

Conflicts and conflict resolution strategies in mentor-mentee relationships

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Abstract

A functional mentoring relationship is essential for the progression of a mentee (e.g., preservice teacher) during a practicum experience. Conflicts can occur in mentoring programs that require problem solving. What conflicts can occur within mentor-mentee relationships and how might these be resolved? This qualitative study collected data from 31 high school mentor teachers about their experiences with conflict and conflict resolution when mentoring preservice teachers. Three themes emerged around the causes of conflict in the mentor-mentee relationship, namely: (1) personal issues (i.e., incompatibility and other problems); (2) pedagogical issues (i.e., lack of pedagogical and content knowledge, differences in teaching styles); and (3) professional issues. A range of conflict resolution strategies are discussed, such as maintaining a positive professional relationship, regular feedback as a way to address issues, sharing responsibility and empowerment, and using empathy for conflict resolution. More qualitative research is needed around conflicts and conflict resolution to gather a bank of strategies that may assist mentors and mentees during the mentoring process.

Positive relationships are needed to communicate effectively in schools. Similar to the development of teacher-student relationships to increase student engagement in learning (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012), the development of a mentor-mentee relationship can also facilitate learning. Since, mentoring relationships can involve intense interactions between mentor teachers and mentees (e.g., preservice teachers) social interaction skills are required to sustain and build these relationships. Social interaction requires a level of interpersonal skills (Vaughan & Hogg, 2011). For instance, Hudson's (2005) quantitative study of 331 preservice teachers shows that mentees require mentors who have personal attributes such as attentive listening, effective communication skills and supportiveness with abilities to instill positive attitudes and confidence in their mentees. They need personal attributes that will allow mentees to reflect openly and honestly with them.

Dhillon's (2009) qualitative study investigated the effectiveness and sustainability of partnerships and concluded that successful partnerships require "trust and shared norms and values" (p. 701). Another study (Hudson, 2013) outlines that mentor-mentee relationships are socially constructed through open communication within supportive, friendly and personally non-judgemental environments developed through respect and trust. This was noted as a two-way process with the need for the mentee to contribute as a substantial partner in the relationship. A grounded-theory model was proposed to illustrate essential ways mentors can assist in forming and developing further the mentor-mentee relationship (Figure 1). The mentee is a partner in the mentoring relationship, who also needs to display desirable attributes for entering and continuing in a positive mentor-mentee relationship.

