

Coaching Cubed: Mentor Teachers' Perspectives on the Exponential Nature of Supporting Teacher Candidates During Uncertain Times

Mark Helmsing, Audra Parker, Holly Glaser, Kristien Zenkov, and Andrew Porter

George Mason University

Abstract: Engaging in mentoring for teacher candidates radically changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in an exponential increase in the nature of mentor teachers' activities and roles. In this study, we examine how mentoring practices changed during the pandemic in our university's elementary and secondary education programs. We analyzed mentor teachers' responses to a survey designed to examine mentor teachers' beliefs and conceptions about mentoring. Using a third space framework (Gutiérrez, 2008; Zeichner, 2010), we found shifts in mentor teachers' practices of mentoring, and shifts in mentor teachers' conceptions and beliefs about mentoring, went beyond traditionally received notions of mentoring. We posit the pandemic brought about a shift from instrumental to development conceptions of mentoring for some mentor teachers. We conclude by calling for reconceptualizing how we represent the practice of mentoring within our programs in light of the effects of the exponential nature of supporting teaching candidates during the pandemic.

Keywords: mentoring, School-University partnership, teacher education, clinical experiences

NAPDS Nine Essentials Addressed:

- Essential 3: Professional Learning and Leading – A PDS is a context for continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry.
- Essential 4: Reflection and Innovation – A PDS makes a shared commitment to reflective practice, responsive innovation, and generative knowledge.
- Essential 7: Shared Governance Structures – A PDS is built upon shared, sustainable governance structures that promote collaboration, foster reflection, and honor and value all participants' voices.
- Essential 8: Boundary-Spanning Roles – A PDS creates space for, advocates for, and supports college/university and P-12 faculty to operate in well-defined, boundary-spanning roles that transcend institutional settings.

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When the spread of COVID-19 in mid-March 2020 prompted most institutions of higher education to pivot to remote, online modes of instruction, the nature of university-based teacher preparation changed seemingly overnight. Unlike many other academic units within a university, teacher education programs were forced to contend with numerous external concerns, such as monitoring the operational plans of partnering school divisions, deliberating how to modify and redirect heretofore face-to-face clinical teaching experiences in schools, and working with mentor teachers and school leaders through new uncertainties and anxieties that shifted daily. Within this array of challenges, one particular aspect of teacher education warranted immediate attention and consideration and caused significant consternation, given our collaborative boundary-spanning structure: specifically, we wondered how mentoring and being mentored was changing with the uncertainties and intensification of teaching remotely, virtually, and in hybrid formats throughout different points of the pandemic.

For those of us dedicated to, and working in, school-university partnerships and Professional Development Schools (PDSs)—and thus unconditionally committed to honoring the work and roles of our school-based teacher educator partners and to rich clinical experiences—these mentoring capacities and activities were central to our teacher candidates' development and success. We ultimately determined that the nature of mentors' activities and roles had not just increased but had grown exponentially. In this article, we (five university-based teacher educators) investigate how mentoring practices and relationships have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic in our elementary and secondary education programs.

Purpose of Study & Review of Literature

Our consideration of the shifting nature of mentoring practices during the COVID-19 pandemic is rooted in several research bases. These include studies of mentoring models and the evolutions of mentors' roles and examinations of the challenges mentor teachers have faced as both classroom practitioners and mentors, including the urgent conversion to virtual and hybrid instructional modes. Below, we explore the body of research literature for these topics to ground our study.

Evolutions in mentors' roles

This study was inspired in part by recent calls from education policymakers, teacher education scholars, and our professional associations, who recognize that effective preservice teacher education must be based on meaningful clinical experiences (AACTE, 2012; ATE, 2015; Feuer et al., 2013). In response, we and a growing number of teacher educators are lobbying for, living out, and scrutinizing our boundary-spanning capacities across school and university contexts. Understandably, while such shifts in mentor capacities are supported by the now long-standing third space orientation and PDS structures, the circumstances of the pandemic and the unavoidable impact on teacher education made for substantial, if perhaps temporary, shifts in the nature of the mentoring of preservice teachers.

The lexicon of the American Association for Teacher Educators (AACTE) defines mentor teachers as “the primary school-based teacher educators for teacher candidates completing clinical practice or internship” (AACTE, 2018). Mentor teachers play a pivotal role in guiding teacher candidates' transition into the field and their translation of theory to practice

(Butler & Cuenca, 2012; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Indeed, mentor teachers are considered “experts of practice” by their university-based teacher educator counterparts (Butler & Cuenca, 2012, p. 297). Teacher candidates identify mentor teachers as the most critical factor in their professional development, and as such, they play a central role in teacher preparation (Hobson, Ashby, et al., 2009; Valencia, Martin, et al., 2009; Zeichner & Gore, 1990).

