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# Professional Growth Among Mentor Teachers in a Co-Teaching Model of Preservice Education

Katya Aguilar, *San Jose State University*



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## **Professional Growth Among Mentor Teachers in a Co-Teaching Model of Preservice Education**

**By Katya Karathanos-Aguilar & Lara Ervin-Kassab**

### **Introduction**

A growing body of research has pointed to the potential benefits of a clinical residency field experience model in pre-service education (Grant & Wong, 2003; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2010). In the clinical residency model, fieldwork and coursework are coordinated to provide meaningful, field-based learning experiences for pre-service teachers under the guidance of trained mentor teachers. This approach to professional development for pre-service teachers has been associated with a number of benefits including increased collaboration (Badiali & Titus, 2009), higher teacher retention (Teitel, 2004) and high potential for effects on outcomes for students (NCATE, 2010). The clinical residency approach aims to re-conceptualize the nature of the clinical experience by positioning teacher candidates as co-teach-

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*Katya Karathanos-Aguilar is a professor and coordinator of the Single Subject Intern Program and Lara Ervin-Kassab is an assistant professor; both in the Department of Teacher Education of the Connie L. Lurie College of Education at San José State University, San José, California. Email addresses are: [katya.aguilar@sjsu.edu](mailto:katya.aguilar@sjsu.edu) & [lara.kassab@sjsu.edu](mailto:lara.kassab@sjsu.edu)*

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ers who collaboratively plan, instruct, assess, and reflect alongside their mentor teachers.

An increasing number of studies have explored conditions necessary for effective co-teaching to occur as well as factors that inhibit successful co-teaching implementation (Soslau et al., 2019; Hedin & Conderman, 2015; Guise et al., 2017). This research has focused primarily on the co-teaching relationship, degrees of co-teaching implementation, and affordances and constraints experienced by pre-service teachers in the co-teaching model. However, an area identified in the co-teaching literature in need of further exploration is the potential benefits that a co-teaching model holds for mentor teachers (Gallo-Fox & Scantlebury, 2016). This paper addresses this need by exploring ways in which mentor teachers involved in the Trio Project, a co-teaching yearlong residency program, reported experiencing professional growth during their experiences in the program. This study is one of only a few that focus explicitly on mentor teacher professional growth through co-teaching. Findings not only advance scholarship in the area of co-teaching and teacher residencies, but they also benefit teacher educators by providing important insights that inform programming and curricular development for teacher education programs.

### **Trio Yearlong Residency Program**

The Trio Project was a five-year professional development program funded by a U.S. Department of Education national professional development grant. The goal of the project was to provide high quality, student outcomes-based professional development around academic language development, serving English learners, and data-driven decision-making. More specifically, the project aimed to provide sustained, job-embedded professional development for pre-service and in-service teachers by using San José State University's clinical yearlong residency program as a context for building professional learning communities. In the clinical residency model, the university's teacher education program worked in collaboration with partnership schools to coordinate coursework and fieldwork, provide training for mentor teacher teachers in instructional coaching, and sponsor professional development activities for mentor teachers and teacher candidates.

Each year of the project, two professional development days were held in August before the school year began. On the first day, mentor teachers participated in instructional coaching training and establishing common understandings of academic language and collaborative teaching practices. Pre-service teachers joined the training on day two and participated in dialogue and learning activities focused on academic language development, co-teaching models and practices, and relationship building (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2008). Co-teaching pairs engaged in activities designed to help them develop collegial relationships and equalize the power dynamics within the relationship. An important goal was for

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mentor teachers and teacher candidates to recognize the dual roles of co-teachers (as both teachers and learners) (Soslau et al. 2019).

At each school participating in the Trio Project, clinical residency teams (comprising one teacher candidate, one mentor teacher, and one discipline-specific university faculty expert) worked together on a series of activities that focused on student academic language development. The pre-service and mentor teachers collaboratively co-planned, implemented curriculum, observed lessons, and mapped student progress through three cycles of inquiry during the course of the school year. This work required an integration of collaborative and mentoring skills within a professional learning community structure. There were three additional professional learning community days during the school year. Central to the learning community days was a focus on discipline-specific academic language development for English learners, data-driven decision making through cycles of inquiry, engaging in peer-problem solving around student learning, and optimizing student learning through co-teaching approaches.

