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# What Do Student Teachers Want in Mentor Teachers?: Desired, Expected, Possible, and Emerging Roles

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Research has shown that mentor teachers play varied roles. Using a conceptual framework grounded in these roles, the researchers explored what seven student teachers said during multiple interviews about the roles they wanted for their mentor teachers. Findings showed that while some participants preferred emotional support and others wanted instructional support, none wanted socialization. The researchers identified a new category–mentor as gatekeeper–to capture the preferences of one participant and concerns of others. This category reflected a focus on the credentialing aspect of student teaching as something that students must complete before licensure. Implications for teacher education included additional support for mentor teacher–preservice teacher pairs such as conversations about desired, expected, possible, and emerging roles during the mentoring process.

*Keywords*: student teaching, mentor teachers, preservice teachers, roles

## Introduction

As student teachers complete their full-time student teaching internship in schools, various stakeholders contribute to the overall experience. From university-based faculty and supervisors to the mentor teacher, pupils in the school site, and the student teacher, a complex web of interactions exists that can be wildly successful, downright toxic, or—as is mostly the case—somewhere in the middle. The nature of interactions between student teachers and their mentor teachers (also referred to as clinical faculty or cooperating teachers) varies widely (Hamman & Romano, 2009). Mentor teachers are generally chosen for their teaching skill or years of experience, but not necessarily the knowledge of how to mentor; further, they are not always trained to be good mentors (Feiman-Nemser, 1998; Zeichner, 2002). Authors of recent articles highlight the need for this kind of training (Colvin, Rose, Pilgrim, & Berry, 2011), as well as the negative effects of mismatched expectations between mentor teachers and university faculty (Rajuan, Beijaard, & Verloop, 2010). Mentor teachers often determine the degree of participation that a student teacher will have in the classroom. Furthermore, mentor teachers sanction the legitimacy of the student teacher's participation within the community (Cuenca, 2011).

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A significant challenge in studying, supporting, and developing the mentor teacher–student teacher relationship is a lack of clarity and consensus on the roles and responsibilities of mentor teacher (Ambrosetti & Dekker, 2010; Hobson, 2010; Long et al., 2012; Smith & Avetisian, 2011). This may be because the role of a mentor teacher can seem obvious and accessible to any experienced teacher (Zeichner, 2005b). In fact, researchers have found that mentors conceptualize and enact their roles in a variety of ways. Picture a mentor who leaves the room often to allow the student teacher to take charge of the classroom, even if the student teacher conveys content incorrectly or interacts with students in negative ways; contrast that with a mentor who remains in the room constantly, provides lessons, and interrupts from the back of the room when the student teacher is teaching. Finally, imagine the mentor who calms a frazzled student teacher, encourages reflection without dictating choices, and facilitates healthy interactions with students and colleagues. These three scenarios are not unusual, and some are problematic. Teacher educators must take a closer look at how these mentoring relationships develop.

On the other side of the student teaching relationship are preservice teachers, whose classroom interactions can be challenging, positive, stressful, or damaging to their personal relationships and identities. Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, and Fry (2004) found that student teaching identities were shaped by relationships in student teaching. Mentors have a major impact on student teachers, sometimes leading student teachers to recreate lessons, right down to the jokes and stories they tell to pupils (Rozelle & Wilson, 2012). The evaluative role and differing goals of university supervisors and mentor teachers can affect identity development and choices (Davis, 2013; Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999; Valencia, Martin, Place, & Grossman, 2009). Preservice teachers have described feeling stressed and tired by the experience, and student teachers who have a positive experience often cite a supportive environment and good pupil relationships as key elements (Flores & Day, 2005).

Given these considerations—that student teaching can be a stressful time of personal change and identity formation, that roles and responsibilities for mentor teachers can be poorly defined or that expectations of roles can be mismatched between the practicum site and the university, and that mentor teachers rarely receive training in how to mentor effectively, but that training can be noticeable when it occurs—the need for clear ideas about the roles of a mentor teacher becomes apparent. Zeichner (2005b) asserted that the role of the mentor teacher is assumed to be clearly understood, when often it is not. This is due in part to poor training and support, but there is also a need for clarity of terms and roles discussion in the literature. Butler and Cuenca (2012) offered some insight on this matter by attempting to clarify definitions of mentor teaching roles, which we describe in greater detail in the following section. In our study, we built on this research base by asking: What do student teachers want from their mentor teachers? Our findings added student teachers' voices, which emerged from our interviews and focus groups, to the larger discussion on mentoring roles and preferences.