Mentor teachers vary widely in their approach to the vital work of mentoring teacher candidates. This variability is a predictable byproduct of numerous factors, including inconsistent and haphazard mentor selection processes, approaches to mentor preparation varying from non-existent to credit-bearing professional development courses, and an overall lack of understanding of the critical role mentors play in teacher candidate professional development. When asked, mentor teachers have described their roles in supporting teacher candidates in such diverse terms as coaches, counselors, supporters, trouble-shooters, parental figures, to name only a few (Boreen, Johnson, et al., 2000; Richter et al., 2013). In their study of mentoring, Butcher and Cuenca (2012) typified the roles mentors enact during the culminating student teaching internship, ranging from instructional coaches to socializing agents to emotional support systems.

Feiman-Nemser (1998) suggested the notion of educative mentoring as a means for explaining the complex and optimal role of a mentor teacher. She defined educative mentoring as helping “novices learn to teach and develop the skills and dispositions to continue learning in and from their practice” (p. 66). While emphasizing the role of intentional development of school-based teacher educators as educative mentors, she highlighted their “combination of showing and telling, asking and listening in helping novice teachers learn” (p. 72). Educative mentors engage alongside their mentees in the learning process as “co-thinkers” and “co-learners.”

More recently, scholars have worked to conceptualize other philosophical orientations mentor teachers bring to their work. van Ginkel and colleagues (2016) studied the interaction of mentoring motives—or why teachers engage in the act of mentoring—with mentoring conceptions, which are mentors’ internal beliefs about mentoring. Based on their literature review, van Ginkel and colleagues (2016) offer two primary approaches to mentoring—instrumental and developmental—noting that mentors likely move within a continuum between these two approaches and can hold beliefs indicative of both sources simultaneously. An instrumental conception of mentoring suggests, mentors describe their mentoring efforts as a top-down power dynamic concerned with giving teacher candidates the fundamentals of teaching, encouraging replication of the mentor’s teaching, and emphasizing task completion (Graham, 2006; Orland-Barak & Klein, 2005). Mentors conceptualizing mentoring via a developmental orientation embrace a more collaborative, reflective learning approach (Graham, 2006; Orland-Barak & Klein, 2005). This orientation, much like Feiman-Nemser’s notion of educative mentoring, emphasizes a co-learning, co-constructed approach to learning to teach, whereas instrumental mentoring mirrors that which is more like a teacher-directed orientation to teaching (Donche & Van Petegem, 2011).

While the research literature on mentors’ roles during the pandemic is for the most part still in production, the outcomes of our own examinations echo the findings of other scholars’ inquiries, suggesting that the circumstances of the pandemic have democratized mentor teachers’ and interns’ roles and uniquely merged and aligned their learning curves, primarily related to virtual pedagogies (Barnhart, 2020; Canipe & Gunkel, 2020). Pandemic mentoring practices have been oriented toward a collaborative construction of virtual pedagogies, rather than a

traditional expert-to-novice exchange of content knowledge and communicating this information (Hoffman, Svrcek, et al., 2019). And, while it may be impossible to determine intentionality in mentors' efforts or causality in the impact on new teachers' practices, scholars have noted how mentoring practices during this pandemic have positively affected teacher candidates' senses of professional belonging, and, potentially, their longevity in the teaching profession (Walker & Ardell, 2020).

Teaching challenges during the pandemic

Classroom teachers have encountered not one but a quickly evolving set of challenges, including mentors, mentees, and their PK-12 students accessing and learning to use new forms of technology. These constituents of schools have also faced existential questions related to what it means to teach and learn both virtually and face-to-face during the pandemic when issues of engagement, achievement, and development are suddenly in doubt and must be considered anew as our teaching practices rapidly change.

As well, since the onset of the pandemic and now—as of this writing—fourteen months later, numerous teacher preparation programs reported suspending their involvement with the clinical elements of their teacher education efforts (Moorhouse, 2020). Concerned with how several states waived clinical requirements and suspended clinical experiences and placements for teacher candidates during the spring and fall 2020 semesters (AACTE, 2020)—a move that we saw as isolating our mentor teachers, stunting their own and teacher candidates' development of effective online pedagogies, and hindering our consideration of virtual teacher education and mentoring practices—we met extensively to discuss how to continue offering these clinical elements across all program stages. Ultimately, the challenge of continuing these experiences presented unexpected pedagogical opportunities for teacher candidates, mentor teachers, and university-based teacher educators to rethink aspects of clinical teacher education, including the chance to integrate new technologies and virtually-based pedagogies into our instruction (Ellis et al., 2020; Zenkov et al., 2021).