It is important to note that the professional development of the Trio project began as a professional learning community, in which the leadership team provided extensive structures and activities for participants. However, over the course of the project, the voices of mentor and teacher candidates became instrumental in the development of the learning community activities. The community evolved into a semi-structured community of practice (CoP), as all of the participants (including the leadership team) learned with and from one another. These natural changes also led to the creation of micro-communities of practice (MCoP) (Ervin-Kassab & Drouin, 2020) focused on content-area teaching, co-teaching triads, and mentoring (with the first hour of the meeting days dedicated for mentors to meet with each other). The mentoring-focused community was grounded in cognitive coaching (Costa & Garmston, 2015) with conversations focused on the consult-collaborate-coach approach to supporting teacher development. Incorporating participant voice and choice in professional development was a particularly important aspect of the project and was an empowering experience for participants.

Another key component of the Trio Project was that it drew on researched-based features (*italicized below*) of effective teacher professional development (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2017): The CoP was *content-focused*, with subject-specific faculty consultants and content-specific peer grouping. The project *incorporated active learning* through cycles of inquiry around pupils' development of disciplinary academic language and co-teachers' analysis of student work. It supported general and content-specific *collaboration* during in-person meetings and through co-teaching training. The activities included *models of effective practice* through the analysis of co-teaching instructional videos during meetings and with veteran mentor co-teachers sharing examples of their own previous effective implementation of co-teaching approaches in the MCoP. The project provided *on-going coaching* and expert support for co-teachers through university supervision and content-area

university experts. These experts facilitated inquiry cycle planning conversations (offering feedback and reflection on co-planning and co-instruction). Finally, the project was of *sustained duration*, consisting of a one-year experience with five full-day CoP meetings and approximately eight on-site visits for each co-teaching pair from a university supervisor and content-area expert over the school year.

### **Methodology**

In order to gain insight into the perspectives of teachers and to paint a holistic picture of their unique realities and individual voices through rich description (Creswell, 1998), a qualitative, or naturalistic, design was chosen for this study. The primary data source for this study included exit interviews (lasting approximately 30-60 minutes) conducted with mentor co-teachers annually at the end of the Trio yearlong residency experience over three years. Participants included a total of 43 mentor teachers (with some who participated in multiple years) who taught math, science, English, social science, or art. Interview questions were designed to surface mentor teachers' perspectives on their relationships with their teacher candidate; their experiences around planning, instruction, and assessment during co-teaching; professional development from the experience; and suggestions for improvement for the Trio Project co-teaching model. The interviews were transcribed and then examined for general themes related to co-teaching. After provisional data categories were established, initial themes were re-examined through the lens of professional growth among mentors, and related sub-categories were created and refined (Creswell, 1998).

The researchers also spent extended time interacting with mentor teachers through the co-teaching professional development days (five full days over the summer and school year). Having multiple roles in the project (i.e. content-area specialist, field supervisor), the researchers also conducted school site observations and meetings in which the researchers facilitated planning conversations for two inquiry cycles conducted by the co-teachers. Thus, the relationship between the teachers and the researchers developed over time. This relationship gave the researchers greater access to the ideas, insights, and practices of the teachers in the study.

### **Results and Discussion**

Results indicated that co-teachers experienced meaningful professional growth in a number of areas. Professional growth described by teachers were grouped under four main themes: (1) pedagogical renewal and risk-taking, (2) critical reflection and "stepping it up," (3) in-situ feedback and refining practice, and (4) application of learning to leadership roles.

Mentor teachers shared how the Trio experience pushed them to engage in pedagogical renewal and risk-taking by stepping outside of their comfort zones. This "push" frequently came from the new ideas the credential candidates brought

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to the conversation. They described learning about and trying out new strategies and approaches—particularly those related to the implementation of common core standards and integration of more technology (as exemplified by the mentor excerpt below):

I feel like I've benefited tremendously from Brianne's fresh approach to things to, whether it's a technological advancement that I did not think of or telling the kids that they can use Vine or use YouTube...that's just not what I was trained to do back when I got my degree...but that fresh aspect has just been wonderful. She's also introduced great teaching websites...specifically art teaching websites...so a new, fresh, she's helping me see the classes with new eyes... (Candice, Art, year 3)

Mentors also described how the collaborative component of the Trio experience challenged them to be more metacognitive and explicit about their teaching practices and the rationale behind them. This led to “stepping up their game” by revisiting and improving certain practices. The mentor teacher excerpt below exemplifies the common theme that emerged specific to critical reflection and “stepping it up.”

