Reconsidering Preservice-Mentor Relationships in Complex Times

New Possibilities for Collaboration and Contribution

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Abstract

A sociocultural context of interruption and instability illuminated our teacher candidates' funds of knowledge and identity (e.g., Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014) during the global pandemic of 2020. Their expertise, skills, and self-understandings strengthened both the mentor-teacher candidate relationship and student engagement. Teacher candidates' stories about shifts to the virtual space demonstrated new possibilities for mentorship in the form of co-learning and co-reflecting (e.g., Canipe & Gunkel, 2020). By making the space to recognize and acknowledge the value of teachers' funds of knowledge and funds of identity (e.g., Hogg & Volman, in press), teacher educators can help structure mentoring relationships that lead to teacher candidates' initial sense of professional belonging, and potentially, their longevity in the profession.

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Introduction

When the pandemic hit the United States in March 2020, we were in awe of how our multiple and single subject teacher candidates and their mentors navigated the shifting educational landscape. In this paper, we focus on how co-teaching (Friend et al., 2010) in a virtual environment deepened the teacher candidate-mentor teacher relationship through the amplification of co-learning and co-reflecting experiences (Canipe & Gunkel, 2020; Gunckel & Wood, 2015). We view this enhanced relationship through a funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992; Hogg, 2011) and funds of identity lens (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014), in which knowledge refers to teachers' skill and capacity to maintain a high-quality classroom experience for their students. Teacher candidates offered rich cultural tools during the shift to online instruction (España & Herrera, 2020) that came from their own lived experiences, their digital native status, and their role as graduate students. These resources became critical for student engagement as some mentor teachers struggled to reinterpret co-teaching practices while simultaneously learning how to implement a high-quality online learning experience for the first time.

We are writing this piece as two teacher educators in Southern California who self-identify as white, upper middle-class, former K-12 teachers with decades of professional experience between us. While the demographics of our neighboring independent universities' student bodies differ (one is a Hispanic Serving Institution and the other has a predominantly white student body), all of our K-12 teacher candidates apprentice in Title 1 public schools. Our programs are focused on social justice pedagogy grounded in the works of Vygotsky, Dewey, and Freire and use a co-teaching model during student teaching (Friend et al., 2010; Stanuilis et al., 2019). During the spring 2020 semester, we both dedicated class time for teacher candidates to share stories from the field because time to debrief helped to sustain all of us during this unprecedented event. These teacher candidate stories (which they gave us permission to share) revealed new possibilities for the field of teacher education. While many of their anecdotes involved a fair amount of chaos and required an unflinching sense of humor, there were also silver linings, which we highlight, below.

Disquisition

Our teacher candidates and mentor teachers all work within a co-teaching model (Friend, et al., 2010) that includes three parts: co-planning, co-teaching, and co-assessing. Co-planning consists of teacher candidates and mentors working together to identify lesson content and structure

(Stanuilis et al., 2019). Co-teaching is more expansive and predicated upon teacher candidate and mentor shared instructional responsibilities through multiple models, including: (1) one teach, one observe; (2) one teach, one support; (3) station teaching; (4) parallel teaching; (5) supplemental teaching; (6) alternative teaching; and (7) team teaching (Friend et al., 2010). Finally, co-assessing involves teaming up to look at student work and determining next steps for instruction (Stanuilis et al., 2019). This model can be complicated by a variety of factors. One consistent issue is finding enough time for collaborative planning. Yet research shows that "planning is an essential component of effective instruction in learning to teach" (Stanuilis et al., 2019, p. 569).

Teacher candidates also often share that they are unable to utilize their own cultural and linguistic K-12 and teacher education experiences in their student teaching classroom (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Moll et al., 1992). While they understand that mentor teachers drive what happens with students, teacher candidates sometimes end their student teaching experience feeling they have not sufficiently utilized their funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Hogg & Volman, in press) as they have not had the opportunity to activate their funds of knowledge in the field. For example, teacher candidates feel tension between the implementation of mandated curriculum that contradicts their personal beliefs and/or does not allow them to integrate what they have learned from their teacher education courses (Richmond et al., 2020; Roegman & Kolman, 2020). A concern of ours is the potential impact of these missed opportunities as they relate to retention in the profession (Ingersoll et al., 2014).