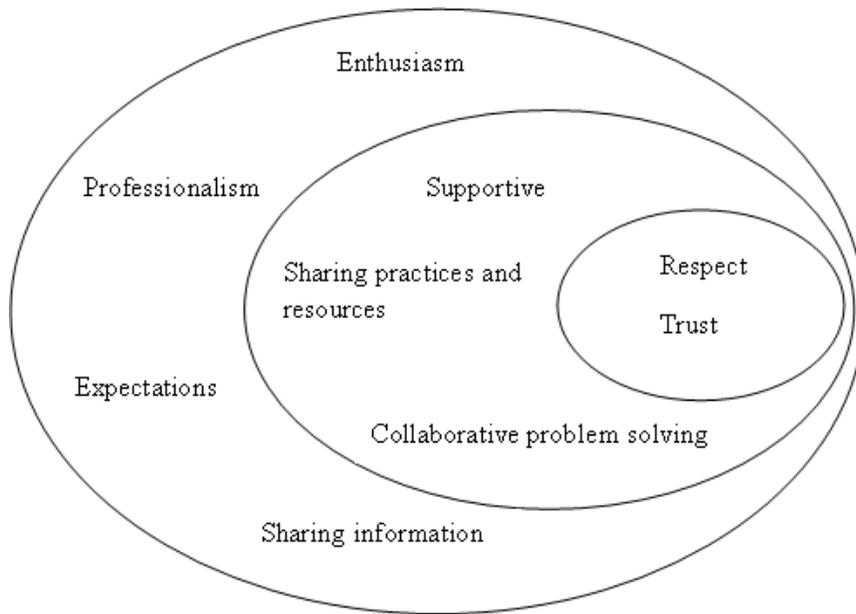


Figure 1. Forming the mentor mentee relationship

Social exchange theory, suggested by Homans (1961), is underpinned by a cost-reward ratio and is based on behaviourism. The reward of the exchange must be higher than the cost for the exchange for it to continue (Vaughan & Hogg, 2011). The interaction is intended to be mutually beneficial, which allows the relationship to be maintained. There is mutual benefit between mentors and mentees in having a positive mentoring relationship. Mentors' benefits include positive professional development, critical self-reflection, enhanced teaching skills, increased confidence, enhanced communication skills, having extra support in the classroom, and a range of other self-fulfilling activities (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009), while mentees have opportunities to be involved in real-world classroom teaching experiences and learn about students, classrooms, schools and education systems. These benefits can allow for a productive social exchange, however, both mentors and mentees need to be aware of their roles.

Many mentors are untrained in mentoring (Hudson, 2010), and effective teachers may not necessarily make effective mentors (Evertson & Smithey, 2000), which can be a reason for some mentoring relationships breaking down. For example, Hobson et al. (2009) claim that “mentoring may even have the potential to do harm” and such occasions may be the result of failing to meet “conditions for effective mentoring” (p. 214). The mentor-mentee relationship is a two-way experience where both have roles for forming and sustaining the partnership. Despite the inexperience of mentees, negative professional school experiences may occur as a result of their own behaviours and practices (Eby & McManus, 2002).

The professional relationship mentors have with mentees appears varied. For instance, “mentoring relationships are conceptualized as close relationships that occur along a spectrum from highly functional to highly dysfunctional, with most occurring in between” (Gormley, 2008, p. 45). Gormley explains that mentors and mentees can have adverse relational experiences that can create emotional upsets. Negative relational experiences for mentees can motivate them to make crucial career decisions on whether to stay in the profession, while those who opt for continuation in teaching may develop and draw upon resilience skills to meet the challenging demands (Gu & Day, 2012; Howard & Johnson, 2004). Gormley also claims that functional relationships for mentors and mentees need to be interpreted according to their attachment styles (see also Bowlby, 1979), interpersonal processes, mentoring outcomes, and other factors such as culture and gender.

Theoretical framework

Conflict and conflict resolution are used as key components for a theoretical framework in this study. To illustrate, conflicting expectations between mentors and mentees about the mentor's role can serve "as a major obstacle to the formation of productive mentoring relationships" (Rajuan, Beijaard, & Verloop, 2007, p. 224). Rajuan et al. show that mentees need professional and personal relationships with their mentors "as a basis for developing the confidence to find their own expression in the classroom through experimentation and risk-taking" (p. 238). Other catalysts for conflicts can involve "territoriality or problems related to ownership of classroom spaces, students, and the power to make decisions" (Rush, Blair, Chapman, Codner, & Pearce, 2008, p. 131). As indicated previously, conflicts in mentoring relationships may be explained to some degree by attachment theory, such as mentor-mentee misperceptions of each other's characteristics, negative emotions, and misperceptions of interpersonal processes (e.g., whether the mentor provided support and the level of support).

Others (e.g., Fassinger & Hensler-McGinnis, 2005) indicate the disadvantage of dysfunctional mentoring relationships in high-level conflict scenarios, with Hobson et al. (2009) claiming "negative side effects of mentoring can be attributed, in part at least, to problems of mentor selection and preparation" (p. 214). Gormley (2008) points out that "studies are needed that... compare mentor and mentee perceptions of their own and their mentoring partners' influences on the relationship" (p. 59). Indeed, conflict theory conceptualises through "power, exploitation, struggle, inequality [and] alienation" (Creswell, 2012, p. 60). Attempting to pinpoint where conflict occurs in mentoring relationships may assist to more effectively target those areas prior to commencement of professional experiences. Hence, this current study aims to explore

conflicts in mentoring relationships and possibilities for resolving such conflicts. The research question was: What conflicts can occur within mentor-mentee relationships and how might these be resolved?

Research design

This qualitative study uses a constructivist approach within grounded theory for understanding participants' experiences of phenomena (i.e., conflict and conflict resolution within mentor-mentee relationships). As an inductive approach, the study attempts to explore mentor teachers' beliefs about conflict and conflict resolution with "flexible analytical guidelines that enable researchers to focus their data collection and to build middle-range theories" (Charmaz, 2011, p. 360). The constructivist approach assists in analysing implicit meanings of participants' accounts towards theorising plausible explanations, and can aid in revealing "links between concrete experiences... and social practices" (p. 362).