So, there's a lot of, what you're doing as a mentor..., you're sort of defending your practice in a professional way. You have to really explain your rationale for all the moves you're making. And...by having to explain it, I start to question myself and wonder why I do certain things in certain ways. So, by having someone else constantly questioning you..., you have to explain it, and by articulating why you're going to do it that way, you actually learn about yourself. It makes me more on my game because I can't...you have to show up. You have to be fully prepared and professional because you know this other person's really counting on you. (John, English, year 5)

Mentor teachers in synergistic co-teaching relationships emphasized the value of having a peer who was immersed in their teaching context and understood their students to bounce ideas off and who could provide them constructive feedback on their practices. They described how helpful this was in refining their practices, particularly related to assessment (e.g., they benefited from having someone to calibrate and collaborate with in developing or revising rubrics). The mentor excerpt below exemplifies the ways that mentors described benefitting from in-situ peer feedback from a colleague who truly understands their classroom context and students.

As far as my own professional development, it gives me someone to bounce ideas off of, like a soundboard...because she knows our students, because she sees them every day and she can actually name names...It's a more accurate soundboard compared to [an] instructional coach that the district sends you who doesn't even know which kid from which. That definitely helped me grow professionally in the sense of...I can make things more accurate for my instruction. I can make things more accurate for my handouts, and for my assessments, and be more prepared than if I were just doing this by myself. (Melissa, math, year 3)

Mentors further described ways in which they were able to apply learnings and



takeaways from their co-teaching and CoP experiences (especially from MCoP content that focused on cognitive coaching) to their department chair positions or other teacher-leader roles they held.

This concept or this construct of moving from consulting to collaborator to coach has really affected...it's been a mindset change for me. I function as a teacher within my department, but I'm also the department chair, and I have release time to work with other teachers. And so, a lot of the learning that I've achieved in the program has been shared and brought out and utilized with other adults on campus. The program has made me a more effective collaborative and collegial colleague. And as a result of that, as department chair, I've been able to initiate PLCs within my department. And in that function, we're now writing a course, you know, on common assessments. (Gene, English, year 5)

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The Trio Project focused on developing mentor and teacher candidate skills in co-teaching and meeting the academic language development needs of students through a year-long teacher residency model. The multiple iterations of the project over three years allowed the project to develop into a collaborative teaching and learning experience for all participants. Research on mentor teacher development provided deep insights into how co-teaching in a residency program supported mentor teacher professional development beyond the academic language focus of the project. Mentor teachers reported learning new teaching approaches from their pre-service co-teaching partners, being more metacognitive, “stepping up their practice,” and transferring their learning from the Trio Project into their roles as teacher-leaders. These results demonstrate a strong potential for authentic, reflective, collaborative professional learning through communities of practice and co-teaching experiences.

These results, however, represent a specific program in a specific time and place. The project was able to provide teacher stipends, release time for meetings, and extensive university personnel support for co-teaching partnerships through a federally-funded grant. Since the grant ended, our teacher education program has been able to sustain some elements of the Trio project (e.g co-teaching professional development, relationship building activities, cycles of inquiry), but to a lesser extent than during the Trio project. Further exploration into feasible ways to robustly scale components of the Trio project to teacher education programs, as well as create capacity for ongoing support of mentor teacher development through co-teaching is needed.

While most mentor teachers experienced positive outcomes from their experiences in the Trio Project, this was not the case for all mentor participants. A small number of co-teaching pairs were unable to develop a synergistic relationship. These pairs often struggled with power imbalances within the relationship or appeared to have incompatible personalities. Further investigation into these phenomena could

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provide important insights for programs seeking to initiate or improve a co-teaching residency model in collaboration with school districts.

Overall, the results of the project are promising in supporting mentor teacher professional development through a blend of communities of practice, co-teaching experiences, and cycles of inquiry. It is, however, difficult to determine the extent to which each component of the project influenced mentor teachers' professional growth. More exploration that parses out the influence of different components would be beneficial. Finally, this portion of the research also focused solely on mentor teachers. Additional research is needed into the growth and development of teacher candidates during their yearlong residency experience to gain a more complete picture of the success of the project.

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