Stories from the Field

The pandemic presented mentor-teacher candidate teams with an opportunity for innovation that was swift, dynamic, and puzzling: how to move K-12 classrooms to an online format immediately. The call for perseverance was loud and clear. When the day-to-day routine was interrupted and the school day became a mix of synchronous and asynchronous instruction, co-planning, co-teaching and co-assessing were undergirded by co-reflecting and co-learning (Canipe & Gunkel, 2020; Gunckel & Wood, 2015). These two elements had always been implicitly part of the co-teaching structure, but due to a shift in the use of time, they were now visible and prioritized by the mentor-teacher candidate team. Drawing on funds of knowledge/funds of identity work (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Hogg & Volman, in press) below, we share stories from the field about how mentor and teacher candidates developed a

deeper partnership as they utilized time and resources to engage students during virtual instruction.

In the beginning of the shift to online instruction, having the time to dialogue afforded mentors and teacher candidates' opportunities for rethinking instructional delivery and enhanced collaboration (Canipe & Gunkel, 2020). For example, one multiple subject teacher candidate shared that he continued to work in his second-grade classroom running Zoom and Google Classroom whole group and small group sessions once his student teaching commitment was finished because he wanted to sustain the academic experience for students. He also wanted to continue to support his mentor teacher, who he had worked with across a span of three semesters. Using videos, pictures, and online whiteboards, he engaged eight-year-olds through multiple technological platforms. In this way, his sense of belonging in the profession might be bolstered through his role as an essential partner while teaching online during the pandemic (Navarro et al., 2019).

In listening to our teacher candidates, we realized tapping into their funds of knowledge and funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Hogg & Volman, in press) were critical to the continuation of classroom learning. For example, many of them used their digital native status to step in and provide immediate assistance with technology and online learning best practices, and many mentors commented that they trusted their teacher candidates to navigate through the rapid change. One teacher candidate shared that she encouraged her mentor teacher to not give up in the face of a shift to online learning. Using her teacher education training and her knowledge of digital platforms, she enthusiastically adapted their curriculum so that it could work in this new space. She spearheaded new practices, such as recording lectures using Screencastify and Loom, and developed collective PowerPoint projects for their students. She then took the initiative to document who was coming to class and how they were participating. Based on that data set, she and her mentor used their increased collaboration time to reflect together on how to adjust their practice to increase student engagement and provide for an appropriate workload. Through co-reflection, they began posting assignments for the week, instead of each day, to offer students flexibility for completing work, and devised a practice of conducting daily check-ins that required student response. They also strayed from the standard curriculum to teach topics of high interest, such as a research project about memes and a film study, while continuing to adhere to Common Core and state standards (California Department of Education, 2013). This example spotlights how collaboration in a moment of crisis built and/or deepened a relationship of trust and reciprocity (Moll et al., 1992) between mentor-teacher candidate teams.

Another mentor and teacher candidate team realized that the relationships of trust they constructed with students prior to the shift were instrumental in drawing students into the virtual space. When co-reflecting together, they discussed how to build upon what they developed as they worked to connect with students, particularly the seniors, given the typical rules of school (e.g., mandatory attendance, grading practices) no longer existed. They found themselves co-planning and co-teaching curriculum that was more relevant to students' needs. For example, they partnered with the economics teacher to develop a curriculum on personal finance and financial independence. This included topics on dealing with debt, estimating a realistic cost of living, and exploring a cost/benefit analysis of graduating from college—all aspects of the California History Social Science content standards (California Department of Education, 2017). Student feedback was positive. This collective "a-ha" experience provided a context to re-think their practice and the nature of their work. Stories like this demonstrate the value of making the time to co-reflect and co-learn in the development of meaningful academic work for and with students.

Once students were drawn to the online classroom, there was a realization by one mentor-teacher candidate team that academic lessons needed to shift as well. With their district communicating that this was a good time to bring their best teaching to the classroom, there was a collective understanding that learning needed to be *exciting*. This mentor and teacher candidates' funds of knowledge, enacted through funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Hogg & Volman, in press) played a critical role. In their sixth-grade classroom, they brainstormed an idea for "guest speaker Fridays." Having cultivated shared values and expertise around culturally responsive teaching practices, they began by having the mentor teacher's brother, a working artist on the East Coast, teach an art lesson to the class. Students responded favorably, leading to the development of a "what you need to know about transitioning to middle school" conversation with the teacher candidate's younger sister. Given that the sister recently completed middle school at an international school in Japan, the 6th graders asked more questions about Japan during this guest speaker session than they did about transitioning to middle school. Noting this dynamic, the teacher candidate adapted an existing Nearpod presentation as a collective virtual field trip. The slides focused both on traditional information like population, the role of religion in society, calligraphy, and gardens, as well as modern representations of her hometown, Tokyo (including 360-degree views). Inviting student questions, the teacher candidate was asked about food, anime, and the nature of advertising (based on all the billboards around Shibuya

Station). Students also noted similarities and differences between the U.S. and Japan. The teacher candidate commented that this experience engaged her students, sparked their curiosity, and allowed her to share her Japanese values, all while cultivating habits of inquiry and critical thinking skills congruent with social science. This story represents the kinds of innovations that came about as a result of mentor and teacher candidates acting on their funds of knowledge and funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Hogg & Volman, in press).

