.
- Charting improvements evident by acknowledging improvement/growth from previous attempts.

The feedback framework components were placed at the end of the evaluation form so that faculty supervisors and mentor teachers could provide their written feedback, after scoring the observation, and use this feedback to guide the post-observation conference with their intern candidates.

The last task in the online training requested that the mentor teacher acknowledge completion of the training by printing and submitting a completion certificate. Currently, the program relies on an honor system for reporting online training completion. A quiz feature may be developed

in the future so that mentor teachers can assess their understanding on the training concepts.

Orientation session. The second part of the mentor teacher training involved mentor teachers attending a face-to-face orientation, where mentor teachers met with their intern candidates. The focus of the face-to-face session was to increase mentor teachers' understanding of co-teaching and the co-teaching internship model. The program faculty and leadership wanted to make certain that mentor teachers understood that co-teaching was to be the only means for the student teaching internship. Additionally, the teacher education program wanted mentor teachers to feel comfortable with using co-teaching strategies in the classroom.

The orientation session included a quick review of co-teaching strategies by watching two to three-minute videos of each strategy in action in a classroom. Next the intern candidates and their mentors discussed what co-teaching would look like in their classroom (co-planning, co-assessing, and co-teaching strategies that might be best for specific situations). Together the co-teachers brainstormed a lesson, identified a co-teaching strategy that would be best used to teach the lesson, and shared their ideas in small groups. Those watching the co-teacher pairs received the benefit of hearing other ideas for using the co-teaching strategies.

The last part of the orientation session involved the mentor teachers only, where teacher education program personnel reviewed and clarified the Framework for Extended Oral and Written Feedback. Teacher education personnel further explained the framework and placed emphasis on the importance of: (a) including the positives of a lesson rather than only focusing on weaknesses, (b) identifying only one or two of the most important areas for change needed that would make a marked difference in candidate effectiveness, and (c)

remembering to look for and acknowledge growth based on the previous observation evaluation. While intern candidates may have several areas to improve upon, limiting the focus on fewer areas of improvement at one time rather than on many may help to prevent the intern candidate from being overwhelmed and frustrated. Dowden et al. (2013) discussed the emotional response that feedback can elicit, stating that in some cases it "extinguished any academic benefit" (p.354). Hattie and Timperley (2007) stated that feedback "is most powerful when it addresses faulty interpretations, not a total lack of understanding" (p.82). In the event that an intern candidate has more areas of weakness in a lesson than might be expected, mentor teachers should still focus on critical areas for improvement but also alert the faculty supervisor. The faculty supervisor may, with mentor teacher assistance, develop an improvement plan for additional monitoring and support.

Training for alignment on the evaluation tool. The last part of the mentor teacher training program involved the faculty supervisor and mentor teacher simultaneously observing and scoring the intern candidate on the evaluation tool. The mentor teacher and faculty supervisor each observe the intern candidate four times so that the intern has a total of eight observations in the student teaching internship semester. The first lesson is co-observed by the mentor teacher and faculty supervisor. All subsequent lessons are observed individually by the mentor teacher and the faculty supervisor. The purpose of the co-observed lesson was to: (a) initiate conversations between the faculty supervisor and mentor teacher about what is important to notice in a lesson, (b) make mentor teachers aware of the capabilities of an intern candidate, and (c) develop a supportive relationship for the intern candidate. Each purpose is discussed.

A co-observed lesson provides an opportunity for the faculty supervisor and mentor teacher to discuss what is important to observe in a lesson. Intern candidates should not expect to receive a markedly different evaluation from the faculty supervisor than from the mentor teacher on the same lesson. Therefore, it is important to have similar expectations and to look for those elements that are important in a quality lesson. According to Hudson (2014), “Mentors should bring their own individual experiences and insights into their mentoring; however, methods should also be found to provide consistency in the feedback” (p. 71). The teacher education program, like the largest partnering district, uses the Charlotte Danielson Framework to observe and evaluate intern candidates (The Danielson Group, 2017). The mentor teacher and faculty supervisor compare their scoring on the Danielson Framework tool, confirm their score similarities, and discuss and come to consensus on scoring differences. Confirmation and consensus are important because the evaluation scoring is generally used as a guide for developing the comments for the Framework for Extended Oral and Written Feedback.

A co-observed lesson provides an opportunity to emphasize intern candidate capabilities. On occasion, there have been mentor teachers with expectations that exceeded capabilities of a novice beginning a student teaching internship. While the intern candidate has had experience teaching four to five lessons in previous semesters, the internship marks the opportunity for the candidate to move beyond only thinking about teaching a single lesson to the complexity of applying knowledge about content, instructional strategies, management, differentiation, and assessment each day.

Program faculty and leadership believe that a supportive relationship is

necessary to intern candidate growth and improvement. Hudson (2014), explained that “preservice teachers rely on their mentors’ feedback to provide insightful advice on how to advance their pedagogical practices” (p. 71). Co-observation of teacher candidates delivering the first content area lesson in the field, provided a platform for the mentor teacher and faculty supervisor to develop a mutual understanding of teacher candidate strengths and concerns about pedagogical practices. These initial conversations set the stage for more frequent, honest two-way communication between the mentor teacher and faculty supervisor about teacher candidates’ performance across the student teaching internship. In addition to the first co-observed lesson, a mentor teacher’s evaluation of student teacher intern pedagogical practices during observations two, three, and four is documented in an online data base. These observation evaluations by mentor teachers are monitored by the faculty supervisor and used as the basis for additional conversations regarding the growth and development of teacher candidates’ pedagogical practices.

Conclusion

Preparing teacher candidates to be effective professionals in the classroom is a challenging task, one that must also consider the preparation of the mentors who guide them. A clear understanding of the student teaching internship processes and procedures provides a road map for mentor teachers and makes them aware of their role and responsibilities. Program faculty and leadership provided the road map through an online training on student teaching internship logistics, co-teaching, and feedback. A face-to-face orientation session served to clarify the co-teaching model, as well as a framework for providing actionable feedback. Finally, co-observed intern lessons by mentor teachers and faculty supervisors,

provided an opportunity for the observers to have conversations on observation focus, scoring, and feedback. Additionally, faculty supervisors and mentor teachers worked as collaborative partners to target critical areas for improvement that contribute to candidate readiness and effectiveness.

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