This research explores conflicts encountered within mentor-mentee relationships during professional school experiences and possible conflict resolution strategies. The study aims to understand mentor teachers' experiences about conflicts and conflict resolution when mentoring preservice teachers. The study draws on audio-recorded discussions of 31 high school teachers who provided first-person accounts of conflicts that have occurred to them during their mentoring of preservice teachers. These participants engaged voluntarily in a mentoring program, as they had strong interests in mentoring preservice teachers and sought to advance their mentoring skills in a certified program (see www.tedd.net.au). They were placed randomly into small focus groups

(participant pairs and one group of three) and were digitally recorded by the researcher and three experienced research assistants.

Participants were asked to focus on conflicts (e.g., issues and problems) that occurred during a mentoring experience with a preservice teacher that had a resolution. They were asked not to consider any conflict that did not have a resolution, which helped them to focus on conflict resolution strategies that could be shared with the 31 participants at a later stage in the program.

Data were gathered when the focus groups discussed conflicts and conflict resolution occurring during mentoring experiences. The 15 audio recordings were transcribed by a research assistant with a PhD. Data emerged inductively and were coded into common themes (Creswell, 2012).

Participant responses provided insights into real-world conflicts and possible strategies for resolving conflicts during their mentoring experiences. Responses were selected that were considered representative of mentor-mentee conflicts. The purpose of this research was to collect oral accounts around mentor-mentee conflicts for understanding the types of conflicts that can occur to mentors during their mentoring experiences with the suggestion of conflict resolution strategies.

Findings

Within their focus groups (participant pairs and one group of three), mentors discussed past conflicts around personal conflicts they had encountered during their mentoring experiences.

Three themes emerged around the causes of conflict in the mentor-mentee relationship, namely:

(1) personal issues (e.g., incompatibility, personality differences); (2) pedagogical issues (such as a lack of content knowledge, behaviour management situations); and (3) professional issues (e.g.,

unsuitable attire, inappropriate social networking, unsuitability for profession). These themes along with conflict resolution strategies will be presented and discussed in the following.

Personal issues

Selecting suitable mentors at the school level was suggested as a way to reduce possible conflicts between mentors and mentees. This tended to be used as a quality assurance process despite teachers who self nominate for a mentor role. For instance, Mentor 1 (M1) said, “We’ve got teachers who put their hand up to be mentors but we don’t use them” to which M2 replied, “Because they just want to tell people how good they are at doing something”. Mentors commented on inadequate mentor selection at the school level with unsuitable personalities being matched. Christensen (1991) suggested more than two decades ago, that mentoring “should be an intentional process” with mentors and mentees willing and wanting be involved in the mentoring process (p. 12); yet poor partnering continues to occur and can result in negative outcomes. Although mentors should be selected on their knowledge and skills to teach and mentor, there seemed to be difficulties in selecting suitable mentors. For instance, Mentor 1 outlined “teachers who put their hand up to be mentors but we don’t use them”; however this may not be the case when there is a paucity of willing and capable mentors, as indicated by other participants. Possible solutions included a more rigorous selection process at the school level and to educate mentors on mentoring practices in order to build the quantity of available mentors and increase the quality of the mentoring.

Conversations around mentor selection and mentor-mentee personality conflicts emerged from various groups. M1 and M2 conversations lead to the difficulty of dealing with incompatible

personalities, particularly when “you’ve got those times when there is a conflict and one person is really dominant” (M1), while M2 suggested that it was important to determine if it was “a personality problem or a behavioural problem as each one can have different solutions”.

Regardless, these mentors suggested solutions that involved communicating to the mentee. To “make it our problem and not their problem or not my problem but it’s our problem” to which M2 responded, “Yeah I like to be being soft on people, hard on problem”. As another example of personality differences, two mentors (M3 & M4) from the same school discuss the issue of a mature-aged mentee who had a dominant personality.

M3: And that’s what I think happened to me. It even put me off a little bit of having another one for a while. I’ve got another one now but because I think it did become a bit of personality. She’s a very big personality and I just found I got worn down a bit by it. So I had to really keep questioning myself because she’s sort of getting annoying to me in a way or was it...?

