

Future-Focused Mentoring: Discovering Our Living Contradictions

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Purpose: This self-study illuminates the living contradictions that a teacher educator experienced when her conventional teacher training methods were resisted by mentor teachers.

Methodology/Design: The researcher adopted LaBoskey's (2004) self-study design, as this work was self-initiated and focused, improvement-aimed, interactive, included multiple qualitative methods, and attended to trustworthiness via critical friendship.

Findings: The teacher educator and critical friend's research space of dialogue revealed three themes that enabled their professional growth: (a) mentoring as craftsmanship, (b) future-focused mentoring, and (c) mentor teacher resistance.

Research Limitations: Findings were grounded in a single iteration of a mentor teacher professional learning workshops and collaborative reflections with a critical friend.

Originality: This self-study presents the process and outcomes of a critical friendship to interrogate a teacher educator's living contradictions around mentoring and professional development. This critical friendship elucidates how future-focused mentoring (Larsen et al., 2023) can disrupt the traditional clinical teacher education hierarchy.

Full paper

Purpose

This study responds to Zeichner's (2021) call to challenge the traditional triad prevalent in U.S. clinical teacher practice where faculty expertise is valued above mentor teachers' and student teachers' experiences, resulting in fragmented, impersonal teacher preparation practices that hardly consider the personal and relational nature of teaching and mentoring. As two faculty members at different points in our careers (Author 1, mid-career TESOL doctoral lecturer, Author 2, senior faculty, professor of educational and organizational leadership), we aim to provide a "deeper examination of the power and knowledge relationships that exist within partnerships" (Zeichner, 2021, p. 3) to illustrate how an affirming dialogic space can be transformative.

Author 1 designed and facilitated a series of five professional learning workshops (topics: roles and responsibilities, co-teaching, coaching, low inference note-taking and feedback, reflection) for a multidisciplinary group of experienced P-12 mentor teachers. This self-study of teacher education practice (LaBoskey, 2004) describes a critical friendship (Costa & Kallick, 1993) which enabled Author 1 to explore the living contradictions (Whitehead, 1989) that she experienced when her conventional teacher training methods were resisted by mentor teachers. Author 1 was prompted to revise her interpretations of her facilitative practice, and both Authors 1 and 2 reaffirmed our commitment to "resisting complicity in repeating discourses of higher education" and "taking back control of the discourse" (SRHE International Conference Call for Papers, 2025) as we grappled with the work together.

Methodology

Author 1 applied LaBoskey's (2004) self-study criteria as this study's design, as the work was self-initiated and self-focused, improvement-aimed, interactive, included multiple qualitative methods, and attended to trustworthiness. We highlight our ongoing dialogue as teacher educators-researchers to demonstrate Author 1's coming-to-know process (Hamilton et al., 2020) and interpretation shifts for her self-study. Author 2 adopted Costa and Kallick's (1993) critical friend practices of building trust by taking a non-evaluative stance, being an active listener, giving informative feedback, and positioning herself as an ally.

Our research question is: How does a dialogic space within a critical friendship function to disrupt the traditional clinical practice power structure? To address this question, the following data sources were used to illuminate the critical friendship process. These include email exchanges and online conferring notes and memos across 10 months (July 2024 to April 2025). Dialogues were grounded in Author 1's mentor teacher training workshops in Fall 2022 (September to December 2022) and subsequent critical friendship data analysis review, resource sharing, and reflection (July 2024 to April 2025). Data from the workshops included four two-hour recorded Zoom sessions and one asynchronous learning task. Author 1 used a thematic analysis approach for data analysis. This process included getting to know the data via extensive and iterative review of sources, noting keywords and phrases, descriptive, inductive, and deductive coding, and identifying and refining themes (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014).

Findings

The pivotal moments in our "research space of dialogue" revealed three emergent themes: (a) mentoring as craftsmanship, (b) future-focused mentoring, and (c) mentor teacher resistance. In the full paper, we will explore these themes with examples from our critical friendship dialogues. However, with limited space, we describe our critical friendship process.

Our critical friendship developed between July and September 2024 via multiple email exchanges followed by Zoom meetings from October 2024 through February, 2025. Email exchanges included discussions on future-focused mentoring (FfM) (Larsen et al., 2023) and Sennett's (2016) notion of craftsmanship in relation to Author 1's initial interpretations of her mentor teacher training facilitation practice. Discussions about FfM and craftsmanship guided Author 1 to engage in deductive coding to discover whether elements of FfM were present in her practice. Deductive coding deepened Author 1's understanding of mentor teachers' contributions and helped her understand the multidimensionality of her facilitative practice. Author 2 used a scaffolded approach, attending to Author 1's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) to help her consider mentor teachers' contributions in a new way and feel a sense of urgency to communicate potentially disruptive clinical practices.

Limitations

Although findings are grounded in a single iteration of a mentor teacher professional learning series and 10 months of collaborative reflections, this study presents a clear critical friendship process to promote future-focused mentoring.

Originality

This self-study presents the process and outcomes of a critical friendship to interrogate a teacher educator's living contradictions around mentoring and professional development. This critical friendship elucidates how future-focused mentoring may be used as a tool to disrupt and transform clinical practice so teacher educators at all levels (professor, doctoral lecturer, teacher educator, mentor teacher) can contribute to shared professional growth.