## Conceptual Framework

In our study, we aimed to add clarity to the discourse around mentor teachers by drawing on three common definitions for mentor teacher roles (Butler & Cuenca, 2012) and viewing the process of student teaching as a transactional relationship between mentor, student teacher, and context that results in the formation of attitudes about teaching and

one's self (Watson, 2006). Transactional leadership can be viewed negatively as it is based on rewards, but in the world of literature, Zinsser (2006) refers to a transaction between the writer and reader that requires communication and changes both parties. Mentor teachers and student teachers can and do have a similar relationship—the transaction is one that adds up to a certification for the student teacher, but that may also lead to new ideas and skills for the mentor teacher. Ideally, the mentor and the student teacher exchange efforts and ideas, first one and then the other, back and forth in a series of transactions during the entire semester or year.

Researchers of the mentor–mentee relationship in student teaching have found that mentor roles vary widely and are not clearly defined (Ambrosetti & Dekker, 2010; Hobson, 2010; Long et al., 2012). Smith and Avetisian (2011) suggested that varied roles of mentors may lead to differing results for novice teachers. Kensington-Miller (2005) called for the creation of a continuum of the roles that mentor teachers take, which could help in developing a better understanding of and discourse around the mentor–mentee relationship. In our study, we investigated students' preferences for the developing relationships in student teacher–mentor pairs in order to add their voices to the emerging definitions of the roles of mentor teachers. Butler and Cuenca (2012) answered the call for a common language in the research on teacher education (Grossman & McDonald, 2008; Zeichner, 2005a, 2010) by creating a set of common terms to use in the discussion of mentor teachers; this "can serve as one powerful tool in uniting a community of researchers and practitioners … By literally speaking the same language, researchers can build on prior work and communicate their findings more powerfully both to each other and to practitioners" (Grossman & McDonald, 2008, p. 198). Butler and Cuenca drew their definitions from the current literature on mentor teachers and developed three roles: mentor as instructional coach, emotional support, or socializing agent. We used these three roles as one component of our frame for this study.

Butler and Cuenca (2012) described their three roles in the following ways: first, some mentors serve as instructional coaches; they observe and provide feedback, assist in instructional growth, and stimulate reflection through dialog. Instructional coaches focus on helping student teachers develop the craft of teaching and the mindset of a reflective practitioner. A second role is the mentor as an emotional support system. This role can be contrasted to the instructional coach in that it is focused on creating a supportive, caring environment for developing teachers rather than evaluating them. These mentors offer advice and support for the anxiety that a novice feels, which can also be caused by the fear of evaluation by a mentor teacher (Fantozzi, 2013). Finally, mentors might play the role of socializing agents, guiding their student teachers into replicating their practice or the culture of the school.

Butler and Cuenca (2012) provided language for teacher educators and researchers to discuss the various types of mentor teachers they see in the field and engage in discussions about expectations for mentor teachers during student teaching. However, what they did not address is whether the types of mentor teachers that researchers see in the field match the types of mentor teachers that student teachers feel they need. Ironically, student teachers are often the quietest voice in the research on student teachers; researchers study their actions and evaluate their teaching, but less often do they ask for their perspectives on their mentors (see Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen, & Bergen, 2011; for a notable exception). In examining student teacher expectations or desires for their mentor teachers, we do not suggest that these desires should be the foundation for

the ways in which a mentor teacher should act. Student teacher conceptions of teaching and learning to teach are often entangled with their schooled biographies (Britzman, 1986, 1992; Riley, 2009) and thus might not be the basis for the most positive learning relationship. Rather, including student teacher voices recognizes that *mentor* is not a definitive role, but one socially constructed by the participants and organizations involved in student teaching, and this construction necessarily includes the student teacher expectations and desires. Adding these voices does not dictate the roles of mentors; instead, acknowledging expectations and the histories of those expectations may allow for open and critical examination of the ways in which student teachers construct learning to teach (Britzman, 1986).

In our study, we used the three roles defined above (emotional support, instructional coaches, and socializing agents) to examine what the student teachers we worked with positioned as the most important role for their mentor teachers. The purpose of our paper was to add to the discourse about possible roles for mentor teachers and how to best support student teachers and mentors in negotiating these roles.