M4: I think also question them, like trying to help your student to come to that conclusion themselves... But if you’re clever enough with your questioning, and I reckon you have to be clever.

M3: Yeah because it also allows you to raise it, without raising *it* [i.e., the issue], but you’re raising it then if they bring it out you can literally agree with them rather than having to say you’ve done this and it’s really not appropriate.

M3 was distressed about the conflict with her mentee to the point that she did not want to be involved in the mentoring process for a long period. The “strong personality” of some mentees may be a mismatch for certain mentors that can lead to frustration. Both M3 and M4 discussed how it is easier to question about issues instead of raising the issues. M3 emphasised “raising it” (i.e., the issue) without having to state the issue explicitly. Outwardly opening up an issue may be confronting for some mentors and so seeking alternative ways to soften hard-issue approaches

maybe considered more palatable to these two mentors. It was suggested that astute questioning provides a strategy for approaching potentially difficult issues.

M5 spoke about an overconfident mentee where a mature-aged preservice teacher argued with her, which had to be mediated by the deputy principal. A further two mentors experienced frustration with their mentees where they believed they had spent “inordinate amounts of time required to assist them in gaining an understanding of the basic principles of teaching” (M15).

Within the dialogue, M16 expressed considerable frustration as:

I experienced ... having a student teacher who was overly confident without the ability to analyse their own performance objectively. I feel the students (preservice teachers) and mentors require an extremely explicit list of standards and responsibilities. I had too many chats with my student teacher about responsibilities in basic areas (e.g., getting a drink or going to the toilet during class time).

Acceptance of preservice teachers' personality differences was noted as an issue for some mentors. There are dominant personalities and those at the other end of the spectrum, particularly when mentees are faced with new contexts of considerable uncertainty. For those who are somewhat reserved when entering the school, empathy was suggested as a way to understand preservice teachers' circumstances. For example, M6 explained to M7:

Well I learnt something from my last prac [practicum] and it was that empathy business. I would have thought I was a reasonably empathetic person. I had a young lady who was not very warm and not very giving in terms of back and forth conversation. On the last day of the prac, she actually had a family tragedy happen and she got a phone call at school and her whole... the way she acted was completely different. Like she was warm and caring and considerate and thinking...

She's probably one of the most thoughtful people I've ever met yet in her dealings with me that didn't show through initially. You know I'm trying to think of why that would be and I think she's someone who cared so much about *what* she was doing and I think perhaps she put her mentor up on a little bit of a pedestal that she... Yeah thought that she couldn't. I think she was expecting an authoritarian, not sort of team approach. And so I think I learned that although I know everybody is different and I know everybody does things differently, this one really hammered it home to make me a little bit more considerate and reflect on my style of dealing with somebody else when it doesn't match with mine.

M6's narrative explained how the mentor needs to understand the preservice teacher's situation. As the preservice teacher may have different expectations to the mentor, particularly about the mentor-mentee relationship (e.g., "I think she was expecting an authoritarian"), M6 emphasised the need to have empathy, be "more considerate and reflect on my style of dealing with somebody". Teachers are expected to be reflective practitioners and this seemed to transfer into mentoring practices. In addition, a supportive mentor would demonstrate being empathetic without making judgements about a preservice teacher's prior knowledge.

Discussing viewpoints, where the mentor can feel threatened, which may possibly undermine the mentor's power base, becomes an issue for some mentors. One mentor (M5) outlined what happened when another mature-aged mentee argued consistently with her and denigrated the school:

That actually happened to me where I had a student and he just refused. It was, "No, not going to happen. Your school is crap. Your kids are crap. You know nothing". And he just wouldn't bring it down. I had to actually take that straight up to our deputy principal, who was in charge and I said, "Look he's not listening to me, don't know what to do". She had a word to him later and basically stated, "You're at risk, your mentor teacher is going to fail you because you're at risk"

and he brought it down in those couple of weeks so that I could pass him. But the conflict wasn't resolved as far as I was concerned and I felt really bad passing him because I'm thinking that poor mentor teacher who is going to get him next time, he's going to be cursing me for passing him.

