

**From Conflict to Collaboration:
Professional Development for Preservice Teachers and Mentors**

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Introduction

Conflict resolution skills and strategies are necessary to maintain a positive relationship between the triad of the mentor cooperating teacher (CT), mentee student teacher (ST), and university supervisor. In a mentor-mentee relationship, conflicts—including personal incompatibility, pedagogical issues, and professional issues—are bound to arise (Hudson & Hudson, 2017) and need to be effectively navigated throughout the relationship. However, conflict resolution requires navigating and regulating the emotions of others. The COVID-19 pandemic has decreased social and emotional learning through attendance of online schooling (Duckworth et al., 2021; Ramos & Towns, 2023), which will continue to impact the upcoming generation of preservice teachers' abilities to navigate conflict resolution. Previous research identified challenges with managing conflict and effective communication between STs and CTs (Montgomery, 2000; Nesbitt, 2024). Previous cohort interviews revealed that high conflict between STs and CTs may have attributed to instances of the STs decision to not enter a career teaching agriculture (Nesbitt, 2024). Therefore, CTs, STs, and university supervisors need strategies for navigating conflict resolution and increasing emotional intelligence to develop strong triad relationships. By incorporating training that includes collaborative discussion, understanding of emotional intelligence and conflict styles, and role-play practice, we can increase the preparedness of our triads.

How It Works

A conflict resolution professional development training for STs and CTs was designed to uncover and address the complexities of the mentor-mentee relationship by focusing on conflict resolution and emotional intelligence. This training was held during the pre-internship workshop, with both STs and CTs present. During this workshop, participants were provided with an overview of conflict and different types of conflict one may encounter, including personal, pedagogical, and professional. STs and CTs then engaged in collaborative discussions to identify potential sources of conflict they may encounter during the student teaching internship with different individuals such as each other, students, administrators, community members, parents, etc. They then participated in a session on delivering and receiving feedback. Following this session, they were provided tools to enhance their emotional intelligence related to conflict management, enabling them to better navigate the dynamics of conflict utilizing Thomas & Kilman's (1974) five conflict styles. This session culminated in STs and CTs working together to unpack their own personal histories and conflict styles to address how they would approach and navigate different role play scenarios. After the internship, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences and identify conflicts that may have occurred in the personal, pedagogical, and professional categories. This data will be used to refine future iterations of the training program to ensure the training remains responsive to the needs of STs and CTs.

Results to Date

The preliminary data from the 2023 pre-internship workshop and 2024 post-internship surveys offer valuable insights into the conflict within the mentor-mentee pairs. Eight pairs of CTs ($n = 8$) and STs ($n = 8$) were invited to participate in the study. All CTs and STs participated in the pre-internship workshop, and six CTs and four STs completed the post-internship survey. During the pre-internship workshop, participants were asked to identify potential sources of

conflict that might arise during the student teaching experience. STs anticipated challenges related to differing expectations around classroom rules, emotional responses, and interactions with parents or alumni, particularly if their approaches differed from those of their CTs. Concerns were also raised about their familiarity with specific chapter expectations, such as participation in FFA competitive events.

On the other hand, CTs identified a range of potential conflicts, including differences in teaching styles, the need for accurate coverage of core content, and the challenge of translating theoretical knowledge into practical classroom applications. They highlighted the importance of maintaining professional boundaries in student relationships, effective time management, and the need for STs to plan ahead and be fully prepared for lessons. Additionally, CTs expressed concern about the productive use of lab spaces and the potential for burnout if STs were overly accommodating. We discussed these differences to help both CTs and STs better understand what each group was more concerned about.

Following the internship, the post-internship surveys revealed that STs and CTs reported minimal or no personal conflicts, indicating a generally positive rapport between mentors and mentees. However, pedagogical conflicts were more prominent. CTs noted challenges with STs' preparation and teaching styles, while STs expressed concerns about the timing and adequacy of feedback and differences in classroom management styles. Interestingly, no significant professional conflicts were reported. Regarding conflict navigation, CTs predominantly relied on reflective practice, collaboration, and open communication to address conflicts constructively. These strategies effectively maintained a positive working relationship with their STs. Similarly, STs emphasized the importance of communication, particularly in discussing differences of opinion and understanding the rationale behind various teaching practices. Both CTs and STs highlighted the significance of constructive feedback, focusing on improvement areas. Feedback was provided by CTs regularly throughout the day, emphasizing positive reinforcement and targeting specific areas for growth. While we cannot attribute this all to this training, it does serve as an improvement from the previous reports of difficulty navigating conflict from prior STs and CTs (Nesbitt, 2024).

Future Plans

Future plans are to continue incorporating this conflict resolution training in the pre-internship workshop for both CTs and STs. While this cohort showed minimal conflict, we recognize that not all cohorts have the same experiences and providing future cohorts with this training could be valuable to the ST internship experience. We plan to collect feedback on the usefulness of the training specifically. Additionally, conflict resolution training geared towards university supervisors could benefit the overall ST experience. University supervisor training would be geared primarily towards helping CTs and STs navigate conflict as it arises.

Cost/Resources Needed

The main resources needed to incorporate a conflict resolution professional development into the cooperating teacher and student teacher pre-internship workshop include time during the workshop, an expert trained in conflict resolution, \$18-25 per conflict style instrument, and a budget for materials such as print items, large poster paper, markers, etc.

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