Seemingly overnight, beginning in March 2020, almost all PK-12 classroom teachers had to urgently consider ways to convert their instruction from face-to-face to online modes. Whereas traditional mentoring practices might focus on providing scaffolded “rehearsals” or “practice spaces” where teacher candidates could develop pedagogical “core practices” (Grossman et al., 2019) and “pedagogical content knowledge” (PCK) (Shulman, 2005), the turn to virtual instruction necessitated an additional consideration of developing teacher candidates' and mentors' technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). Similar to the research on the challenges faced by classroom and mentor teachers during the pandemic, there is now only a small but growing body of literature on how classroom and mentor teachers adapted their TPACK to meet the demands of the pandemic. Without this robust research base and mentor expertise in TPACK-informed virtual instruction, the turn to online modes added yet another complex layer to the already exponential nature of mentoring in a pandemic.

Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical perspectives as applied to teacher education—and, by extension, to clinical experiences and the roles of mentors—are grounded in the explicit acknowledgment that the majority of our field's work has long been accomplished in elementary and secondary classrooms by veteran teachers serving in almost invisible school-based teacher educator and

mentor roles. Echoing the work and reflecting the stances of numerous other practitioners and scholars operating in school-university and PDS settings, we employed the concept of “third space” to develop and examine the mentoring roles and structures in our teacher education efforts. This notion recognizes how we, teacher candidates, and our programs’ school-based mentors might increasingly “live across” school and university settings to effectively engage in clinically-centered teacher education work (Gutiérrez, 2008).

The notion of third space was borrowed from the post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha (cited in Rutherford, 1990) and also has bases in hybridity theory (Soja, 1996), which recognizes that individuals draw on multiple discourses and cultures to understand and respond to phenomena in given contexts (Rochielle & Carpenter, 2015). This construct also appreciates that functioning in a middle ground, between multiple sets of experiences and points of view, can assist members of a given community of individuals with roles in different but related institutions to perceive constructive options and existing constraints of current structures. A third space orientation intends to bridge the cultures of the university and PK-12 schools (Cuenca, Schmeichel, et al., 2011), enabling mentors and university instructors to reconceptualize their roles.

McDonough (2014) extended the application of the concept of third space beyond these structural and role considerations, suggesting that this orientation allows for what Zeichner (2010) terms a “shift in the epistemology of teacher education” as well as a shared consideration of pedagogical practices. The knowledge base for teaching strategies is collaboratively and iteratively reconstructed (Klein, Taylor, et al., 2013). This notion also influenced our consideration of technology tools to supplant and enhance traditional, observation-focused experiences, as well as our efforts to develop boundary-spanning roles for ourselves (university-based teacher educators at various points on career continua), our veteran teacher project partners, and the teacher candidates and youths involved in our project (Burns & Badiali, 2020).

Methodology

Our research team designed a qualitative study to identify, describe, and share mentor teachers’ experiences and sense-making of mentoring practices as affected by the shifts in the nature of their work during the pandemic. Using survey data, we generated analytically-shaped descriptions of mentor teachers’ beliefs and ideas about their practice. We engaged in iterative coding of these descriptions to identify particular distinctions among the different accounts mentor teachers provided about how they conceptualized their beliefs and ideas about mentoring. We then analyzed these codes to note particularly insightful qualities relevant to our field to understand better how mentor teacher practices—and the ideas behind such practices—have exponentially changed during these uncertain times. This section describes both the contexts of our program in which the mentoring occurred and the methods we employed for this study.

The Context of Mentoring in the Elementary Education Program

The Mason Elementary PDS Program has a rich history of clinical teacher preparation based on the tenets of the Professional Development School (PDS) model. Our Pathways to Partnership model establishes mutually beneficial partnerships between school-based teacher educators and administrators and creates three ‘paths’ for collaboration among stakeholders: *partner schools*, *clinical practice schools*, and *collaborative inquiry schools* (Parker, Parsons, et al., 2016). Partner schools support five to six early field hours students each semester, whereas clinical practice and collaborative inquiry schools support semester-long and yearlong interns.

All sites host site-based university courses infused with real-time fieldwork. This responsive framework allows schools to engage in clinical teacher preparation and PDSs with the necessary flexibility to respond to our partners' changing contextual needs.