Generally, mentors would expect formal and informal discussions with their mentees but would draw the line at inappropriate discussions and the use of strong language (e.g., "Your school is crap. Your kids are crap. You know nothing"). Indeed, there was a somewhat angered tone in M5's voice when she was reflecting on her conversation with her mentee about the mentee's denigration of the school and students. M5 was indignant about the mentee downgrading the school and was prepared to take action, as this particular mature-aged mentee was deemed not to take advice from M5. The deputy principal's words "you're at risk" had an impact on changing the mentee's behaviour to the point where M5 was able to record a passing grade for the mentee's professional experience. Yet, guilt was apparent in the decision to provide a passing grade for this mentee, as M5 tended to believe the conflict was largely unresolved and the "that poor mentor teacher who is going to get him next time" would not be happy about the previous mentor's assessment of this mature-aged mentee's attitude to school and students. A preservice teacher may be in schools at various points during a four-year degree, consequently, not addressing a high-level issue may re-surface with another mentor at a later point in the degree. M5's strategy was to include the deputy principal as a mediator who could articulate pungent words ("you're at risk") that had significant meaning for this mentee. It was also suggested that mentors need to evaluate the tone and quality of discussions and make appropriate decisions when discussions are not in alignment with professional dialogue.

Mediation was noted as a “last resort” strategy, where a third party was enlisted to assist in rectifying an issue that appeared unresolvable between the mentor and mentee. As shown in the following discussion between M1 and M2 on having to “take it up” to the site coordinator (usually an executive who supervises the mentoring program conducted at the school site):

M2: Well, I took it up to the site coordinator.

M1: So you had to take it up?

M2: Yeah and [the site coordinator] had a talk to this man and he came back and for the last couple of weeks he bit his tongue and you know tried to please for the students. I failed him and that was a bit like what I was saying about the expectations...the expectations of...

M1: It's not about unreasonable expectations that you were suggesting either.

M2 later inferred using low-level conflict resolution strategies before mediation. She stated that “Wouldn't you try every other conflict resolution strategy before you went to mediation?” and “if you can't, well we need to look at negotiating with the uni or do we need to bring in a third person or that kind of thing”. Mediation included other knowledgeable personnel who may be able to deal with the situation more effectively.

Pedagogical issues

Preservice teachers enter school experiences to learn about teaching, which includes the gamut of pedagogical knowledge and skills. One issue that was a concern for three participant groups involved a preservice teacher's inaccurate content knowledge. It was shown that the levels of inaccuracy varied from minor to major inaccuracies, particularly with certain subject areas such as the sciences. M8 highlighted how preservice teachers' content knowledge varied in physics mainly because of inadequate planning, as indicated in the following:

M8: It happens almost every time I have a physics preservice teacher. The really good ones know their gear [content knowledge], but I've probably only had two of those in eighteen, twenty years. That they haven't made a mistake in content. I don't want to embarrass them in front of the class and I don't want to belittle them by saying "Look how clever I am and how inferior you are". But my big issue with preservice teachers is when they come in with no planning and you insist on it, and they still don't do it.

M8 strategised around not embarrassing preservice teachers in front of the class if their content knowledge was inaccurate and later explained that he would take them aside during the lesson and outline quietly the correct content knowledge for them to re-adjust their teaching and students' learning. In a conversation between M8 and M9 around content knowledge and planning, they emphasised that some preservice teachers have inadequate planning and some spend so much time planning that it may interfere with their teaching on the day, to illustrate:

M9: Preservice teachers that I think are going to go to sleep in the lesson because they've spent so much time on some of their preparation and the anxiousness that they have around there. I suppose it's reaching that happy medium. I've seen probably over planning in some preservice teachers. So I guess it's reaching that balance.

Amongst compliments of teaching preparedness for many mentees, effective communication skills and acceptable language were considered to be issues for some. For instance, M10 stated, "His preparation was great, his presence in the classroom was great. It was just his language and how he used his knowledge that just wasn't good". Yet, the mentors indicated empathy in broaching sensitive and somewhat difficult issues, as illustrated by M11's comment:

So what do I want to change? How do I tell them without blaming or attacking and is this statement about how I feel rather than what is right or wrong? Now I myself believed that I was speaking to him and saying this was the issue and this is something we need to work on. Whereas

I feel as though he was thinking that I was saying there's something wrong with him. So it's difficult.

