

# Understanding Mentoring Practices in a Professional Development School Partnership

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This study examined the practices of four mentor teachers in a PDS context over the course of three months from March 2015-May 2015. The purpose of the study was to better understand and answer the following research questions:

1. What are the self-reported practices of mentors in the PDS context?
2. Why do the mentors engage in these practices?
3. How have these practices developed and changed over time?

In addition to classroom observations of practice, qualitative interviews were conducted with each mentor to learn more about each mentor's life history as a student, time spent as a mentor, and espoused beliefs about effective mentoring. As a result of the data collection, a profile of each mentor was written to describe the mentor's experiences as a student and teacher leading up to the time he or she became a mentor, as well as each mentor's beliefs about effective mentoring including examples from practice to illustrate the beliefs. Across the mentors, four specific mentoring practices were identified. (1) Co-planning. All mentors engaged in this practice, with the same end goal in mind, i.e., developing an intern who was capable of planning independently, there were similarities and differences among them in terms of how they involved the intern in co-planning early in the process. (2) Providing "teacher" opportunities. This practice goes further, especially at the beginning of the year, by providing opportunities for the intern to be viewed as a "teacher" and develop his/her own identity in the classroom. (3) Co-teaching. The data from this study shows that all of the four mentors engaged in the practice of co-teaching with their intern. (4) Collaborating with the Professional Development Associate (PDA). Unlike the previous practices described, collaborating with the PDA was not a key practice the mentors articulated explicitly in interviews about their mentoring beliefs. This practice emerged from the data analysis process. These practices were also compared to the Yendol-Hoppey and Dana's (2007) framework for effective mentoring in order to provide illustrations of their domains for effective mentoring and contribute a new component for consideration.

## Summary of Claims

**1. Mentors' practices in the PDS can be characterized as mentor-focused or intern-focused, or sometimes both.**

As a result of examining the common practices of the four mentors: co-planning, providing "teacher" opportunities, co-

teaching, and collaborating with the PDA, there emerged three ways to characterize the practices: 1) mentor-focused, 2) intern-focused, or 3) both mentor/intern-focused. Not only do these four practices illustrate specific examples of what mentors do in actual practice, conceptualizing the practices as mentor-focused or intern-focused, or both, provides a deeper level of unpacking the mentoring practice.

Through analyzing the practices of these mentors, characterizations emerged regarding the practices. There were some practices among mentors that seemed to be primarily focused on the intern as the beneficiary. These practices are labeled as intern-focused. Other practices seemed to be more focused on benefits for the individual mentor or the mentor's students. These practices are labeled as mentor-focused. These practices might be conceptualized through the use of a Venn diagram where one circle encompasses mentor-focused practices while the other encompasses intern-focused practices (See Figure 1). It is not the intent to claim that mentors themselves are solely mentor-focused or intern-focused. They might engage in practices in both circles of the Venn diagram. It is also possible for a mentor to engage in practices where the two circles may overlap and focus on both the mentor and intern simultaneously. It is not the practice per se that determines whether it is primarily mentor or intern-focused, but rather the way in which the practice is used and who is the primary beneficiary of the practice.

The importance of conceptualizing the mentoring practices as mentor-focused, intern-focused, or both, is key for generating discussion in the larger teacher education and mentoring communities to develop a common language for communication about mentoring practices generally and more specifically with teacher candidates within PDS or partner school contexts.

One of the most powerful practices to emerge from this study is collaborating with the PDA as a mentoring practice, which is a practice that can benefit both the mentor and intern. This study found collaborating with the PDA was a significant and widespread practice of these mentors. Not only were the PDAs useful in supporting the interns, but they also supported the mentors as well as the students in the classrooms. Collaborating with the PDA benefitted the mentors in learning how to mentor, support for mentoring, learning about teaching, and feedback about teaching. This practice benefitted the interns through support and differentiation for struggling situations, providing feedback in a timely manner, and supporting interns with planning and teaching. This study supports the notion that mentoring is not solely a dyadic relationship between mentor and student teacher and indicates

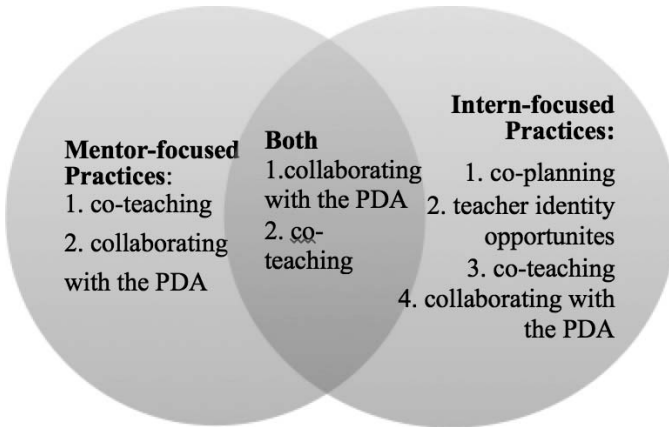


Figure 1. Venn Diagram of mentoring practices. This diagram illustrates how the mentoring practices can be conceptualized as mentor-focused, intern-focused, or both.

