

# Strengthening Critical Conversations in the Teacher Residency: Mentor Professional Development

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**Abstract:** This study focused on mentors who worked with a university-based Educator Preparation Program (EPP) located in South Texas during the pilot of a teacher residency program. Our research aimed to explore the roles and behaviors of mentors working with teacher residents, with a particular focus on how the introduction of a critical conversation protocol influenced their profiles. Our goal was to increase the capacity for mentorship by strengthening and increasing the critical conversations that mentors had with teacher residents with the intention to inform our practice, grow our partnership, and refine tools that are necessary to effectively mentor teacher residents.

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## Introduction

This study focused on mentors who worked with a university-based Educator Preparation Program (EPP) located in south Texas during the pilot of a teacher residency program. Prior to the pilot, the EPP had a traditional model for teacher preparation which consisted of field-based experiences and student teaching in their final semester of their senior year of undergraduate studies. In the year this research was completed, the EPP piloted a teacher residency model that placed teacher candidates in a school for an entire school year with a highly qualified mentor teacher supervised by a site coordinator. Quarterly governance meetings led by the site coordinator with EPP, and school district personnel served as a place to discuss the teacher residency model and the strengths and challenges of the teacher residents based on mentor and site coordinator observations of their teaching and engagement in school and classroom activities. A critical feature of our teacher residency is that it is rooted in co-teaching models, which involve intentional opportunities for collaborative planning and teaching for the mentor and the teacher resident. Understanding the importance of the mentor role, the model included quarterly mentor trainings that were generatively designed based on data about teacher residents and mentors.

In this paper, we use the term teacher resident. We define our teacher residents as students who participate in the one-year teacher residency. The term teacher candidate is also used in this paper to refer to students who were not enrolled in the teacher residency program but are preparing to become a teacher. The term mentor is used to refer to the school-based educator working with university students in an EPP. The mentor could be working in the teacher residency model or the traditional model, but in this study, they are working with teacher residents. The site coordinator is the university-based educator who is working directly with the mentors and the teacher residents providing the link between the university and the school sites.

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One of the guiding principles for the transformation of the EPP was to systemize the selection and training of mentor teachers who work in the teacher residency. Considering the importance of interpersonal relationships and focusing on the selection criteria, the topic of the mentor training in this paper was intended to assist the mentors with the capacity to hold professional conversations and work collaboratively to achieve common teaching and learning goals for their teacher residents.

At the beginning of the teacher residency, the mentor training covered topics like co-teaching models, evaluating teacher residents using the EPP observation instrument, and was designed to orient the mentors to the teacher residency model. In the second semester of the teacher residency, the site coordinator, who is the third author, collaborated with another field-based professor and the associate dean to develop a model for situating the mentor training. Scenarios were developed to address the situations the mentors identified as challenging throughout the year. These scenarios were intended to offer the mentors a space for reflection and growth.

### **Context of Study**

The EPP partnered with the University-School Partnerships for the Renewal of Educator Preparation National Center (US PREP) to support the transformation to a teacher residency model. US PREP is a comprehensive, multi-organizational collaborative with the mission of attracting, training, and retaining high-quality, racially diverse teachers for underserved communities across the country (US PREP, 2019). US PREP delivers on-the-ground support and services to EPPs to create classroom-ready teachers and advance learning and innovation in teacher preparation.

This EPP is in the process of transformation of the clinical experience from two separate semesters to a one-year teacher residency. This study reports on using a critical conversation protocol that was introduced during professional development at the end of the first year of the one-year teacher residency pilot. The program traditionally provided two semesters of clinical experience. The first semester is a field-based experience where teacher candidates were in the field with a mentor teacher in their content area and grade level. The teacher candidates spent two days per week with the mentor teacher and experienced various levels of immersion in teaching. The traditional experience in the second semester included one semester with a mentor teacher, five days a week. The second semester model for the clinical experience was a gradual release, with the teacher candidate assuming full responsibility for the mentor teacher's classroom for a few weeks throughout the semester.