## Methods

The impetus for this paper came from the researchers' discussions about participants in our separate qualitative studies. Qualitative methodology was appropriate in both cases as we investigated the nuances of relationships and ideas about the self during student teaching, with the aims of describing the influence of the context and preserving the voices of the participants. As critical friends discussing our findings, we found that the ways in which student teachers conceptualized the actual, expected, and desired roles of mentor teachers foregrounded their discussions about student teaching. Further, the way student teachers conceptualized the role of their mentors played an important role in the way student teachers constructed their experiences during student teaching. However, in their teacher education program, the programmatic expectations for mentor teachers were the same, and did not take into account student teachers' expectations or desires. This open question about student teacher preferences led us to interrogate our data further. What were student teacher expectations of mentor teachers?

### Context

Participants were seven secondary student teachers—six female and one male—completing the semester-long student teaching requirement of their degree program at a large state university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. They represented multiple content areas (four social studies, one Spanish, one earth science, and one English). The participants all responded to an open call for student teachers to participate in research, thus that is something they have in common and a possible limitation to the study. However, it was not the researchers' goal to select a representative sample of student teachers, but rather to collect in-depth and detailed data about a small sample of students in the hope that this detailed information might be transferable to other settings (Guba & Lincoln, 2000). All of the participants were given pseudonyms to preserve their confidentiality.

At this particular university, students completed a Master of Arts in Teaching either as a five-year program that is connected to their undergraduate degree in a content area

that they would like to teach (i.e. History or Spanish) or as a graduate degree. The teacher education program, and university as a whole, were highly ranked and drew high-achieving students. All participants, with the exception of the one, were completing the combination Bachelor's–Master's degree program; the other participant was completing a postgraduate Master of Arts in Teaching degree, which contained the same coursework. The program offered a standard array of courses mainly focusing on instructional design; students completed four practica in local schools before student teaching in the fall of their fifth year. In these practica, the students taught or tutored secondary students, created lessons, and reflected on the effectiveness of their teaching. It is important to note that neither teacher identity development nor analysis of the roles of student teaching is the key focus of the program.

This teacher education program, like many others, did not have a systematic training program for mentor teachers. Mentor teachers were essentially volunteers; the university paid a small stipend for their work. All mentors were invited to attend short training seminar on being a mentor teacher; however, attendance at this training session was optional, and many mentor teachers did not attend the session. This program employed university supervisors to support and evaluate the student teachers during their student teaching experience. University supervisors were primarily doctoral students who had teaching experience and training in supervision. The supervisors served as liaisons between the university and the practicum site and organized meetings between the mentor teachers, the student teacher, and themselves during the teaching internship. These meetings generally focused on making sure that each party knew their respective responsibilities, had received the student teaching handbooks, and had completed the required evaluations. The university supervisors did not receive training or direction to facilitate a discussion about possible roles the mentor may play or the type of support a student teacher might desire. Both researchers had experience as graduate assistant university supervisors, however, none of the participants in this study was supervised or evaluated by either researcher.

### Data Collection and Analysis

In our study, we drew on data from two studies that looked more broadly at student teacher experiences during student teaching. In the first study (see Davis, 2011), the author used interviews, observations in the field, and written reflections. In the second study (see Fantozzi, 2012), the author used interviews and focus groups. Although separate, each study contained similar data because each original study focused on student teacher identity development, including the influence and roles of participants' mentor teachers. For our current study, we revisited the data to answer the question: What do student teachers say they desire in a mentor? Because we were interested in what the student teachers said they desired in a mentor for this study, we focused only on the data that involved spoken communication about these preferences.

In each of the previous studies, the participants completed three semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002) at the beginning, middle, and end of their student teaching semester, and in the case of the second study, also participated in four follow-up focus groups that offered additional insight into participants' preferences about mentor teachers. Interview and focus group questions were focused on exploring certain themes related to student teaching and explored these themes as a conversation with open-ended questions

(Kvale, 1996). We developed the open-ended questions based on an extensive review of the literature. The questions were designed to elicit response and reflections from the student teachers focused on the roles and relationships in their student teaching. Each interview had a few key focus questions, such as *Describe your relationship with your mentor teacher*, and *Tell me about your experiences being observed.* As the previous studies were not solely focused on the mentor–mentee relationship, questions not directly related to their mentors were asked (e.g. *Tell me about a success you've had in student teaching*); however, since mentor teachers are an integral part of student teaching, they were often included in responses to these questions as well. During the interview, the researchers also responded to the student teachers by asking follow-up questions about topics that the student teacher initiated. Interviews for studies one and two lasted from 30 min to an hour and focus groups for study two lasted an hour. Both were audio-recorded and then transcribed for data analysis. The researchers completed the transcriptions by listening to the audio files and typing the participants' and interviewers words verbatim in electronic documents. The researchers then shared the transcripts with the participants for member checking; this was so that the participants could verify that the transcriptions were an accurate representation of their statements and beliefs (they were directed to remove any information if it did not represent their statements or beliefs, but none chose to do so). To preserve confidentiality, we used pseudonyms for the participants and their mentor teachers. We maintained participants' privacy by conducting interviews in private locations and storing interview data in locked files.

