Remote teaching and learning for teacher candidates: mentor teacher perspectives

Amy D. Wolfe
Department of Teacher Education, Ohio University – Chillicothe Branch, Chillicothe, Ohio, USA, and
Sara L. Hartman
Department of Teacher Education, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, USA

Abstract
Purpose – This study offers implications for remote mentoring within school university partnerships based on a qualitative study focused on how three experienced mentor teachers within a long-standing Professional Development School (PDS) partnership adapted to remote mentoring during emergency remote teaching in the 2020–2021 school year.

Design/methodology/approach – Data was collected through interviews with three teachers and analyzed following qualitative methods to identify themes. Data is presented in case studies describing their remote mentoring practices.

Findings – Findings indicate that in the context of strong school–university partnerships, these mentor teachers were successful in adapting their mentoring of teacher candidates to a remote modality and that the benefits to collaborators within the partnership were like those documented in traditional, in-person mentorship. The challenges these teachers overcame include establishing relationships and providing adequate supervision.

Research limitations/implications – The results offer rich insights into the experiences of mentor teachers when conditions necessitate a change in instructional modality and create implications for innovation in mentorship of teacher candidates, particularly in remote mentorship settings.

Practical implications – School–university partnerships should be maintained during emergencies because of the benefits to all partners, most notably to prek-5 students. We recommend that articulated agreements be revisited and modified to address potential future emergencies. The value of establishing and maintaining strong PDS partnerships should not be undervalued during times of emergency.

Social implications – Teacher preparation programs can sustain the important work of educating teachers through challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic most effectively when they work in partnership with prek-12 schools. Use of technology in innovative ways, such as remote mentoring, can support teacher preparation when in-person clinical experiences are limited.

Originality/value – This study offers initial data on remote mentoring, an innovative mentoring approach which has, to this point, been the subject of limited empirical investigation. Additionally, as remote educational opportunities for prek-5 learners increase, teacher preparation programs may choose to utilize remote mentoring in PDS programming, making this data of particular value.

Keywords Teacher preparation, Mentorship, Digital learning, Clinical preparation

Paper type Research paper

A typical remote learning day
It is 9:15 on a Tuesday morning, and school is beginning for Ms. Betty Patterson’s kindergarten class. One by one children’s faces appear on the screen, smiling as they eat their
last bites of breakfast and wave to their friends. Adults, other children and pets wander in and out of the scenes behind the faces of the children. It’s 2020, and all classes for these kindergarteners are remote via Zoom. Two of the faces on the screen are other adults, teacher candidates who are in their first semester of a year-long Professional Development School experience. After a few minutes, one teacher candidate looks at her mentor teacher, Ms. Patterson, for the go-ahead to start that day’s class. Receiving an affirmative nod, the teacher candidate addresses the class. “Friends, let’s start our Morning Meeting.” She proceeds to lead the class through their morning meeting, successfully incorporating each essential part (Greeting, Share, Activity and Message). By the time the half hour Morning Meeting is complete, every child has an opportunity to speak to others, share something important about their lives and engage in an interactive learning activity with their class. The message prepares them for what is coming throughout their day of learning. With the support of the three teachers in the class, children successfully navigate muting and unmuting, speaking over the household noises in the background, and responding to their classmates’ thoughts and ideas. A casual observer would likely be amazed at the connections that are made and the learning that occurs with the guidance of the mentor teacher and teacher candidates. Although the teacher candidate took the lead on this part of the school day, Ms. Patterson and the other teacher candidate actively co-taught with her. When class was dismissed at the end of the morning activities, Ms. Patterson engaged in a lengthy debrief, providing the same high-quality mentoring that occurs during in-person clinical experiences. At first glance, this manuscript may seem to be about the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, the practices here are not COVID-19 stories, they are examples of the power of partnerships to inspire and create innovative teaching practices, even under the most challenging of circumstances. COVID-19 may have created the impetus for the remote teaching modality, but it is the supportive partnerships that existed as part of Professional Development School programming that led to innovative mentoring and teaching practices.