Following the traditional model, the mentor teachers were required to attend a yearly training delivered at the EPP's partnership conference. It was required to attend, and the mentor teacher training typically consisted of a one-hour session with mentor teachers who chose to attend a variety of conference session options. There is not an established routine; however, some mentor teachers have opportunities for some training at the beginning of the year for professional development, and the overall process is compliance-driven based on state education agency requirements, which require procedural tasks that will ensure compliance with our accrediting agency.

The teacher residency pilot was based on the developmental framework of University School Partnership for Renewing Educator Preparation (US PREP) that provides 14 components for high-quality teacher preparation. The focus of the renewal is to build strong partnerships with school districts to meet their staffing needs while placing teacher candidates into a one-year teacher resident position, which prepares them to be "day one ready" teachers. The pilot year represented in this paper included the mentor teachers from two local area school districts.

Mentor preparation for the teacher residency began with an orientation focused on requirements and compliance. Based on the job description, mentor teachers were expected to

attend training twice a semester, and orientation was considered the first training. While the training was intended to be generative and responsive, it also focused on filling a gap in understanding the new teacher residency model. The framework for the teacher residency focused on co-planning and co-teaching, a facet of mentoring that diverged from the traditional model. The initial effort to provide context for this model involved three interactive training modules on teacher residents coaching, co-teaching, and co-planning. While these were provided, there was no consistent feedback or discussion.

### **Problems of Practice**

This qualitative study aimed to develop the mentoring effectiveness for the mentors working with the teacher residents in a one-year teacher residency. As the EPP transformed its clinical experience, focusing on the shared expectations and decision-making process with the mentor teachers was critical. This study intended to inform our practice, grow our partnership, and refine the tools that are necessary to effectively mentor teacher residents.

In the context of the US PREP developmental framework (US PREP National Center, n.d.), the issue was identified through a process of self-evaluation conducted by the transformation leadership team, which included the authors of this study. As the team collectively assessed their own performance using the provided rubric, a consensus emerged that our program fell within the "developing" category for the specific indicator related to mentoring. We were particularly drawn to the indicator titled "TPPs and school districts co-select high-quality clinical educators/mentor teachers." This observation closely aligned with our existing mentor-teacher training protocols.

In response to this assessment, the leadership team established a clear objective for the Educator Preparation Program (EPP) – to progress towards the "sustaining" level on this indicator. This advanced level entails implementing mentor training sessions occurring quarterly or even more frequently, emphasizing teacher resident performance data as a guiding force. This approach has the added benefit of facilitating ongoing improvements and updates in both P-12 programming and EPP programming. These enhancements encompass various aspects such as the duration and settings of clinical experiences, coursework, mentor teacher selection procedures, and preparation processes.

This transformative shift in our approach signifies a transition from anecdotal practices to data-driven decision-making. It underscores the central role of data in steering the direction of mentor training, ensuring that our efforts are consistently guided by evidence and aimed at enhancing the overall effectiveness of our program. This study's research question is: How did the nature of professional conversations between mentors and teacher residents change after implementing a critical conversation protocol?

### **Literature Review**

Mentor teachers play a pivotal role in teacher preparation programs, and their effectiveness is a subject of considerable research interest. This inquiry aims to shed light on the collaborative efforts between school partners and an EPP in selecting, training, and assessing mentor teachers, emphasizing their critical role in mentoring teacher residents. In the context of this transformation, the EPP and teacher residents collaborate with experienced mentor teachers who have been intentionally chosen and rigorously trained to guide the professional development of these teacher residents (US PREP National Center, n.d.). Beyond their foundational role, mentor teachers also receive training on implementing co-teaching strategies, which are integral to the program.

Co-teaching, a pedagogical approach primarily associated with special education settings (Friend, 2008; Kamens, 2007; Murawski, 2006; Solis et al., 2012), has garnered attention due to its potential benefits for both teachers and teacher candidates (Graziano & Navarrete, 2012; Scruggs et

al., 2007; Tschida et al., 2016). Notably, a study demonstrated that teacher candidates in classrooms where co-teaching was employed outperformed their peers in traditional single-teacher or mentor teacher-led classrooms (Bacharach et al., 2010).