The Mason Elementary PDS Network includes over 25 elementary schools across multiple districts in the Northern Virginia region. Teacher candidates in the Mason Elementary PDS program are placed for early fieldwork, practicum, and internship in one of our PDS sites. Each PDS site is supported by school- and university-based teacher educators in specific roles, including a university facilitator, a site facilitator, and a mentor teacher. The Mason Elementary PDS Program orients school and university-based stakeholders to support the shared mission of the partnership with ongoing professional development, ongoing communication, advisory groups, and monthly meetings.

As noted in the research literature, mentor teachers, particularly those supporting the internship experience, are the most critical factor in a teacher candidate's professional development. Thus, intentional mentor teacher preparation and selection are core practices of the elementary program. This preparation includes engaging mentors in the design and implementation of initial and advanced mentor training and ongoing mentor teacher discussions held monthly at each PDS site with university facilitators. While both the training and the meetings include logistical information aimed at preparing mentors to work with teacher candidates in our program, the primary focus is on essential skills in effective mentoring (e.g., identifying attributes of effective mentors, co-teaching, navigating difficult conversations).

The Context of Mentoring in the Secondary Education Program

The Mason Secondary Education (SEED) Program consists of five disciplinary concentrations working together to prepare secondary educators to teach at the middle and high school levels in mathematics, science, English language arts, social studies, and computer science. NAPDS' "Nine Essentials" (NAPDS, 2021) inform the clinically-rich continuum of experiences, evolving in complexity from exploratory observations in early program coursework to a focused co-teaching partnership in the advanced subject-specific teaching methods course, and culminating in a semester-long student teaching internship.

The structure for these school-based clinical experiences includes 16 partner schools (eight middle and eight high schools) in which the program's teacher candidates engage in co-teaching experiences with both middle and high school mentor teachers. Each partner school is assigned a university-based teacher educator and a school-based teacher educator to recruit, identify, and support mentor teachers to work with the program's teacher candidates. Together, the school-based teacher educator and the university-based teacher educator facilitate the clinical experiences in a partnership model that mobilizes a cadre of mentor teachers each fall and spring semester to mentor the program's teacher candidates.

Like the Mason Elementary PDS Program, the Mason SEED Program offers initial and advanced mentor training and ongoing mentor teacher support conducted by the school-based teacher educator and university-based teacher educator in each partner school. Mentor teachers are also increasingly involved in university-based teacher education coursework. While the program is growing more opportunities for mentor teachers to span the boundaries of their mentoring outside of their school-based classrooms, the majority of mentoring experiences—especially those discussed in this study—still occur in the school-based classroom contexts.

Design of Study

All mentors in both the elementary and secondary education programs who supervised graduate teacher candidates in the Spring 2020, Fall 2020, and/or Spring 2021 semesters were invited to participate in this study. This study is part of a broader, ongoing, longitudinal study occurring in four phases. This manuscript focuses on data generated during Phase One of the study, in which all mentors were invited to respond to an Initial Short Survey. Survey follow-up interviews, to be conducted in Summer 2021, will comprise Phase Two. Phases Three and Four will consist of sending a Follow-Up Short Survey in Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 and completing a new round of interviews with selected mentors. Below we describe the collection and analysis of data generated during Phase One.

Data Collection and Analysis

In the spring semester of 2021, our research team invited 100 mentor teachers in the elementary education program and 56 mentor teachers in the secondary education program to participate in the Initial Short Survey for Phase One. Forty-five mentor teachers across both programs consented to participate in the study; 12 respondents did not complete the entire survey, and their responses were eliminated from coding consideration. Thus, 33 mentor teacher responses were included in this study for an overall and identical program-specific response rate of 21%. Of these 33, twenty-one were elementary education mentor teachers, and 12 were secondary education mentors. They represented five different school divisions and 22 schools, including 12 elementary and ten middle and high schools.

The survey consisted of 23 questions, 11 of which were demographic questions such as years of teaching experience, current teaching setting, and the number of candidates mentored (Appendix A). The remaining 12 questions were open-response and asked mentors to reflect on their experiences and relationships with teacher candidates during the pandemic. Below we focus our analysis on the open-ended questions, specifically those related to mentors' perceptions of mentoring before and during the pandemic. These questions included, "What elements of mentoring have stayed the same for you thus far during the pandemic?" and "What elements of mentoring changed for the better (or were negatively impacted) thus far during the pandemic?" Additional questions focused on mentors' prior and current conceptions of mentoring and their beliefs around the attributes of an effective mentor.