Professional development school structure
The data presented in this article represents the perspectives of mentor teachers who worked with elementary teacher candidates in a teacher preparation program in a Midwestern state. Teacher candidates began Professional Development School (PDS) experiences during their junior year. They spent two full days/week in their PDS classroom for an entire school year. In addition to working with their mentor teacher, teacher candidates worked with a school-based teacher liaison and a university-based faculty coordinator. Teacher candidates’ clinical experiences followed a cohort model that grouped them together in school and created a structure of shared university classes. One day/week teacher candidates attended a school-based seminar that was co-taught by their PDS teacher liaison (school-based partner) and faculty coordinator (university-based partner). Mentor teachers worked closely with the PDS teacher liaison and faculty coordinator, providing frequent updates on candidate progress, delivering content during seminar classes and participating in pre- and post-semester planning and reflection meetings. Many participants in the PDS occupied boundary-spanning teacher educator roles, whereby they easily moved between school- and university-based contexts with the shared goal of preparing teacher candidates (AECT, 2018; Cosenza, 2023). The PDS partnership described in this article is a long-standing one, having been in existence for over 25 years. Understanding and valuing mentor teacher perspectives is an essential component of sustaining the PDS partnership.

Like others across the globe, our university’s clinical model for teacher preparation was challenged during the pandemic. Partner schools expressed concern about the increased levels of exposure that many university students experienced due to communal living and dining situations, making schools across the country reluctant to host teacher candidates.
Yet, in teacher education programs with well-established partnerships, clinical experiences were often able to continue without disruption, even if those experiences were remote as opposed to in-person. The cases described in this manuscript are all within a district with a well-defined school-university partnership (SUP) which was sustained through a strong commitment to the necessity of clinical experiences in effective teacher preparation. This partner school district underwent several stages in its response to the pandemic. It initially transitioned to completely remote instruction in March 2020. Nearly all students remained remote until October 2020, when families/caregivers could choose remote or hybrid (in-person/remote) learning at reduced density. Another milestone in March 2021 provided families/caregivers the option to return full day/every day or learn remotely with a grade-level teacher from the district. The district offered exclusively traditional in-person instruction to enrolled students starting in August 2021 but also offered families an option of remaining fully remote for the whole school year. Throughout each iteration, clinical experiences continued for teacher candidates. The mentoring that occurred from PDS partnership programming transcends basic reactions to a health emergency and offers innovative practices applicable across settings and in times of either wellness or uncertainty.

Literature review

Professional Development Schools (PDS) provide a framework for clinical preparation of teacher candidates that transcends the two distinct realms of prek-12 education and university teacher preparation, creating a third space in which the boundaries of the two are crossed for the benefit of students, candidates, prek-12 educators and the university (AACTE, 2018; Zeichner, 2010). In a PDS, candidates are immersed in prek-12 education, mentored by teachers and faculty as they build professional knowledge, skills and dispositions through practical experience. In the reciprocal relationship created in the PDS, schools and universities share knowledge and resources with prek-12 student learning as their focus, creating an environment in which candidates are prepared to meet the diverse needs of students through development of a strong theoretical foundation and realistic understanding of the profession (NAPDS, 2021).

Practical experiences are critical to teacher candidate preparation but were drastically limited during COVID-19 (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Helfrich, Hartman, & Keifer Kennedy, 2022). Well-articulated school-university-partnerships were foundational to inclusion of preservice teachers in the transition to remote instruction during COVID-19 (Hartman, 2021). Even in normal circumstances, remote teaching and learning present challenges to prek-12 education and teacher preparation alike. Emergency remote instruction, such as that undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic, presented further challenges as teachers and students learned to use unfamiliar technology with little time to prepare and transition. Common barriers included access to appropriate technology, lack of consistent broadband internet and difficulty with attendance and engagement (Helfrich et al., 2022).