Dispatch

Given the types of experiences described above, we offer two possibilities that are germane to innovating in teacher education. First, having an authentic and meaningful relationship grounded in ongoing professional collaboration and action facilitates a novice's sense of belonging in the field. As we move beyond the immediate virtual context, creating explicit space for mentors and teacher candidates to identify, explore, and enact their collective funds of knowledge and funds of identity for the purposes of student engagement should be foregrounded (Turner & Blackburn, 2016) within the realm of the co-teaching model. To bolster shared understandings, we suggest mentor teachers and teacher candidates read, explore, and reflect on the funds of knowledge and funds of identity literature (see Appendix A for a list). Including these readings during mentor teachers' required training (a minimum of 10 hours), prior to their qualification as supervisors (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2015), and/or as part of the university's student teaching orientation are possibilities. Mentor teachers and teacher candidates can then have discussions in which they (a) reflect on their own life journeys in relation to their students, (b) relate their own language practices to the those of their students, and (c) remind themselves of the generational and cultural similarities and differences between their own literacy traditions and the those of their students (España & Herrera, 2020). Teacher education programs might then have teacher candidates design lessons inspired by these conversations as they make progress toward mastery of the Teacher Performance Expectations (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2016). Exercises which encourage co-learning and co-reflecting support the notion that the developing identity of a teacher is fundamentally social (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014).

Second, when we talk about student teaching in a co-teaching model, we identify co-planning, co-teaching, and co-assessing as the essential tasks (Friend et al., 2010; Stanuilis et al., 2019). Virtual learning created an opportunity for us to highlight the additional roles

co-learning and co-reflecting play in cultivating student engagement. We previously assumed these elements were a part of the student teaching experience, but we now feel that they need to be highlighted due to their potential to strengthen the mentor-mentee relationship itself (Canipe & Gunkel, 2020; Roegman & Kolman, 2020). To this end, we have already revamped our teacher candidate and mentor teacher orientations and courses in the fall to include co-learning and co-reflecting as valued practices. We recommend mentor teacher candidate teams read literature on the co-teaching model (see Appendix B) and engage in dialogue or role play on this topic, prior to beginning their work together. Exercises like this can cultivate shared understandings and values around individual funds of knowledge and identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014, Hogg & Volman, in press).

While we recognize that a return to a full in-person school day may limit our time to dialogue in the ways described above, our teacher candidates' stories provide insight into the value of co-learning and co-reflecting in enhancing student engagement. By experimenting with instruction in creative ways (e.g., inviting virtual guest speakers, using asynchronous activities, and maximizing the potential of learning platforms such as Google Classroom and Zoom), teaching teams generated additional learning opportunities for their students. The proliferation of virtual learning spaces that have come as a result of the current quarantine further expanded on-demand access to information and strategies. For example, as they co-reflect on student engagement, teacher candidates and their mentors can research solutions to classroom challenges in real time. Additionally, virtual meeting spaces can enable mentor teachers and teacher candidates to come together and discuss vital issues with each other and/or with the larger education community without traditional constraints on time and travel.

Conclusion

Mentoring in a sociocultural context of interruption and instability illuminated the contributions made by teacher candidates who drew from their funds of knowledge and identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014). We observed how these lived experiences strengthened both the mentor-teacher candidate relationship and student engagement (Vygotsky, 1978; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014) in the form of co-learning and co-reflecting (Canipe & Gunkel, 2020; Gunckel & Wood, 2015). By making the space to recognize and acknowledge the value of teachers' funds of knowledge and funds of identity (Hogg & Volman, in press; Navarro et al., 2019), teacher educators can help structure mentoring relationships that lead

to student engagement, teacher candidates' initial sense of professional belonging, and potentially, their longevity in the profession.

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Appendix A

Suggested Readings for funds of knowledge and funds of identity:

Esteban-Guitart, M., & Moll, L.C. (2014). Funds of identity: A new concept based on the funds of knowledge approach. *Culture & Psychology, 20*(1), 31-48.

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Appendix B

Suggested readings on the co-teaching model:

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