Indeed, a lack of communication skills for teaching and unacceptable language when teaching were noted by four groups of mentors with most suggesting that outlining effective communication skills and acceptable language seemed an appropriate way forward. It seemed that empathy within mentor-mentee conversations needed to be apparent, particularly with consideration of preservice teachers' interpretations, and possible misinterpretations, of the mentor's comments. However, as shown previously, an overconfident mentee may elicit conflict as a result of an inability to "analyse their own performance objectively", yet it also appeared in this study that a lack of confidence can present difficulties. For instance, two groups spoke about their preservice teachers' lacking confidence at the time of teaching, which the mentors claiming that the mentees would be embarrassed with possible feelings of failure, presented here in one of the dialogues:

M12: We had a preservice teacher three minutes or something before the start of a double Year 12 Economics class who decided that she didn't have what it took to take that lesson on that particular topic.

M13: So what happened there?

M12: I took it. Experienced teachers are very skilled at winging it. She wanted to be left to her own devices and the evidence preceding that, which is confident enough to and generally skilled enough to take it, but I think she just had one of those moments.

M13: So this preservice teacher was more confident for the next lesson or went into the next lesson or what happened?

M12: Highly apologetic and...

M13: Must have felt a failure.

M12: Yeah.

M13: You'd feel like I've let the team down, let the class down, let my mentor down.

M12 highlighted that experienced teachers can teach without too much planning or preparation ("winging it") but preservice teachers need to build that repertoire for demonstrating confidence and teaching skills. There was recognition that this mentee had a one-off experience of lacking confidence ("one of those moments") and would feel inadequate for letting down a range of people. M12's strategy to take the class at this time presented as a safety-net strategy for the mentee. It was later discussed that M12 had a talk with the mentee to ensure this episode would not repeat itself.

In the following, M14 tells of a preservice teacher who was passed mainly because it was her first practicum and there was considerable effort in failing her. Pedagogical issues appeared at the centre of the conflict.

M14: A couple of scenarios where a prac student kind of crossing boundaries I felt with behaviour management and dealings with children. And I thought, "Look she's a very competent teacher, she's only in her first prac, she's going to be quite a good teacher, I'm going to pass her, should I bother"? Because I wondered whether I was having a personal attack... I'd given her direction and she would kind of change the rules for the kids... it was that kind of a situation. It came to a head. We said that it was resolved but it wasn't, you could tell by the relationship in the next week or so that there was a little bit of tension.

M15: Could you build in a procedure if that came about again? Like I'll just check with Miss So and So has she said anything....

M14: Well that's what I did... having those negotiations at the beginning. I didn't think that was going to come up, yeah. But now of course I would, I would say this is the expectation in terms of your management of the children.

It was not clear about what constituted “crossing boundaries... with behaviour management”; however M14 spoke about the management as being a “kind of a situation” that needed resolution, particularly as tension was felt by M14. M15 aided M14’s reflection on mentoring practices by asking about building in a procedure, which allowed M14 to suggest, as a strategy to alleviate potential difficulties, outlining expectations about classroom management. Several groups also acknowledged that some preservice teachers may be unsuited to the teaching profession. In addition, problems were said to arise when a mentee discloses unsuitability for the profession but continues regardless of this articulated decision, as indicated in the following dialogue:

M16: One was where one preservice teacher two weeks into her six-week prac [school experience] decided she hated being a teacher.

M17: So what do you do about that?

M16: She wanted to go through the motions of completing the prac [practicum].

A strategy was not articulated by these two mentors on how to overcome this issue. It was suggested that some mentors may avoid making hard decisions about the level of success a mentee has attained during a professional experience. For instance, decisions around not failing a preservice teacher can be made to avoid conflict. M16 said, “Yeah so it ended up, she was sort of borderline for... it was final year prac too... it was the final practicum till graduating and decided I’d put her through and allow market forces in the classroom determine whether she was going to survive”. This action appeared as a result of the decision being “too difficult to make” and the market forces referred to the state education department selection process and school selection processes when the mentee graduates and seeks a teaching position.