While remote mentoring of teacher candidates is relatively new, literature and professional supports for best practices in online instruction, such as Quality Matters (Shattuck, 2015), offer some insight which could be applicable to informing the establishment of remote mentoring. Online instruction is most effective when it is designed to support relationships and belonging through communication and collaboration (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005), is organized with clear and consistent guidelines (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010), employs user friendly technology (Hintz, 2014) and includes variety of modalities to support diverse learners (Hrastinski, 2009). The advent of video conferencing software and its rapid recent adoption in educational settings offers new possibilities for teacher candidate clinical engagement and supervision which may provide unique benefits, such as an objective source of observational data that can be revisited during
mentor debriefings (Smith, Meetze-Hall, Walters, & Arnold, 2020). Evidence suggests that video supervision can be comparable to face-to-face supervision of teacher candidates (Heafner, Petty, & Hartshorne, 2011). The elimination of travel and associated time efficiencies are appealing to university supervisors. And while use of video supervision eliminates a supervisor’s ability to be fully immersed in the classroom, candidates may benefit from the opportunity to narrow their focus as they teach before a camera lens and receive more immediate feedback (Smith, Ferrin, Gibb, & Hite, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought new attention to remote mentoring as schools and universities responded to public health measures. “With this change to online learning, co-teaching morphed from a marriage to an online dating relationship and school-university partnerships adapted accordingly” (Shields, Reig, & Rutledge, 2021). In one PDS action research study, mentors felt they could mentor candidates as well as or better than before in content knowledge, building positive environments and designing effective instruction. On average they felt their mentorship was worse in assessing student learning and meeting the needs of diverse students. Mentor teachers surveyed were divided in their self-evaluation of their effectiveness at building relationships with prek-12 students (Marshall-Krauss, Garin, & Nowlin, 2022).

With many more educators and candidates adopting remote platforms such as Zoom and Teams for a range of uses inside and outside the classroom, an opportunity is emerging to explore the potential of remote mentoring in teacher preparation. The practice presents a chance to expand the diversity of clinical experiences without requiring greater commitment of time and resources for candidates and their university supervisors. Despite the potential benefits for candidates and teacher preparation programs, little is known about remote mentoring of teacher candidates. The current study seeks to answer the question: “What were the remote mentoring experiences of teachers within a PDS?” The current manuscript highlights the experiences of teachers who mentored teacher candidates while teaching remotely, with a focus on supportive mentoring practices for remote teaching that create implications for PDS programming.

**Methodology**

The study received Institutional Review Board approval. Participants were selected based on their engagement in PDS programming in the partnering school district. Teachers were eligible to participate if they were fulltime remote teachers during the 2020–2021 school year. The research team tried to include teachers across the k-3 grades. Of six teachers recruited, three mentor teachers from two elementary schools within the same district participated in a semi-structured interview, a response rate indicative of the continued stressors of the return to in-person schooling. The PDS partnership between the school district and the university has existed for over 15 years. Table 1 provides demographic information on the participants.

We designed a semi-structured interview protocol to collect teacher perspectives on their experiences with remote teaching and mentorship. The interview protocol began with

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Betsy</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eve</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1.** Participant demographics

*Note(s):* This table presents the gender and grade level taught among participants

*Source(s):* Authors own
demographic information, teaching philosophy, strategies for remote instruction of prek-3 students and included 11 questions centered on mentoring teacher candidates.

The interview protocol served a guide rather than a script, allowing each interviewer to respond to their previous answers and context, such as time limitations. Informed consent was obtained verbally at the start of each interview. Digitally recorded interviews lasting between 45–60 minutes either in-person or over teleconferencing software, depending on the preference of the participant, were conducted. Researcher field notes were kept for each interview.

Interviews were transcribed and cross-checked with researchers’ field notes. The interviews were coded using qualitative data techniques to reveal recurrent patterns (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2015). Researchers collaboratively designated a first cycle set of codes based on the initial readings and familiarity gain through reading and re-reading the transcriptions which was applied to the entire data set using qualitative analysis software (see Table 2). Next, a dual coding strategy that allowed for development of shared understandings of each code and researcher triangulation was employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). The team each reviewed the transcripts separately, applying codes, then together reviewed their individual coding to come to a consensus, using reflexivity to refine the accuracy of their collaborative understandings constantly. Researchers made sure each theme was defined, named and described and their meanings were discussed until consensus was reached and codes were systematically applied to the entire data set (Braun & Clark, 2006). Finally, we created descriptions for each of the three participants as a case focused on their mentoring of teacher candidates which are presented next, followed by a discussion of the identified themes and implications for practice.