### **Co-Teaching in a One-Year Teacher Residency**

One-year teacher residency programs have gained prominence as a dynamic approach to teacher preparation, offering teacher residents an intensive, immersive experience in P-12 classrooms. Within these programs, co-teaching emerged as a valuable pedagogical strategy that enhances the learning experience for both teacher residents and students. There are benefits and challenges associated with the role and effectiveness of co-teaching within one-year teacher residency programs.

Mentoring plays a pivotal role in the development of teacher residents, offering guidance, support, and valuable insights as they embark on their teaching journey. The literature on teacher resident mentoring reveals various mentoring approaches and models employed by school districts and teacher preparation programs. This program focused on traditional mentoring. Traditional mentoring, often called one-on-one mentoring, is a well-established model in teacher preparation programs (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Pike & Carli, 2020). In this model, a veteran teacher, known as the mentor, is paired with a teacher resident, providing individualized guidance and support throughout the teacher resident's clinical experience. This form of mentoring offers personalized attention and the opportunity for a deep mentor-mentee relationship, fostering a sense of belonging and professional growth (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Mentor teachers grapple with the complexities of their roles in teacher preparation (Feiman-Nemser et al., 1992; Gardiner & Robinson, 2009; Santoli & Martin, 2012). The evolving expectations and the absence of adequate training exacerbate the challenges mentors face, particularly when their role has become a deeply ingrained, unexamined "fossilized behavior" that has persisted throughout history (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 63). An example of this entrenched behavior is the misconception that hosting a teacher candidate in their classroom is a mere favor to the teacher preparation program. This notion fails to acknowledge the educational significance of clinical placements in the teacher residents' training in learning how to teach, reducing them to mere visits and mentors to hosts or hostesses. This misunderstanding hamper mentors' ability to grasp the educative aspects of mentoring, resulting in teacher residents being placed without deliberate learning opportunities and meaningful, practical experiences (Feiman-Nemser et al., 1992; Tomlinson, 1995).

To address these challenges and foster effective mentoring, it is imperative to recognize and cater to the needs of mentor teachers. Doing so can offer valuable insights for preparation programs seeking to establish collaborative relationships that revitalize the mentoring role through comprehensive preparation and sustained support. Despite the prevalence of mentoring programs in school districts for new teacher induction (Bullough, 2012), mentor training to work with teacher residents remains subpar, with slightly over half of mentor teachers reporting a lack of formal preparation (Hall et al., 2008). This deficiency in preparation directly impacts their interactions with teacher residents, who often present complex interpersonal and professional challenges (Gardiner & Robinson, 2009; Hall et al., 2008; Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006; López Pastor, Monjas, & Manrique, 2011; Norman, 2011). Although some studies suggest that training may lead to more effective mentoring (Clarke et al., 2012; Killian & Wilkins, 2009), the existing research often relies on anecdotal evidence and is deficient in empirical support (Dever, Hager, & Klein, 2003; Korthagen et al., 2006).

The collaboration between school partners and universities is crucial in ensuring the effectiveness of mentor teachers in teacher preparation programs. This partnership involves the careful selection and training of mentors and the incorporation of co-teaching strategies into the

instructional process. Research indicates that such efforts can yield significant benefits for teachers, teacher residents, and students. The literature on teacher resident mentoring reveals a rich tapestry of mentoring models and approaches, each with unique characteristics and advantages. Traditional mentorship offers personalized guidance while co-mentoring taps into diverse expertise. Co-teaching in one-year teacher residency programs represents an innovative and practical approach to teacher preparation. It capitalizes on collaborative learning, enhances support structures, models effective instruction, and ultimately contributes to improved student outcomes. While challenges exist, careful planning and attention to role clarification can help mitigate these issues. As the EPP continues its transformation, co-teaching within one-year residencies offers a valuable strategy to prepare the next generation of educators.