Professional issues

Another pair of mentors discussed how preservice teachers needed to understand the school's code of conduct, particularly the use of social networking forums such as Facebook. One female mentor (M18) stated, "So with the Facebook usage, I have spoken to [mentees] about how their comments on Facebook are affecting others and even though they may not be aware, it's affecting a wider community. It actually is, yeah". The other mentor (M19) agreed and reciprocated with following reflective experience:

Our problem was, with the mentees, was a breach on Facebook. They talked about a teacher and they talked about school, that there were problems and concerns. We could point out all the different areas it affected. So it might be whether they were talking about a student, a parent, a teacher of the classroom, the school. So they might be putting down the public system. We talked about the people who were involved and using the code of conduct and going back to those documents. By mapping it out, they could clearly see what the issues were that we were concerned with because they were you know major concerns where we were heading.

M18's concerns of negative presentations about students, the school, and wider community through social media presented with a strategy of outlining a code of conduct and mapping out how such public communication can affect others. The issue around social networking and breaching codes of conduct surfaced in other participant groups, such as this group of three mentors:

M20: How easy is it for them just to Facebook their other friends... But it doesn't reflect very well on the school and those teachers.

M21: It's an important part of being a teacher is the confidentiality, the policies, the professional policies.

M22: Yeah they're the things that run through my head because they're the sort of big things.

M21: Give them a book on professional pedagogies and code of conduct.

M22: Well you couldn't pass them if they are breaking the code of conduct, there's no way because that's a biggie.

M20: There was one that they were saying in our group yesterday, code of conduct and highlighting things like basic clothing, like you suggested the clothing. Actually highlighting some of those points.

M22: Even though they are teachers, they are still students here or at uni and they're still very social and their social circles are very different to ours, so they will communicate and react and do things differently, like use Facebook.

These three mentors also highlighted the need for presenting a code of conduct with social media and associated consequences when the code is violated. However, it was inferred that such a code should include all potential issues to ensure preservice teachers are well informed on school practices.

In another professional code of conduct issue, there were four groups of participants who mentioned preservice teachers dressed in unsuitable school attire. Although they pointed out the need to "have empathy about it" and outlining "what's practical clothing for teaching", there was also affirmative action on presenting clear expectations to them: "you're providing a service, you have clients and you need to look professional because that's what your clients are expecting". Strategies included using empathy such as "mapping yourself into the other person's point of view and we really spoke about perhaps the difference in age groups and what expectations are and what society is like these days". Yet other strategies included the mentor teacher "modelling appropriate clothing as well"; another mentor suggested, "If it was not modelled well then you

can't preach". Observations in school settings of teachers' attire should provide an indication of how preservice teachers need to dress, though this may not be the case necessarily, and so conversations between the mentor teacher and preservice teacher was a strategy to negate possible misunderstandings about school attire.

It was presented clearly that most conflicts can be negated by building and maintaining a positive professional relationship, as can be noted in the following discussion between two female mentors:

M23: That line between mentor and mentee is a professional line so that you go from you're not too friendly with them but you've got to try and keep that....

M24: Yeah, yeah sort of professional and distance of some sort.

M23: But still having a positive relationship with them.

Building the relationship did not mean having a "friendship relationship" but rather maintaining that professional distance; however it also meant working closely on issues related to the classroom and sharing the responsibility, noted in the next dialogue:

M25: If you can build that culture of "Oh this is our class, and oh something is not working, what can we do"? Not "what are you going to do", "what are *we* going to do to make this work better for our kids". So you're sharing responsibility.

M26: Yeah so you're empowering them a little bit.

M25: Yeah and it's not so threatening and you're not criticising them it's just something that we've got to sort out for us.

M26: How would you like me to give you positive criticism because I actually felt I was? And it's not getting, that's how the message is leaving me but it's not arriving at you in the same way so how would you like to get that positive feedback?

M25: That's the beauty of regular feedback and you might decide to adopt that more formal approach on almost a daily basis where that person can see.. okay, I reckon this, this is what's happened.

M26: Probably comes down to that willingness to resolve because if the mentee is not particularly willing, if they think they're going to pass and they kind of disrespect you in a way because they're not taking advice from you then are they necessarily willing to resolve.