Findings
This study explores remote mentoring of teacher candidates through qualitative analysis of interviews with 3 teachers who mentored remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic within a PDS partnership. Table 2 presents an overview of the codes identified, their frequency, a sample quote and the number of times each code intersected with mentoring, the subject of the analysis. The most frequent intersections with mentoring were in challenges and best practices with teacher candidates while there were fewer overlapping excepts coded with mentoring + parents/caregivers, disabilities, or classroom environment. A moderate frequency of overlap between mentoring + best practices with children, relationship building and technology is evident in the analysis.

The 3 cases, presented next as narrative cases with thick descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), illuminate the challenges and successes of remote mentoring via PDS partnerships for these educators. The benefit of the well-developed PDS partnership context in which they all serve provides a connective thread that weaves throughout the three cases.

Joe
Joe is a 3rd grade teacher, certified to teach 1st-8th grade, who has several years of experience teaching and mentoring. In his role in a PDS, he regularly hosts undergraduate students in clinical experiences. He describes his approach to teaching as “hands-on,” emphasizing conversations between students about their experiences with materials and activities. When he learned he’d be teaching remotely, he wondered how he would facilitate the social connections necessary for this type of engagement. Joe hosted two teacher candidates during his year of remote teaching. Instead of teaching new professionals how to open a classroom, establish routines and build community, he found himself taking a step back and focusing on the basics of mentorship. Building rapport was the greatest challenge for Joe in remote
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Sample quote</th>
<th>n intersection with mentoring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Best practices with candidates</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>... as I modeled a few lessons, and they watched with them, we flipped roles. And I got to observe and that was the first time I felt like I was able to sit back and watch what my students were doing while they facilitated the lessons</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best practices with children</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>I believe, though, that... children learn hands on... I provided the best I could with notebooks and packages of materials, we sent home copious amounts of manipulatives and things like that for them to play with. So there would be things like, you know, build something with your... 0.20 blocks and show me...</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>But... in the middle of a lesson where the kid who is flipping upside down and... coming up to the screen and being goofy, which five-year-olds do, right? ... Or licking the screen with their tongue, or you had all of that... it's was challenging, but ... it's not that much different than what I would do in person with a kid who was being out of control</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom environment</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>(The) dry erase board was my friend; it was the best tool. We used it for assessment, we used it for fun, we used it for drawing, we used it for a lot of things. Also, we developed... a quarterly notebook. So each quarter, they got a notebook and... the parents would come into school and do a big pickup...</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabilities</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Some of my students who had suspected or already existing IEPs, they met separately with intervention, teachers, speech, teachers, things like that. And there wasn't a lot I could do. Because I wasn't in-person with them, it was very challenging to meet needs that way. And I had to sort of let go and trust that my team members were picking up those pieces</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>I [had] never [before] had an intern fall semester. So I was really looking forward to having an intern fall semester in the classroom, and starting the year off... she was really, really good with the kids; great at having things planned ahead</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents/caregivers</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>I just met with the parents and then we did a face-to-face... I sent them all an email saying that things that they would definitely need in that space... and the requirements of that it needed to be in a quiet space</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship building</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>...creating and maintaining community and this is the reason why we want our children to take all types of smart risks. They cannot take risks unless they feel safe. And I also feel like I was a very structured teacher with a lot of movement within that structure and I feel like I was that way online also</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>And then they'd all be like, mine's not working. It's not working. I think those were the most frustrating pieces. Like you just forget to assign something on Canvas</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2.**

Codes and intersection with mentoring

**Note(s):** This table presents the 9 themes identified in the data, their frequency, sample quotes, and the number of times each was coded with the theme mentoring

**Source(s):** Authors own
mentoring. “We weren’t even supposed to... get together and meet. I didn’t meet her face to face until the last day of school... having that, just the... time to get to know each other and converse about, just, stuff that’s going on... their personality, that piece was not there.”

From his perspective, it was helpful for candidates, teachers and prek-5 students to start the year together remotely compared to the experience of the partnership student he mentored remotely in spring, who entered the classroom after other relationships were built. He describes her experience saying, “She was like a new student. Right? ...in the fall, we all started together. And they were also brand new to it... we were we were all on the same page. Right? After spring break, she was learning, and she was picking up on what we have been doing. Starting from the beginning was... much more productive and helpful. I think that’s what helped in fall is that we... all didn’t know each other. And they were all learning... at the same time we were...[sharing] a little bit about me a little bit about you. And then the spring came...and then she popped into the room. And that was this. I’m an outsider. Yeah, trying to gain information about you guys. But you already know each other.”