The interview and focus group data comprised 193 transcribed, single-spaced pages. Because the initial data involved a broader study of student teaching, beyond the mentor–mentee relationships, we created a new data-set which contained all of the comments related to the mentor–mentee relationship; this included both mentions of the mentor teacher and discussion of expectations or desires of the mentor teacher, regardless of whether the mentor teacher matched these expectations. During each study the researchers asked specific questions about mentor teachers, such as, *Describe the relationship between you and your mentor teacher*; however, discussion of mentor teachers was not limited to the answers to these questions, so the data in this reduced set came from the entire data corpus, not just answers to these questions. The set was created by reading the initial set and selecting all discussions or mentions of the mentor teacher, grouping their mentions by participant. The reduced data-set comprised 83 pages; thus, although the initial studies examined student teaching more broadly (e.g. relationships with students and university supervisors, evaluation of learning, the teacher education program, goals for student teaching), 43% of the talk referenced the mentor. Researchers engaged with both sets of data. We read all of the data in the initial data-set to understand the context of comments about mentor teachers. Then we read and reread the mentor teacher set to look more closely for themes.

These data were analyzed using a process of analytic induction (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Analytic induction is an iterative process in which researchers independently examine data for both emerging themes and instances that match with existing themes or questions, then discuss findings and emerging hypotheses, revisit the data corpus for negative or contradictory cases, and revisit and revise themes accordingly. We read and reread the data corpus looking for emerging patterns in participant expectations for their mentor teachers. Butler and Cuenca's (2012) roles functioned as a source of a priori

codes, including *emotional support*, *instructional support,* and *socialization*. We discussed the meanings of these codes based in the literature and in what we would expect to hear from the participants, while also remaining open to new and unexpected insights that might emerge. As instruments of this qualitative research, we could not be completely without bias, but we worked to increase the validity of our inferences by rigorously and continually checking and verifying our assumptions and inferences with each other.

In addition to the start list of codes, we also engaged in open coding searching for alternative roles and expectations the participants had for the mentor–mentee relationship. More codes emerged during the course of the data analysis, such as *independence* and *credentialing*. Each researcher read the data corpus independently using the start list of codes and noting emerging codes. Then we met for shared coding and to discuss additional new codes. Some codes such as *supportive talk* or *specific comment*s were initially coded separately and then ultimately encompassed into the larger a priori codes. When disagreements emerged, data were revisited looking for confirming and disconfirming evidence. Using cross-case comparisons, we formed hypotheses as to possible similarities and differences in what student teachers wanted in their mentor teachers. We also examined the a priori hypothesis that Butler and Cuenca's (2012) three categories were a good framework for understanding what student teachers want from mentor teachers. Using these strategies, each researcher again examined the data independently and then met to share emerging hypotheses and possible supporting evidence. We discussed each hypothesis and then tested each hypothesis by reexamining the data for evidence to support or disprove a given hypothesis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In the following section, we present the findings of our data collection and analysis. In order to avoid confusion, we refer to the participants as *participants* or *student teachers* to highlight their role in the classroom. We refer to the secondary students in those student teachers' classrooms as *pupils*.

## Findings

Analysis of the data revealed that participants expressed the desire for their mentor teachers to fulfill, at least in part, two of the three roles (emotional support and instructional coach) outlined by Butler and Cuenca (2012). None of the participants sought a mentor teacher as socializing agent, and one of the participants in particular did not desire any of the three roles in the original framework. It was in this last participant and in aspects of the others' preferences that we saw a desire for a different style of mentoring, which we call *mentor as gatekeeper*. This kind of mentor would allow a clear, uncomplicated path to obtaining a teaching credential as the end goal. The findings represented the student teacher discussions of the roles of their mentor teachers; in some cases mentor teachers fulfilled these roles, and in others the discussion centered on the role they wished their mentor teacher would take. With the exception of one participant, Clark (all names are pseudonyms), student teachers acknowledged multiple roles for their mentor teachers, but seemed to have a preference for a specific role. This preference existed whether or not they perceived that the mentor teacher was able to fulfill this role.