that mentoring practices include embracing the triad relationship to collaborate with the PDA in different ways. This study also indicates that mentors may conceptualize their mentoring work as inclusive of the classroom supervisor as evidenced by the mentoring practice of collaborating with the PDA. By including the practice of collaborating with the PDA as illustrated in this PDS, mentors and supervisors of undergraduate preservice teachers may begin to envision their work together as a triad team versus two, separate dyadic relationships, mentor-intern and supervisor-intern. This finding largely impacts the research on mentoring practices as it may encourage teacher education programs to closely consider how to utilize their supervision resources in order to achieve a functioning triad relationship in non-PDS contexts.

## 2. When a mentor changes grade levels and needs to learn an entirely new curriculum, it impacts some of her mentoring practices.

One mentor in the study significantly changed grade levels, from first grade to fourth grade, prior to the school year in which this study was conducted. This move required her to learn completely new curriculum content from what she had previously taught, in addition to learning about how to teach fourth graders as opposed to first graders.

Of the four mentoring practices discussed in this study, co-teaching, “teacher” opportunities, and collaborating with the PDA were three practices affected by the grade level change. The mentor struggled with co-teaching in fourth grade due to fact that she was a novice in regards to the content she was teaching. It was challenging for her to mentor her intern in this area because she was still learning herself. The mentor’s learning in fourth grade was different from a teacher or mentor who continues to learn year after year in the same grade level. Teachers and mentors who remain in the same grade level each year have the opportunity to tweak and revise their teaching

strategies without having to attend to learning totally new content and trying to understand the general developmental patterns and needs of students. This mentor was not tweaking old knowledge, she added brand new knowledge about fourth grade content for all subject areas. In addition, she needed to accumulate knowledge simultaneously about both the general patterns of development among fourth graders as well as the specific developmental needs of her classroom of fourth grade students.

As for providing opportunities for her intern to be seen as a “teacher” in the classroom, changing grade levels from first to fourth grade essentially eliminated how she implemented this practice as a first grade mentor. In primary grade levels, station teaching is a common practice, and her interns often had opportunities to lead small groups of students through station teaching. The mentor did not utilize station teaching much, if at all, and therefore those “teacher” opportunities were not available during the fall semester for Jamie.

She was the only mentor in this study who described learning about teaching from her PDA. As a new first grade mentor, she often collaborated with her PDA, to learn about best practices for teaching first graders. She sat side-by-side with her intern as a learner to observe veteran teaching skills. During the mentor’s first year in fourth grade, her assigned PDA did not have intermediate teaching experience and therefore how they collaborated was different. Perhaps if she had been working with a PDA who had intermediate experience, she would have collaborated with him/her in ways similar to how she collaborated with previous PDAs.

Teacher preparation programs may want to consider more closely placing preservice teachers with mentors without experience teaching their particular grade level. Perhaps support can be provided in other ways. For example, pairing the previous with a PDA with intermediate teaching experience may have resulted in learning together about teaching fourth grade. The content knowledge of the PDA could supplement the pedagogical knowledge of the mentor teacher to provide quality preparation in these instances.

## Framework for Effective Mentors

The results of this study revealed many connections between the mentors’ practices and Yendol-Hoppey and Dana’s (2007) components of effective mentors. It is important to remember that their framework focuses more directly on mentoring beginning, inservice teachers. All four of the mentoring practices: co-planning, teacher opportunities, collaborating with the PDA, and co-teaching serve as illustrations of what the framework’s components might look like in the classroom. Appendix A is a visual that represents both the original effective mentoring framework by Yendol-Hoppey and Dana, in black text, as well as the addition of where the mentoring practices from this study supported the framework, in black, underlined text. Finally, there is also a new addition to the framework in black, italicized text within the component of Cultivate the

Dispositions of a Successful Educator, Commitment to Identity. As a result of the data from one of the mentoring practices, I propose this descriptor as a valuable contribution to this component of the framework.

### Create an Educative Mentoring Context

All four of the mentoring practices appear in this component and provide illustrations of how the mentors in this study created an educative mentoring context by the ways they developed a strong relationship, ascertained a mentee's prior knowledge, and provided emotional support through co-planning, providing "teacher" opportunities, co-teaching, and collaborating with the PDA.

Interestingly, in their mentoring portraits, three of the four mentors espoused a mentoring belief in developing a relationship with their intern. While one of the mentors did not specifically identify building a relationship as a mentoring belief, clearly it is a part of all of their mentoring practices because of what is evident in the mentoring practices. Relationship building is probably a much greater focus of mentoring during the early part of the relationship and school year and likely served as a foundation for these later mentoring practices.