For Joe, collaboration within both planning and teaching was key to successful remote teaching. He emphasized the value of planning and preparation in his work with candidates. His grade level team also met weekly to plan and divided responsibilities for preparation of materials for use in multiple classrooms. Similarly, he divided responsibilities among his candidates during remote teaching. Although university policy did not allow candidates to be alone in breakout rooms, which presented a limitation to their engagement, he developed a structure in which each adult would facilitate a learning experience with a series of small groups by pairing them with another adult. “My partnership students are there where they know which games and activities they’re going to be doing within a break[out]. And then being able to say, ‘Okay, we’re going to the breakout room’ and click it.” He capitalized on classroom routines, such as morning meetings, to allow partnership students to practice planning and teaching within a predictable structure.

Eve

Eve, who had retired for the 2nd time at the time of the interview, taught for many years. Her initial experiences were at a community-based private school where she taught kindergarten, fifth and sixth, and served as administrator. She later transitioned to public school where she taught in kindergarten, first, second and third grades. She was instrumental in bringing a social-emotional curriculum to the district and served as a trainer for the company and district. “My emphasis on building and sustaining community would probably [be]... you know, the epitaph or banner over the door.” Eve describes her work in spring 2020, when the district shifted to remote teaching as a temporary emergency measure differently from her later remote instruction in 2020–21 when the modality became long-term. In the first part of the pandemic, she taught from her rural home where “the connectivity was absolutely horrible.” She felt that she needed to learn a whole new set of skills and missed her collaborative relationships with colleagues and candidates. Still, she accepts that she did what she could during the initial period of remote teaching. “Those two months, they were what they were.” When the district allowed her to teach at the school building beginning in Fall 2020, she had better internet connection and was able to work collaboratively with her colleagues and mentees. It didn’t take long for her to adapt. “Once we really dove in and had that strong training for two weeks plus and then we got to get our feet wet, and we got to meet our children and we got to figure out how to do zooms and how to have recurring meetings. I would say by the end of September, I personally was feeling confident that I could deliver the content.”

Eve hosted a teacher candidate during her remote teaching year. The candidate acted as a facilitator in break-out rooms with the paraprofessional as the second adult required by
district policy. Eve adapted her typical approach to using teacher candidates to facilitate student learning while providing intentional support for their professional growth by allowing them to lead break-out rooms and facilitate small group work. “She would take one group and I would take another and then we would switch so that she would get a full experience of different challenges.” Eve notes that teacher candidates brought new ideas to her remote classroom, “She designed a lot of really interesting things for [the phonics curriculum].”

Eve’s mentoring style was characterized by a personalized and collaborative approach. She had her mentee manage small groups, which provided her with practical experience in classroom management and student engagement. Furthermore, regular feedback sessions were a staple of her mentoring. In these sessions, Eve and her mentee openly discussed the challenges and successes of their experiences, fostering a collaborative and supportive learning environment.

Betty

Betty Patterson brings a lot of experience and confidence to her work as a kindergarten teacher and mentor of teacher candidates. At the time of the interview, she had been teaching for 20 years, with three years to start her career in third grade and the last 17 years in kindergarten. For most of those years, she was a mentor teacher, supervising teacher candidates in early field experiences and candidates during the final internship semester. The 2020–21 school year was her first and only year as an online teacher. Like the other teachers in this study, Betty’s school chose one teacher per grade level to teach solely online for the 2020–21 school year. During Betty’s year as an online kindergarten teacher, two junior-level teacher candidates worked with her all day on Tuesdays and Thursdays for the duration of the year. During the previous year, they spent time in a preschool clinical experience, although it was cut short in March of 2020.

Of being a mentor teacher, Betty’s passion was evident, “I believe that, like, teaching is one of the hardest jobs in the world. There’s nothing easy about this. And so, helping to prepare them makes me feel good.” Yet, despite being a veteran mentor teacher who felt extremely confident as a mentor teacher, adjusting to being an online mentor teacher was an unexpected challenge. Betty remembered the beginning of the year saying, “They watched me panic - like literally panicking. They watched me at the beginning cry after a horrible Zoom meeting where I had no idea what I was doing.” Adding supervising teacher candidates to the list of things that Betty had to do as an online teacher might have been too much for her to take on that year, but, overwhelmingly, Betty felt that having candidates collaborating with her in her online classroom was tremendously helpful. Of this she stated, “My candidates were really, really great. At the beginning, it was really hard. But as I modeled a few lessons, and they watched with them, we flipped roles.”