## Mentor as Emotional Support

A common theme for three participants was a preference for a mentor who would provide an emotional support system for them. The emotional support system involved warm, supportive, face-to-face conversations that focused on more than just the mechanics of teaching, such as relationships with pupils and being present when the student teacher felt the need for it. Additionally, the kind of feedback these participants preferred and recalled positively was encouraging and pleasant. Although these student teachers also desired instructional coaching to some degree, their main focus was on the caring and supportive nature of their relationships with their mentor teachers.

**Supportive conversations.** The student teachers that showed a preference for emotional support often focused on the type of talk they got or wanted from their mentor teachers. These conversations focused on supporting them in their feelings about student teaching rather than in their development as teachers. For example, although Katelyn described her pupils as difficult, but felt that her mentor teacher "had her back." In the beginning of her student teaching, she had troubles with a pupil; her mentor teacher took her out to coffee to talk after the incident. This was important to Katelyn because she felt her mentor was communicating, "beyond just [my] teaching, you know [it was as if she was saying], I am here emotionally for you." This type of teammate-teacher was important to Katelyn, who said:

> I feel like I can deal with the other things because I know that I have my mentor teacher to go and talk to if things go badly … I think the big things are support and guidance. And just feeling her support of "It's okay", "You made the right decision" or "It's alright, we'll fix it."

Although she did mention that feedback from observations was helpful as well, Katelyn felt that a supportive mentor was one that was "there for her"; her focus was on emotional support rather than constructive feedback.

Similarly, Maria—who had an unusual situation involving three different mentors—noted that she had a detailed conversation with her primary mentor about who would play what role at which time in the classroom, but that because a different mentor was more focused on a new classroom management technique, "we never got to have those conversations." For Maria, when the focus was on the basics of instruction and the mentor's preferences for how the lesson would go, the benefit of a supportive, two-way discussion was lost. Maria often described thinking about how she presented herself in the various settings and attributed that to her experience as a resident assistant. She commented on her primary mentor's supportive advice about self-presentation, saying,

> She really empowered me in the beginning, saying … you're not me, you're not [her student teacher last year], you are yourself, and you can do things your own way, and I don't want you to copy me verbatim, I want you to be who you are.

Maria enjoyed the support that her mentor provided and felt that this led her to feel more comfortable—even empowered—in the classroom.

**Encouraging feedback.** The students who preferred this type of mentorship also expressed a desire for feedback that was encouraging, positive, and emotionally supportive. In most cases, this preference became evident when participants noted its absence as they recalled interactions that they did *not* find encouraging. Katelyn felt alone when her teacher would leave the room often late in the semester, saying, "I just miss talking to her!" Maria noted (emphasis added):

> [My mentor teacher said] "Actually, we should sing this song," and I wanted to show these videos, and she kind of switched my plans and gave me an order of things of what she wanted to do, and *I'm not sure how that looks*, [but I had to say] sure, I'll lead it, and she kind of interrupts a lot lately … they recognize her as being their teacher, and … she's very much a relational person [with the pupils] and hasn't really let go, *hasn't allowed me to be head teacher.*

Maria discussed instructional planning, but she couched it within her sense of a loss of emotional support for how to be "in charge" in the classroom. When she said "I'm not sure how that looks," she was referring to the impression she felt she was making in the classroom; she felt as if she was just doing what the teacher wanted, which made it look as if Maria was not prepared or skilled. Maria did not feel as if she had the support of the teacher, rather that she was getting unwanted feedback. When considering her primary mentor teacher, she noted, "I really appreciated that about her … there's a lot of ways that she's encouraged me to be myself."

Although Kara described her mentor teacher as "awesome," she also had concerns about feedback. She and her teacher had different personalities and Kara worried that this might cause problems in their relationship. She commented:

> I want to do more exciting things, but I don't know if she is going to be okay with me doing more happy, fun things. She is also just more intense about everything and it makes me kind of nervous because I am planning and [thinking] I need to do this exactly how she wants it or else I'll disappoint her … that kind of is hard for me because I wanted to be able to do my own thing a little more without being scared that I'd make her mad.