To analyze mentor teachers' survey responses, we used content and thematic analysis to code the mentor teacher surveys inductively and identified several recurring themes (Richards, 2014). First, we grouped questions by topic. Two members from the team were assigned to each group of survey questions to code individually. This arrangement enabled each researcher pair to develop familiarity with the survey data. After each individual coded the responses line-by-line, the assigned researcher partners met to share and explain codes and devise a master code list. With this list, the researcher pair re-read and re-coded each question together to either confirm or reject the first individual reading. The researcher pairs were able to analyze and sort codes into categories used to detect consistent and overarching themes for the survey data, which allowed the entire research team to meet and discuss how best to illustrate the critical analytical findings that emerged, which we discuss below (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2020; Pratt, 2008).

Findings

In the following section, we consider survey responses from the 33 participants, twenty-one of whom were elementary mentors, and 12 of whom were secondary mentors. We begin by

documenting mentors' prior experiences and then share mentors' descriptions of shifts in mentoring practices and conceptions of effective mentoring during the pandemic.

Documenting Mentoring Experience

Participants were asked to identify how many years they had been teaching and the number of teacher candidates they had mentored throughout their careers. Of the 33 total participants, thirteen were in their first decade of teaching, eleven had been teaching for 11-20 years, and nine had been teachers for more than 20 years. Only five of the 13 mentors with ten years or less of experience were in their fourth or fifth years of teaching. Approximately one-third of participants shared that they had served as mentors of one teacher candidate, while another third had experience mentoring two or three teacher candidates. Four participants had mentored six or more teacher candidates throughout their careers.

In addition to asking about teaching and mentoring experiences, mentors noted when during the pandemic they had mentored a teacher candidate, as well as the context in which this mentoring took place. Thirteen of the 33 participants served as mentors in Spring 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic, and seven of those 13 did not mentor again in Fall 2020 or Spring 2021. Eighteen participants each mentored in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, and of the 18 that mentored in each of those semesters, twelve from each semester mentored during another pandemic semester. Overall, nineteen of the 33 participants mentored only once during the pandemic. The context in which this mentoring occurred varied by semester. Most Spring 2020 mentors began face-to-face, then moved to a virtual format. All but one of the 18 participants mentoring in Fall 2020 did so virtually. By Spring 2021, virtual and concurrent (virtual and face-to-face simultaneously) were the most popular formats, with seven and 13 participants, respectively, mentoring in these ways.

Shifts in Mentor Teachers' Practices of Mentoring

With three survey questions, we explicitly inquired about the elements of mentoring that (1) remained the same, (2) changed for the better, and (3) were negatively impacted during the pandemic. Overall, while many elements of mentoring and mentors' philosophies remained the same, and some elements of the mentor/intern relationship and practice improved, the majority of the impacts of the pandemic on mentors' practices—and, by extension, interns' growth—were negative.

The most consistently appearing themes related to the nature of collaboration between mentors and interns, the learning stance mentors and interns had to adopt, and the existence and the forms of collegial interactions. Mentors repeatedly highlighted how they and their interns were required to learn together—learn new technologies, learn new ways to engage with each other and their peers and their students, and learn to achieve the same ends with new virtual pedagogies. There was a leveling of the teaching and learning terrain, as mentors were no longer experts in domains where many had spent years and even decades developing honed, effective pedagogical, relationship-building, and coaching skills. One secondary education mentor spoke to this unavoidable but most often appreciated reality:

I think the difference is that I myself was in uncharted territory, so there was a lot more experimentation and trying things out...We tried things out together, and I felt that it was more of a co-learning experience. Obviously you can always learn from your teacher candidate, but in this case, we were on pretty much the same level of experience.

While mentors were almost universally forthcoming about the extent to which they were now learning alongside their interns and optimistic about this very substantial shift, they also described how interns also suffered the loss of another, often invisible and harder to quantify, form of collegiality: with the teachers on their grade level and subject area teams.

Another primary theme we identified in mentors' responses related to the broad notion of communication. Mentors detailed and lamented how communication with interns that occurred via virtual and technology-mediated forms—about teaching plans, feedback on their lessons, and even daily check-ins about their well-being—took so much longer and was not as authentic as usual. As well, often because of the additional security measures put into place by schools and school districts—especially in the pandemic—interns simply weren't aware of the email exchanges, administrative messages, and caregiver check-ins to which they would have had access in typical face-to-face school contexts. Perhaps most notable was the loss of automaticity, informality, and rhythm in these communications. While most mentors—and likely no interns—would have been aware of the value of their on-the-spot, minute-by-minute exchanges pre-pandemic, mentors were conscious of but could not precisely quantify or detail what was lost for interns as the result of this abrupt, dramatic shift in communication mode.