The candidates in Betty’s classroom contributed to positive classroom learning experiences in numerous ways, some of which Betty had not expected. First, having teacher candidates work with her allowed her to offer individualized and smaller groups. Speaking to this she said, “As we got moving, we also did some breakout groups and my candidates were instrumental in facilitating those. So based on what I knew about the kids and the data that I was able to get from them, we did either individual or small group. And we ended up having a system of after our big morning meeting with everyone, we’d get off, we give them an assignment, but we keep a few for an extra 20 minutes. And each day that group changed and who was getting that smaller group or individual attention.” Betty related that on days her teacher candidates were not present, that type of instruction was not possible. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, more of Betty’s students received intervention services from her and the teacher candidates.
Also, having teacher candidates lead both small and whole group lessons permitted Betty to observe the learning of her students in ways she could never do when she was solely in charge of running her classroom via Zoom. Speaking of the value of this she said, “And I got to observe and that was the first time I felt like I was able to sit back and watch what my students were doing while they facilitated the lessons. And that was great.” Betty’s teacher candidates were also extremely helpful with technology, bringing ideas of apps and websites that might be helpful for children. By the end of the year, in part due to collaborating with teacher candidates, Betty felt the technology piece was, “smooth sailing.”

Regarding challenges in meeting the needs of children via an online classroom, Betty spoke about how difficult it was to not be able to be physically present with her teacher candidates. “We all had times where we cried, and then we’re apart and you can’t hug each other. You can’t say, oh, let me go get you a cup of tea. You know. And so that was absolutely the worst.” At the end of what was an exceedingly difficult year, Betty still felt, “And yet, it ended up being the best thing in the world to have two candidates and all of us just working as a team to solve the 10,000 problems instead of just me by myself.” Asked if she would teach kindergarteners and work with teacher candidates again in an online setting she shared, “I wouldn’t be opposed to doing it again.” The structure of the PDS Partnership that allowed teacher candidates to work in her online classroom for the entire school year both contributed to the growth that Betty experienced as a mentor teacher and to the development of the teacher candidates who were fortunate to have such an engaged clinical experience when many teacher candidates across the U.S. were not permitted in classrooms.

**Discussion**

While participants did not anticipate providing remote mentoring to teacher candidates, they quickly adapted their approaches to a remote format. As in their in-person mentoring, these teachers focused candidate clinical experience on prek-5 student learning, providing opportunities for candidates to design and implement instruction and modeling how they think about planning, instruction and assessment while allowing candidates to practice. They viewed their candidates as collaborators and assets to instruction and valued the innovations and enthusiasm of their aspiring teacher partners. They provided opportunities to debrief and reflect.

These results reveal the impressive adaptability of experienced teachers, both in teaching their students and mentoring future teachers. The technologies employed to facilitate mentoring had never been widely tested as a prek-5 learning environment, much less as a means for mentorship of novice teachers. These teachers approached remote instruction using a high frequency of synchronous modalities and limited asynchronous experiences. Even when prek-5 students were working on assignments, they were connected to their teachers, candidates and classmates on remote conferencing software so the teaching teams could monitor their engagement and respond to questions immediately. These mentors adapted mentorship to include their candidates with a notable emphasis on small group instruction.

The findings from these cases reveal that teacher candidates continued to be a valuable resource to support prek-5 student learning and to teachers both professionally and personally, even when they were only present remotely. Teacher candidate engagement with small groups offered increased individualized attention. The addition of lessons planned and facilitated by teacher candidates ensured further opportunities for prek-5 student learning and engagement. They supported their mentor teachers’ steep learning curve with technology. Teachers were emotionally overwhelmed by the responsibility of their role and the unfolding public health emergency. Teacher candidates supported their emotional well-being through their professional relationships. Reciprocally, candidates learned how to
manage their professional responsibilities in crisis by observing their mentor teachers’ coping skills.