Here Kara focuses on how her mentor teacher feels about her teaching rather than on the quality of the teaching. She is not focused on getting feedback on her instruction, but more concerned with keeping up a good relationship with her mentor teacher. In fact, when Kara did get instructional feedback she had mixed feelings:

> Sometimes I would get mad because I'd say, "Ok, here is what I am doing tomorrow," and she would say—"Um, did you think about this?" And I would think, "Come on! Just let me do it!" But then I'd think—"You are right, you are right. I definitely do need to fix that" … so at times it would be frustrating, but she always helped … it was never … bad.

Rather than desiring instructional feedback, Kara was frustrated by it. More than feedback, she was looking for positive support before she began teaching a new lesson.

### Mentor as Instructional Coach

Three of the participants described a preference for a mentor teacher who would help them become reflective practitioners, and plan and refine successful lessons. These student

teachers valued the feedback that they would receive from their teachers, and saw that as part of the process of becoming a better teacher.

**Support in becoming a reflective practitioner.** A common theme among these participants was the ways in which feedback would help them grow in reflective practice. Jessica described her mentor teacher as supportive and open; her desire for an instructional coach came through when Jessica discussed why post-observation conference feedback was important to her. She said:

> The only way you are going to grow as a teacher is if you are forced to make a list of what's going well and what's not going well. I thought that to an extent every day anyway, but it's more of a—"yes, that went well, but why did it go well? It worked because of this, so I can continue doing that next time."

Jessica wanted to have someone help her through the process of becoming a reflective practitioner. She valued the post-observation conferences as a time specifically carved out to discuss her practice. Jessica noted that she did this not just on her own, but also with another person so that she could consider, "*Why* did it go well?"

**Lesson design and delivery.** Participants' descriptions of the role of instructional coach also included specific advice or suggestions for practice, specifically about how to construct and deliver lessons. Tina preferred an instructional coach, saying:

> She'll suggest things but she doesn't demand that I do certain things … I definitely learned a lot from her. Especially in the beginning, she would have ways of explaining things that I thought, "oh, that's a really good way of explaining," and she'd be like, "yeah, it just comes with experience" … learning her style of explaining things … giving real-life examples … I've come to do that more.

In this case, Tina described another side of instructional coaching as compared to Jessica —she learned how to teach certain concepts in certain ways by watching her mentor teacher do it first. In other cases she described similar situations to Jessica, where she and her mentor were able to sit down and talk about what had gone well and what could use improvement. Often this took the form of discussions about how to modify lessons for different leveled classes, such as standard and advanced. Tina's mentor's style was more direct than other participants described, but Tina welcomed these suggestions and incorporated them into her practice. Jamie also noted a desire for instructional feedback, but she had to seek this out:

> [My mentor teacher] is definitely the type of person where you have to ask for her opinions or her critique and then she is willing to give it, but I had to say, "Hey, can you observe me tomorrow during this period? Because I am having trouble with this." And then she will; she will sit down and watch and then afterwards we'll talk about it.

Jamie prioritized getting feedback, especially when she was working on a method or topic with which she did not feel comfortable. Jamie also noted that she knew that not

all student teachers felt the same; many of her peers were nervous about the possible criticism they might receive after an observation. She noted,

> It doesn't bother me … knowing that they are there to help you … they are just giving you feedback, so even if you mess up, it doesn't matter because they are going to have good advice for helping you fix the problem.

This attitude highlighted the contrast between the desire to have an instructional coach—someone who is going to help you "fix problems" with your teaching—and an emotional support system, which focuses more on creating a situation in which student teachers feel positive about teaching.

### Mentor as Gatekeeper

The third role of mentor teachers (socializing agent) as described by Butler and Cuenca (2012) was not present with any of the participants in this study. Instead, we noticed that the student teachers acknowledged successful completion of student teaching, and in particular the letters of recommendation from their mentor teachers, who served as a kind of gatekeeper into the profession. For this population, we have chosen to replace the category *socializing agent* with the term *mentor as gatekeeper.*

We defined the mentor as gatekeeper as the provider of an entryway into the profession through access and approval. In this role we saw the custodial role of the mentor in student teaching: they gave student teachers access to the pupils, completed midterm and final evaluations, and beyond student teaching, provided a reference for potential job opportunities. In addition, the mentor as gatekeeper encompassed more agency on the side of the student teacher as the participants discussed manipulating the speech and identities they presented in order to avoid upsetting the gatekeeper. These identities were not taken on (as would be the case in socialization), but a recognition that the student teacher might act one way to keep a relationship smooth, but could enact their own beliefs when the teacher was not there, or when they were in their future classrooms.