## **Methodology**

This study aimed to explore the roles and behaviors of mentors working with teacher residents, with a particular focus on how the introduction of a critical conversation protocol influenced their mentoring profiles. The research utilized a mixed-methods approach that combined surveys, pre- and post-assessments, and video recordings of mentor training sessions.

### ***Participants***

The study involved mentor teachers who were actively engaged with teacher residents in the pilot year of a one-year teacher residency program. The convenience sample for this research comprised 11 mentor teachers from three separate schools in two different school districts. The selection criteria for participants aligned with the job description for cooperating teachers (see Appendix 1) and included the following prerequisites: a minimum of three years of teaching experience; training on the state evaluation system; and adherence to the state code of ethics for educators. Additionally, mentor teachers were expected to possess effective interpersonal and communication skills, as demonstrated by: maintaining positive relationships with colleagues; modeling respect for students; exhibiting leadership skills; establishing positive interactions with families and community members; demonstrating active involvement within the school campus; providing honest and constructive feedback while addressing concerns professionally; and identifying areas for improvement. Exclusion criteria included mentor teachers working on different campuses or not actively mentoring teacher residents. Informed consent was obtained from all invited mentors, and their participation in the research was contingent on their consent.

### ***Data Collection***

Data collection involved multiple instruments: (1.) Survey: Participants were administered a survey before the mentor training session. All participants completed this survey. (2.) Mentor Teacher Profile: A Mentor Teacher Profile instrument was used to collect additional information about participants. (3.) Pre- and Post-Assessment: Participants were given a pre- and post-assessment during the training session. Both assessments were designed to assess their responses to critical conversation scenarios. (4.) Video Recording: The entire mentor training session was video recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis. Data collection occurred during the second semester of the school year, focusing on mentor training sessions. The scenario question used in the pre- and post-assessments was: "There are a few students in the class who are struggling with behavior expectations during the Teacher Resident's lessons. What would you do or say to support the Teacher Resident with this issue?"

### ***Data Analysis***

The data analysis process consisted of several steps. The final mentor training session was recorded and subsequently transcribed. Data sources were categorized as either "pre" or "post" and identified by participant. Researchers examined participants' written and verbal responses to the critical conversation scenarios before and after the introduction of the critical conversations protocol. An additional analysis focused on identifying emergent themes by reviewing coded excerpts for each mentor, thus allowing for the identification of overarching patterns in mentor responses. The research methodology aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how mentor roles and behaviors evolved in response to the critical conversation protocol, ultimately contributing valuable insights into effective mentoring strategies for teacher residents.

### **Findings**

One objective of our research was to study the change in the nature of professional conversations between mentors and teacher residents after implementing a critical conversation protocol. Six of the mentors from one specific school district out of the 11 mentors included in this study attended the professional development on critical conversations. All six mentors completed the pre-question scenario before the professional development began. Four of the six mentors completed the post-question scenario. Through a blend of verbal responses during the training and written pre- and post-question scenario responses, we derived essential insights into mentors' perspectives and approaches to managing critical conversations with their candidates. Three major themes were identified: candidate-centered strategies, district or school-centered strategies, and professionalism in communication.

#### **Candidate-Centered Strategies**

One strategy a mentor emphasized was the importance of offering limited feedback, suggesting sharing only one area of reinforcement and one of refinement when having a critical conversation about teaching with the candidate. The purpose is to avoid overwhelming the candidate and provide a focused area for improvement. Another strategy shared was to engage candidates with questions. A notable shift was observed between pre and post question responses in this area. Post-training, there was a more significant inclination towards initiating critical conversations by asking candidates questions about their lesson's outcome. From the data, three of the four mentors in the post-question scenario responses chose this method, as opposed to only one in the pre-question scenario response.