The primary challenge in mentoring teacher candidates remotely was in establishing and maintaining the depth of relationships necessary to provide emotional support to candidates experiencing the stresses of the teaching profession. They also had to overcome an inability to supervise candidates in break-out rooms without an additional adult. However, since the relationships they build with candidates are so essential to their success in mentoring, whether in-person or online, and these teachers so value candidate engagement as central to their development as teachers, they made great efforts to provide adequate supervision of candidates in break-out rooms to allow them the opportunity to practice facilitating learning experiences for prek-5 students. Overall, although at first, it was more difficult to facilitate mentoring relationships remotely, mentors and teacher candidates adjusted in ways that made mentoring remotely effective and similar to in-person mentoring.

Implications and recommendations

Clinical practice cannot be limited to times when conditions are most favorable for learning because teachers’ work is of such value to individuals, families and society that it must be sustained and adapted in times of crisis or when physical distance is needed. COVID-19 made evident the value of a PDS partnership in supporting collaborators in sustaining their roles through emergency circumstances. School-university-partnerships take various forms to meet the district and university’s interacting needs (AACTE, 2018). The current findings reveal that a PDS model offers an excellent way for future teachers to connect their college coursework to experience because mentor teachers can support their reflective practice to facilitate this growth. Essential to the successful modification of their mentorship to a remote setting in this study was the long-standing formal agreement that the district representing these cases holds with the university. Overwhelmed by the challenges of the emergency, many districts understandably drastically reduced their engagement with university partners. Although those early, uncertain days of the pandemic have passed, much can still be learned from these experiences that can be applied in a range of future scenarios.

Importantly, it is inevitable that each teacher, candidate, school and university will experience emergencies, whether of large scale or small, and must be prepared to balance their work with these challenges. This study also provides evidence that remote mentoring of teacher candidates is not only possible but, with practice, it could offer similar benefits to partners as compared to traditional in-person clinical mentoring. Consequently, we offer the following recommendations to those considering remote mentoring of teacher candidates:

(1) Experienced teachers can adjust and adapt in even the most challenging circumstances; they provide the greatest support of candidates in unexpected situations; we recommend selecting remote mentors have adaptive expertise (Darling-Hammond, Bransford, LePage, Hammerness, & Duffy, 2005; McGraw & Walker, 2024) or when that is not possible, those whose reflective practice supports mentorship of others while developing their own expertise.

(2) When the focus is on student learning, the candidate practices the planning, teaching and assessment necessary for effective instruction and is immersed in the professional decision-making of their mentor teacher (NAPDS, 2021). We recommend that a central focus of the remote teaching should be on the children in PDS classrooms, and that mentoring should support prek-12 student learning.

(3) The existing, well-established formal agreements in this study compelled the district to continue supporting clinical experiences for teacher preparation despite the
limitations of the public health emergency. As such, we recommend that school-university partners should establish formal, written agreements to guide remote mentoring and decision making in emergencies, most notably for the continuity these agreements offer PDS partners in the face of change and crisis. Articulated agreements are Essential Six in the Nine Essentials (National Association for Professional Development Schools, 2021). They support clear expectations on roles, responsibilities and articulate mutual visions, missions and goals. We also recommend that school-university partners with written agreements revisit their agreements considering their COVID-19 experience and revise them to include contingency plans for future unexpected events and remote mentoring.

(4) Based on the findings of the cases presented in this study, we recommend that when faced with situations that necessitate physical distance, school-university partnerships should be sustained remotely. No matter the remote setting, the benefits to all partners were evident. Because of the value of relationships in the mentorship process described in these findings, we recommend that time and resources be devoted to establishing and maintaining strong relationships between remote partners. It may be preferable to offer designated in-person opportunities for these relationships to grow if circumstances allow.

Further research on remote mentoring of teacher candidates, both in emergencies and as a regular practice, is needed to establish a baseline of best practices. Future studies should include the perspectives of teacher candidates, prek-12 students and parent/caregivers. In particular, we recommend research to better understand intentional and planned remote mentoring in non-emergency situations. Understanding the practices that sustain and facilitate remote mentoring benefits teacher preparation programs in all locales.

References


**Corresponding author**

Amy D. Wolfe can be contacted at: amy.wolfe@ohio.edu

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: [www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)  
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com