Finally, mentors detailed how the very nature of their own—and, naturally, their interns'—teaching practices shifted. Indeed, they learned together how to translate face-to-face pedagogies to virtual instruction effectively, but they often made decisions to operate as instructional islands to better serve their students, out of concern for their own or their students' health, and in response to pressures to perform from their principals. One elementary mentor was exceptionally articulate about this isolating shift:

So to be the most beneficial with our time for the students, we separated our virtual teaching and in-person...I would see the virtual groups and my intern would strictly work with the in-person students...We have students that have lost a quarter and half of [instruction], but unfortunately the expectations and what they need to be able to do at the end of the year has not changed.

Mentors also noted that these necessary choices to “divide and conquer” resulted in interns developing greater senses of teaching efficacy and independence. But the virtual mode and the fact that mentors and interns so much less frequently engaged together with individual students meant that those everyday, every lesson moments when they could recognize and address a child's confusion or question simply vanished. Many mentors identified this loss as a significant concern, with one secondary mentor highlighting it poignantly: “When we can see the students' expressions it allows us to get an idea of their level of comfortability with the content. Also, when they are working, and they get confused on a topic, it is easy to see them disengage in person.”

Shifts in Mentor Teachers' Conceptions and Beliefs about Mentoring

Using an “I used to think...but now I think...” protocol, two survey questions asked mentor teachers to elaborate on their shifting conceptions of effective mentoring and the attributes of effective mentors. Interestingly, mentors' responses did not mirror the largely negative perspectives they shared when explicitly asked how their mentoring practices had been impacted by the pandemic. Instead, mentors' descriptions of effective mentoring and effective mentors revealed how this experience of mentoring in the pandemic helped them to develop a more nuanced understanding of and commitment to mentoring.

Few mentors described mentoring as challenging, time-consuming, or complex, and of those responses, over half simultaneously acknowledged mentoring as a rewarding experience or investment in the profession. For example, one elementary mentor stated that they now believe mentoring is “a way to give back and to learn and grow from the experience and is very challenging at times!” Further, while mentors describing mentoring as a challenging experience remained relatively stable, those relating it through a more positive lens increased slightly across responses. Likewise, the theme of mentoring as a moral imperative or as stewardship of teacher candidates’ development as teachers increased substantially from mentors’ previous conceptions of mentoring. Whereas 39% of all respondents used to believe mentoring was about investing in future teachers and students, 56% now believe in this concept of mentoring as stewardship. Strikingly, while responses from elementary mentors related to this theme remained nearly the same over time, the number of secondary mentors echoing this response more than doubled.

When considering attributes of an effective mentor, the vast majority of mentor teachers’ responses referenced technical skills, roles, and personality traits associated with mentoring. For example, mentors described technical skills using terms such as “organized,” “helpful,” “effective communicator,” and “knowledge of standards, practice with assessment, lesson planning and classroom management.” Personality characteristics were frequently referenced as attributes of effective mentors with typical responses including terms such as “patient,” “kind,” “flexible,” and “open.” In comparing responses from across the pandemic year, nearly half of the mentors revised their descriptions of effective mentors to include terms reflective of the uncertainty of the times, such as “empathetic,” “humble,” “realistic,” and “accepting.” One-third of the responses also included descriptions of mentors’ philosophical orientations to mentoring, with approximately half of these conceptualizing attributes through the lenses of both characteristics and philosophical orientations. When included, these philosophical orientations either did not change or shifted from an instrumental to a developmental orientation.

This shift was echoed in mentors’ responses to what they believed constituted effective mentoring. While more than half of participants initially stated that mentoring was about imparting their knowledge about teaching to their mentees, that number later dropped by one-half and one-third, respectively, for both elementary and secondary mentors. Furthermore, these decreases mirrored an increase in the number of respondents stating that they now believe mentoring is about learning from, and with, teacher candidates and making the tacit knowledge of teaching more explicit for teacher candidates. For example, one elementary mentor initially defined effective mentoring as “showing them [teacher candidates] how to teach,” yet later revised this response, stating that effective mentors “let them (teacher candidates) discover their own voice.” A secondary mentor initially described effective mentoring as “be[ing] regimented and bossy,” then contrasted this with their current belief that effective mentors “work alongside a mentee and collaborative learning with targeted goals.”

A similar refrain was shared by another secondary mentor, who moved from describing effective mentors as “advising student teachers in best teaching practices” to noting that “they [teacher candidates] can also be observers to make their own conclusions of best teaching practices.” An elementary mentor summed up this shift when writing,

Before becoming a mentor, I used to think mentoring was mostly modeling what an effective teacher looked and sounded like. [Now I think mentoring is] learning from each other. Constant communication. Coaching and providing effective feedback while also being flexible and being willing to let go of control of your classroom. Gradually

releasing the responsibilities of the teacher candidate and constantly providing the WHY behind everything you do.