#### **District or School-Centered Strategies**

Reinforcing Established Protocols was mentioned during verbal responses and both the pre and post question scenario responses. Mentors cited the need to align with established behavioral strategies such as *Capturing Kids Hearts (CKH)* and existing classroom behavior expectations. Before the training, responses were generic like, "Remember to continue with the classroom expectations." After the training, responses became more specific with mentors stating that they would remind candidates about the comprehensive CKH practices and strategies. There was an increased emphasis post-training on specifying strategies to candidates during critical conversations. Mentors not only suggested reminding candidates about these strategies but also emphasized the importance of modeling them. The idea is to show, not just tell. Two of the four mentors named specific CKH strategies such as the social contract, using hand signals as a non-verbal reminder, and using their questioning script to help students self-regulate. Another strategy

mentioned was that of the use of proximity, either by moving closer to the student or moving the student to the front, as a method to manage behavioral issues.

### **Professionalism in Communication**

Positive reassurance, open communication, and collaborative planning were all shared by mentors as important for critical conversations. Mentors acknowledged the significance of positivity in their communication. Responses suggested assuring candidates that perfection isn't always achievable and reinforcing the idea of mutual problem-solving. Mentors stressed maintaining open communication lines and ensuring candidates felt comfortable reaching out for support or discussions. Another essential element of the professional mentor-candidate relationship was the collaborative effort in reviewing lesson plans, ensuring alignment with best practices, and seeking mutual feedback.

In the post question response, there was a marked trend amongst mentors to conclude critical conversations with clear, actionable steps. This approach aims to ensure that the feedback doesn't remain theoretical but gets transformed into practice. One mentor highlighted the immediate applicability of a new technique by suggesting, "Let's try this technique tomorrow and see how the students react to this type of strategy." Mentors expressed gratitude for the introduced conversation scripting and guidelines, signifying a felt need for structured communication methods. One mentor candidly admitted to past struggles in framing conversations, stating, "I tend to struggle. I do. I struggle with what to say and how to say it. So I love this and I can't wait. I'm definitely going to be using these scripting, the conversation guidelines." Another mentor confirmed the utility and intention to use the newly introduced protocol by mentioning, "I will surely use the five steps scripting." The findings confirm that professional development on critical conversations not only provided mentors in this study with a structured approach to engage with candidates but also addressed their past struggles in effective communication. The emphasis on actionable feedback and the widespread acceptance of the introduced scripting and guidelines demonstrates the training's positive impact.

### **Conclusion and Implications for Teacher Preparation**

After working with our mentor teachers over the year, our study continues to confirm the pivotal role that mentor teachers play in preservice teacher development. As stated in the literature (Feiman-Nemser et al., 1992; Gardiner & Robinson, 2009; Santoli & Martin, 2012), our mentor teachers continue to grapple with the nuanced and multifaceted complexities that drive the collaboration, critique, and the success of our teacher residents. Our findings support that providing professional development that is targeted to specific mentor needs as well as understanding their unique profiles increases the capacity of the mentor to work and collaborate effectively with their teacher resident. Therefore, providing professional development opportunities such as scenarios grounded in the problems of practice that are emerging at different school sites is beneficial to mentors as they navigate how to support their teacher residents. Through the use concrete examples of specific issues at our school sites and a critical conversations protocol, mentors are provided opportunities to craft feedback and model responses that they were then able to translate to other conversations that they had with their teacher residents.

Many facets of the year-long teacher residency model hold promise for enhancing the future of teacher preparation. The year-long model allows teacher residents to experience the school year in its entirety, as well as providing them with more teaching experience with a highly-qualified mentor in a classroom unlike the traditional one-semester student teaching experience. Co-teaching fosters collaboration, support, and effective modeling while positively impacting student learning outcomes. To maximize co-teaching benefits, teacher preparation programs should focus on role

clarification, adequate resource allocation, and fostering a reflective mindset among teacher residents. Mentor professional development meets mentors at their specific needs and will allow them to work more effectively with their teacher residents while providing them the skills and support to have and maintain crucial conversations. Governance meetings providing additional time build mutually beneficial relationships with school partners. The deep dive into data and the problems of practice allow EPPs and school districts to work together on providing solutions and support. This benefits both the EPP to help strengthen their teacher preparation programs and districts who will hire the teacher residents as beginning teachers. Moreover, ongoing research and evaluation are necessary to refine the teacher residency model to ensure its effectiveness.

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