Although only Clark desired this as the sole role for his mentor, each of the participants considered the role of their mentor teacher in their completion of student teaching in some respect. Jamie and Katelyn specifically stated that they had avoided making comments they thought their mentors would perceive negatively because they wanted to make sure they maintained a positive recommendation. Katelyn stated:

> Honestly, if the recommendation was not hanging over my head I think I would have been more vocal—I mean, I would never be rude or anything … just more confrontational. But this recommendation makes me want to make sure everything is more than perfectly fine and she has no idea how I have felt.

Similarly, Jamie said,

> She is going to write my recommendation … I just wouldn't want to put a dent in a professional relationship … constructive criticism is fine, but … she is the kind of person who might take it the wrong way coming from someone who has a lot less experience.

Katelyn and Jamie felt there were things they wanted to change in their student teaching, but both chose not to voice these concerns because they were afraid of how these comments would be perceived. Rather than being socialized into the profession, taking on the practices of the mentor teachers, the participants showed an understanding of the role of the mentor teacher in sanctioning them as teachers in the profession and acted in ways they thought would have a positive outcome.

**Being the teacher.** Another aspect of the gatekeeper role centered around the student teachers' desire to be left alone, either physically or metaphorically, so that they could be in charge, or as they often said "be the teacher." In this way the participants wanted the mentor teacher to step aside, playing only the perfunctory role of filling out the paperwork. For some of our participants, this involved their mentor teacher physically leaving the space. Kara wanted her mentor teacher to leave because she felt that she could act differently when she was alone with the pupils.

> I like having (my mentor teacher) not there because I do get to have more of a relationship and bond with (the pupils). Instead of when she is there I'm think … "I have to do what I am supposed to do." The pupils come to me with their questions and they recognize that I am in charge, that I have the authority … being the teacher versus just another teacher in the room.

Kara felt that she had a supportive mentor teacher and repeatedly experienced satisfaction with the relationship. However, at the same time she felt that she could not be completely herself when her mentor teacher was there. She wanted her mentor teacher to leave so that she could develop her own relationships with the pupils. For other participants, it involved taking control of the curriculum taught whether or not the teacher was present. Jessica felt that her cooperating teacher did not have high enough expectations for the pupils in her classroom, saying:

> I had a sense that my pupils could try a little bit more … And while some of the things we've done may have required a little more guidance on my part with them, they have also been able to accomplish a lot more than my cooperating teacher said they would be able to.

Rather than looking to her teacher for methods, Jessica felt that she could be even more effective than her cooperating teacher.

In either case—desiring the mentor teacher to physically leave, or just be "hands off"—the student teachers wanted their mentor teachers to remove themselves from any role other giving them the necessary space and perfunctory (rather than critical) approval that would open the metaphorical gate to the profession. For most of the participants, this was a passing desire and was not their preferred role for the mentor teacher; these participants thought a completely absent mentor teacher would be a disservice to their student teaching.

**Gatekeeper as mentor's only role.** Only Clark saw gaining this credential as his main focus; he did not describe a desire for emotional or instructional support, but preferred more limited interactions:

> He wants to know everything that's going on. I mean, I respect that, it's going to be his classroom when I leave; I'm going to be gone the first week in December. Other than that he's very hands off, unless he sees something as a potential problem, like pupils aren't going to understand this, or this could be a potential legal problem, unless it's something like that, he's very flexible. He'll [say], "You can try it like that" … He's a decent guy. I've enjoyed working with him, it's been pretty good.

Clark wanted to lead the class without interference, without evaluation from his mentor teacher. He likened this to "making his own mistakes," instead of taking others' advice and avoiding mistakes altogether. Clark mentioned his desire for limited guidance often. Because he viewed learning to teach as a process of trial and error, he did not feel the need for emotional support nor a coach giving him feedback. He was confident that he would figure it out on his own. He even compared his reactions to those of other student teachers in his student teaching seminar, noting that student teachers took their pupils' actions more personally and didn't see events as he did: that it should be "like water off a duck's back" if something didn't go well during student teaching.