This evidence indicates that mentors' initial, more hierarchical notions of mentoring as transmissive or incremental acts leveled more into a transformational or developmental conception—a shift echoing the finding described above that collaboration increased during the pandemic.

Discussion and Implications

The findings highlighted above suggest a significant shift in mentoring practices and relationships during the pandemic. With the switch to online learning, mentors were repositioned into the role of novice teachers, requiring them not just to encourage interns but to rely on collaboration with these teacher candidates to help them plan and provide quality instruction to students. As we considered the findings of our study, we wondered to what extent the experience of mentoring in a pandemic forced mentor teachers to reconsider the practice of mentoring through a new lens similar to how Andrews (2014) suggests that “in the very act of teaching, we must take ourselves through the steps of relearning our subject, and in so doing making the familiar strange to use once again” (p. 77). Given that mentors had no prior experiences mentoring teacher candidates in a virtual environment—not to mention doing so during a pandemic (which impresses us now as perhaps the most consequential aside *ever* noted)—mentors could not rely on their existing “familiar” approaches to mentoring to aid them as they navigated teaching, mentoring, and living through a new “strange” set of circumstances. This was evidenced in additional attributes identified by mentors as they redefined mentoring and the characteristics of effective mentors. Using descriptors such as “accepting” and “empathetic” suggests mentors were seeing teacher candidates in new ways and perhaps were reconnecting with what it felt like to be a novice teacher.

The notion of making the familiar strange can also be applied to how mentors viewed best practices associated with mentoring. As a result of the pandemic, experienced mentors who felt they had a grasp on what their teacher candidates should know, understand, and be able to do by the end of their internship were left to seek evidence of learning through diverse and uncharted means. And while mentors indeed described negative mentoring experiences in the pandemic, such as issues with communication and feeling unsure what their teacher candidates had learned, their responses also reflected several positive outcomes. For example, a significant number of mentors described a shift from instrumental to developmental conceptions of mentoring (van Ginkel et al., 2016), along with a deepened commitment to their stewardship of teacher candidates' development. This shift in mentoring approaches reflects an increasingly collaborative and less transmissive philosophy around mentoring. Additionally, while mentors may not have been able to measure their teacher candidates' learning through traditional means, they did note that teacher candidates developed heightened and different senses of professional and pedagogical self-efficacy than in previous years. These positive outcomes may reflect a learning cycle through which the mentors themselves grew as pedagogues as they refined and reimagined their mentoring practices and relationships.

While the pandemic certainly provided a context for making the familiar act of mentoring new and strange to mentor teachers in our partnership networks, Taylor and Hamdy's (2013) multiple-theories adult learning model may begin to shed some light on how mentors made meaning of their evolving notions of mentoring. In this model, a learner is 1) presented with and engages in a task that causes dissonance, 2) refines their understandings and researches possible

solutions, 3) evolves in their thinking and synthesizes new information into an existing schema, and 4) engage cycles of feedback and reflection. The sudden, unanticipated, and dramatic shifts required during the pandemic presented dissonance in their mentoring practices for the mentors in this study. Throughout the mentoring experience, mentors refined understandings and researched possible solutions to challenges encountered in their daily mentoring work. Our data suggest mentor teachers enacted new and novel ways of communicating, collaborating, co-teaching, and providing feedback to teacher candidates. This indicates an evolution of their understanding of mentoring practices and a synthesizing of new information into existing schemas in order to take action. In this study, the mentors seemed to have progressed through this cycle to articulate their new learning around mentoring. We assert the very nature of mentoring during such unprecedented times likely set off a learning cycle that enabled mentors to move from a more instrumental to a more developmental conception of mentoring.

On the one hand, it is encouraging to see a shift in some mentor teachers' practices. Yet, as Taylor and Hamdy (2013) remind us, such shifts are the result of a dissonance caused by a sudden alteration to one's way of working. Still, despite this learning to mentor amidst great uncertainty, the results of our study indicate many mentor teachers perhaps value the new insights and approaches they were required to develop. Perhaps it is not entirely a negative phenomenon for an experienced mentor teacher to again encounter the feeling of "being a first-year teacher" and reconsider their teaching and mentoring practices—making the familiar strange.