Mentors developed strong relationships with their interns by providing "teacher" opportunities, co-teaching, and utilizing the PDA. Rebecca and Tara were the two veteran mentors in this study who provided opportunities for their interns to develop a "teacher identity" by encouraging their passions and talents to be used in their teaching. The way Rebecca and Tara encouraged their interns to "exercise agency" in their teaching in order to differentiate themselves from the mentors illustrates a result of creating a strong relationship.

Co-teaching can also illustrate a strong relationship between the mentor and intern. The classroom examples of One Teach, One Guide demonstrate the trust that is needed in order to allow for the intern to take the lead in classroom teaching while the mentor supports, or vice versa.

Mentors ascertained the intern's prior knowledge through the mentoring practice of co-planning. Co-planning was another strategy the mentors used to understand the prior experiences interns brought to the classroom. Rebecca, Tara, and Amy particularly invited their interns to be a part of the co-planning process from the early on in the internship year.

Provide emotional support is the third descriptor to create an educative mentoring context. Like much of the research on mentor roles, emotional support connects with many of them. The data from this study showed that at times, mentors collaborated with the PDA to provide emotional support to the interns. For example, Tara, Amy, and Rebecca all described times when they worked with an intern who struggled for some reason or another. In each of their experiences, they recalled collaborating with the PDA in order to support the needs of the intern. Often, the mentor and PDA worked together to brainstorm strategies or ideas for how to best support the intern. The mentors were not left alone in these situations to

figure it out for themselves. Throughout the recounts of their experiences, mentors often used the language of "we" when detailing these times. It was clear they felt they had a partner to work with towards the same goal for the intern.

### Guide a Mentee's Professional Knowledge Development

Yendol-Hoppey and Dana (2007) outlined seven different types of knowledge bases that mentors' draw upon during teaching: content, pedagogical, student-learner, curriculum, pedagogical-content, context and classroom management. In order to engage in educative mentoring, these are the domains to which mentors need to attend. Three of these knowledge bases: content, student-learner, and classroom management, were evidenced in one of the mentors' practices, collaborating with the PDA. I would speculate that more than these three knowledge bases were developed through mentors' practices, but direct evidence supported the named three. The PDA is a critical piece of mentoring in the framework. To rely on one person to attend to all seven of the knowledge bases is quite an overwhelming task. Mentors in the PDS context were able to share the responsibility for developing content, student-learner, and classroom management knowledge with the intern's PDA.

### Cultivate the Dispositions of a Successful Educator

Three of the four mentoring practices appear in this domain. Two mentoring practices, collaborating with the PDA and co-teaching support the existing descriptor, Commitment to Collaboration. Providing "teacher" opportunities is a practice that I believe fits within this domain and contributes an additional descriptor that is not present in the framework.

Commitment to Collaboration was illustrated through co-teaching and collaborating with the PDA. Mentors are able to model this commitment with these two practices and provide a foundation for their interns to take with them into their first years of teaching.

Collaborating with the PDA also illustrates the Commitment to Collaboration descriptor. When the triad works together to support a struggling intern, or support the classroom of students, interns are seeing examples in action of how to utilize colleagues outside of their immediate classroom walls to support them as professionals.

As a result of this study, I would argue for a new disposition to be added to Cultivate the Dispositions of a Successful Educator: Commitment to Teacher Identity. This seems especially important in the case of mentoring preservice teacher candidates. Beginning inservice teachers may already have a good start in developing a unique teacher identity. Commitment to Teacher Identity supports the combination of finding oneself as a teacher and as a person and bringing that combination to the classroom.

After using the framework as a level of analysis for the mentoring practices, one particular practice can be found in all

of the domains of the framework. Collaborating with the PDA is the most prevalent practice across the framework. Again, I believe this speaks to the powerful impact the PDAs have on mentors' practices. Mentors and PDAs could use this framework together to think about how to best support the interns they work with each year. I believe the presence of the PDA in all aspects of the mentoring framework will be validating for PDAs to see how critical their work with mentors is.

### Conclusion

This summary focused on the claims of the study. The four mentoring practices: co-planning, providing teacher opportunities, co-teaching, and collaborating with the PDA were practiced by all of the mentors and the data showed the practices could be conceptualized as mentor-focused, intern-focused, or both.

Depending on who primarily benefitted from the practice determined the focus of the practice. The mentor who changed grade levels prior to the year of study experienced challenges to three of her mentoring practices as a result of her new teaching assignment. The results from the study were also merged with Yendol-Hoppey and Dana's Effective Mentoring Framework. The practices provide additional illustrations of mentoring in practice, and contribute a new disposition for developing a Teacher Identity in mentees. All stakeholders invested in teacher education may find the framework useful for their practice. SUP

### References

Yendol-Hoppey, D., & Dana, N. (2007). *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Mentoring Strengthening Practice Through Knowledge, Story, and Metaphor*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press