Another key difference between Clark and the other student teachers was a lack of knowledge of his mentor teacher's practices, especially in terms of grading. Clark once commented that he had graded pupil essays according to his own philosophy of being "tough" at first, and added "God knows how [my mentor] is going to grade them [when I leave]." There was a lack of a clear transition between the student teacher and mentor teacher in this classroom that was not present with the other student teachers. This lack of interaction did not bother Clark: it was exactly what he wanted. He noted that he wanted to plan lessons and grade outside of the school building, even during school hours. Clark was not completely alone in wanting to learn teaching on his own. As noted in the previous section, the other participants expressed a desire to be given some freedom from the presence or guidance of their mentor teachers so that they could "be the teacher" on their own. He was alone in not desiring any other type of support.

## Discussion

The findings of our study indicated that student teachers have clear ideas about what they desire in a mentor teacher. In addition, it seems that Butler and Cuenca's (2012) roles for mentor teachers (with the exception of the socializing role) may be useful in initiating conversations between student teachers and their mentor teachers about relationships and types of support in student teaching, particularly in discussing the instructional coach and emotional support roles.

We did, however, identify a new interpretation of the mentor teacher role (mentor as gatekeeper) that might be viewed negatively or least as a hard truth about the function of student teaching for some student teachers. This finding aligned with recent work by Maynard (2010), who suggested that the degree to which student teachers felt they could manage their mentors contributed to their student teaching success. Gatekeepers can be positive or negative: they can keep people in or out, and they can be patient and calming or threatening. In our study, rather than being socialized, participants identified and highlighted the sanctioning role that mentor teachers play (Davies, 2005). The participants all shared some desire or acknowledgment of the mentor teacher as a gatekeeper during student teaching. While for Clark, this gatekeeper figure was unthreatening and mainly about clearing a path to teacher licensure, the other participants were aware of the power

imbalance created by evaluations and recommendations. This was a negative aspect of their student teaching as it filtered their choices about what they said about their relationships, and the way they taught, which could extend to the ways they teach in the future. This contributes to the discourse about issues of power in student teacher–mentor teacher relationships (e.g. Anderson, 2007; Rippon & Martin, 2003) and should be an aspect considered in discussions surrounding the roles of mentor teachers.

The varied classroom settings and personal experiences of the student teachers were complicated and could be separated from their preferences. Most notably, while Clark (the only male, and the only participant not completing the degree as a fifth-year student) saw his teacher as only a gatekeeper, his scripted program meant that he did not have the opportunity to plan lessons from start to finish for all but one of his classes. In this case, he could not choose to use most practices he learned about in his teacher education program. He also had completed his undergraduate degree at a different university. Simply being at a slightly different place in his life could contribute to the ways that he viewed his mentor as a non-threatening figure. Smagorinsky, Rhym, and Moore (2013) highlighted the “competing centers of gravity” that pit the two settings—the student teaching site and the university setting—against each other, and those forces were at work here as in nearly every other student teaching partnership (p. 147).

There were limitations to our findings: we did not observe mentor teachers to qualify their behavior in a given role, but rather relied on participants’ interpretations of their mentor teachers’ actions. We set forth recommendations for future practice based on our findings; however, our study represented one setting and population, and findings may not transfer to other preservice teachers. Finally, it was beyond the scope of our study to determine whether personality, maturity, gender, or prior experiences contributed to desired mentor relationships. More research is needed in these areas.

## Conclusion

The relationships formed between the student teacher and mentor teacher are influenced by previous life experiences (Britzman, 1986; Riley, 2009) and by expectations each side brings into student teaching (Alsup, 2006; Veenman, 1984). In this way no mentor teacher–student teacher relationship will be the same, nor can we predict them. We may, however, be able to help shape them by facilitating discussions about the relationship, and expectations for this relationship. Butler and Cuenca’s (2012) definitions of the roles and our findings in relation to student teacher expectations and interpretations of these roles (and a new mentor as gatekeeper role) can add to a common language to help start these conversations.

In our study, we emphasized the need to include student teachers in conversations about expectations that they may have for their mentors or student teaching in general. Participants in our study had clear conceptions of the type of support they wanted but did not know how to communicate these needs when they did not get that support. If we grant that the role of a mentor teacher is transactional, constructed by all parties involved in student teaching, it is important that all parties discuss this role openly. The role of mentor as gatekeeper is one that may not be viewed positively, however it was salient for our participants. If this sanctioning role is not discussed openly, then it will continue to exist un-scrutinized and possibly affect the actions of student teachers. Zeichner

(2005b) noted the danger in the assumption that the mentor teacher role is self-evident; in this study, we aver that the way to foster positive mentor–mentee relationship is also often seen as self-evident, when perhaps it is not.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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