Conclusion

The lived experiences of the pandemic have shown us that the practice of mentoring teacher candidates—and the practice of teaching itself—has increased the labor and effort of teachers in almost incalculable ways, which we have characterized as "exponential." The data and findings of our study support and illustrate this characterization: mentors were learning to teach virtually, while learning to mentor virtually, while learning to model grace at such dramatic shifts in their daily practices and daily lives. These layers of learning are not simply additive or cumulative: each compounded the other. Teachers serving as mentors were responsible for a level of coaching at least cubed if not higher.

At the outset of this study, we wanted to make sense of the myriad shifts in mentoring practice and how mentor teachers made sense of these shifts. In thinking about what it means for something to be exponential, we considered how some mathematicians argue the exponential function "is the most important function in mathematics" (Rudin, 1987, p. 1). This is because the concept of exponentiation helps in understanding many examples of increased changes in our everyday lives, from compound interest, to population growth, to radioactive decay. Our field must continue investigating how the pandemic has affected the exponential growth in the work teachers and teacher educators—and particularly mentor teachers—perform.

While we recognize the positive outcomes of this study, these must be tempered by remembering the contexts and the seismic shifts in teachers' work within which these shifts occurred. To continue supporting the positive professional development of mentors, we suggest teacher educators create spaces for mentors to be able to step outside their traditional roles and move beyond an "apprenticeship of observation" orientation to interns' development (Kennedy, 2005; Lortie, 1975). This might be the third space afforded by our school-university partnerships and Professional Development Schools, with those merged, boundary-spanning roles and collaborative orientations and structures. By systematically presenting mentor teachers with

opportunities to make the familiar strange, we might turn the exponential into the reasonable in partnership with teacher candidates and university-based teacher educators.

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Appendix

Initial Survey for Mentor Teachers

Demographic Info:

1. Name (open response)
2. Email (open response)
3. Age Range (forced choice: elementary, middle, secondary)
4. Grades/Subjects Taught (forced choice + option write in; Science, Social Studies, Math, Language Arts, Computer Science, write-in option)
5. Current Grade Level(s) (check multiple options: K, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12)
6. Current School District (open response)
7. Current School (open response)
8. Please check which semesters you have mentored teacher candidates during the pandemic, then provide information on how that mentoring was provided:
 - a. Spring 2020
 - i. If you mentored in Spring 2020, was it Online, F2F or both?
 - b. Fall 2020
 - i. If you mentored in Fall 2020, was it Online, F2F or both?
 - c. Spring 2021
 - i. If you are currently mentoring in Spring 2021, is it Online, F2F or both?
9. How many years of teaching experience do you have? (open response)
10. How many teacher candidates have you mentored? (open response)

Survey Questions (all open-ended):

1. I used to think mentoring was...
2. Now I think mentoring is...
3. I used to think the attributes of an effective mentor were...
4. Now I think the attributes of an effective mentor are...
5. What did you do to get to know your teacher candidate?
 - a. ...in Spring 2020 (or n/a)
 - b. ...in Fall 2020 (or n/a)
 - c. ...in Spring 2021 (or n/a)
6. Prior to the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, what experiences have you had as a mentor of teacher candidates?
7. Describe your experiences as a mentor of preservice teachers since March 2020.
8. What elements of mentoring have stayed the same for you thus far during the pandemic?
9. What elements of mentoring changed for the better thus far during the pandemic?
10. What elements of mentoring were negatively impacted thus far during the pandemic?

Author Information

Mark Helmsing (mhelmsin@gmu.edu) is an Assistant Professor of education at George Mason University. His research examines and theorizes the art and poetics of teaching as an expressive performance. Additionally, he studies and publishes on how people develop and express historical attachments to the past in schools, museums, and popular culture.

Audra Parker (aparke19@gmu.edu) is a Professor of education at George Mason University. Widely published on innovations in clinical teacher preparation and elementary education, she serves as a leader in the field of clinical teacher preparation through active engagement in NAPDS (National Association for Professional Development Schools) and ATE (Association of Teacher Educators).

Holly Glaser (hglaser@gmu.edu) is an adjunct faculty member of education at George Mason University. Holly's research focuses on supporting teachers in creating classroom contexts for talent development and on nurturing gifted potential in students from historically underrepresented backgrounds in gifted programs.

Kristien Zenkov (kzenkov@gmu.edu) is a Professor of education at George Mason University. He is the author/editor of eight books and more than one hundred fifty articles and book chapters, on teacher education, literacy, and school-university partnerships. He directs "Through Students' Eyes," through which youths address grand questions with photographs and writings.

Andrew Porter (aporter7@gmu.edu) is a doctoral candidate in education at George Mason University. A former classroom teacher, Andrew researches aspects of teaching and learning through methods and approaches from educational psychology. He is currently conducting a study of teacher candidates' self-directed learning in social studies education methods coursework.