The sharing of responsibility with the mentee was explained as empowering the mentee, especially in asking the mentee how he or she would like to receive feedback. Importantly, regular feedback was seen as a way to have open communication. Yet, any conflict would require a "willingness to resolve". As discussed by M27 and M28, sharing the responsibility with a way to resolve issues entails planning on how to negate disagreements between mentor and mentee, particularly with the notion of the mentor modelling expectations.

M27: Whether it's this disagreement between mentor/mentee or teacher/parent... I guess to encourage each side to talk about what they're seeing.

M28: Yeah maybe differing expectations between mentor and mentee and I guess it could be most clear in the planning

M27: So modelling that expectation.

M28: But looking towards continuous improvement as progression.

M27: ...give them an opportunity to talk about it if there's a problem.

Data from other pairs of mentors (M28 & M29, M30 & M31) expressed conflict that matched with previously mentioned mentors. For instance, M28 and M29 outlined professional issues that could be resolved with a code of practice, and M30 & M31 emphasised the development of positive personal-professional relationships to negate possible conflicts in these areas.

Discussion

This study outlined possible conflicts that can occur within a mentoring program and ways in which these conflicts can be resolved. The participating mentors ($n=31$) expressed a range of issues that have lead to conflicts, at personal, pedagogical and professional levels, for instance: inadequate mentor selection at the school level; being unsuitable personality matching; arguing with the mentor; the inappropriate use of social networking; unsuitable school attire; a lack of content knowledge and skills; and unsuitability for the profession (Table 1). As an example, the inappropriate use of social networking by a preservice teacher can be damaging to the school, teachers, students and the preservice teacher. Mentees must be aware that a misuse of social networking can have serious consequences.

Importantly for teaching, conflicts can occur when the mentee is not well prepared and demonstrates a lack of knowledge and skills for teaching. These signs may lead towards failing a preservice teacher. Indeed, some mentors can have difficulty failing a preservice teacher because of a lack of mentoring skills and knowledge; that is knowledge of whom to contact in such situations and a clear awareness of the level that is expected for passing a preservice teacher. Third-party mediation is required when preservice teachers are deemed to be unsuited to the profession.

Table 1. *Conflicts and conflict resolution strategies*

Conflict themes	Specific conflicts	Conflict resolution strategies for mentors
Personal issues	Selecting unsuitable mentors	More rigorous selection process; build capacity by educating mentors
	Dominant personalities Incompatibility	Open communication with mentee; astute questioning; develop empathy
	Inappropriate language when communicating with mentor	Evaluation skills (tone & quality of communication); mediation with more experienced third party
Pedagogical issues	Inaccurate content knowledge	Review planning
	Unsuitable language for teaching	Outline relevant language and communication skills
	Behaviour management situations	Mentor to take class and model practices; discuss building in procedures (e.g., expectations of students)
Professional issues	Inappropriate social networking	Provide a code of conduct
	Unsuitable school attire	Mentor to model attire; outline expectations
	Lack of confidence	Develop a professional relationship; sharing responsibility; regular feedback; instil empowerment
	Unsuited to the profession	Third-party mediation

Conflict could occur in any relationship, including the mentoring relationship; hence conflict resolution skills can contribute towards having a more effective mentoring relationship (Eby & McManus, 2004). Resolving conflicts depends on the level of intensity of the conflict, willingness of partners to solve the conflict, and a range of other factors that need to be explored. Theoretically, various personal, pedagogical and professional (3P) issues can be associated with low to high-level interventions (e.g., see Figure 2). For example, providing a code of conduct and

outlining expectations may be considered a low-level intervention strategy while third-party mediation may be viewed at a higher level. It was highlighted that mentors need to be proactive in establishing positive relationships and provide mentees with sufficient information and expectations to guide mentees' practices within the school and classroom. To illustrate, providing a code of conduct can assist preservice teachers to be aware of rules and regulations and thus breaching these (e.g., unsuitable school attire and misuse of social networking) may result in potential conflicts. Indeed, part of such codes can include the use of Internet to demonstrate cyber smart usage for teachers (e.g., www.cybersmart.gov.au). It was important to recognise that honest and diplomatic communication needs to incorporate planning for a more productive mentoring relationship (see also Rush et al., 2008). Having communication lines open, planning before and during professional experience, and being open to challenges may be some ways to negate conflict within the mentoring relationship.

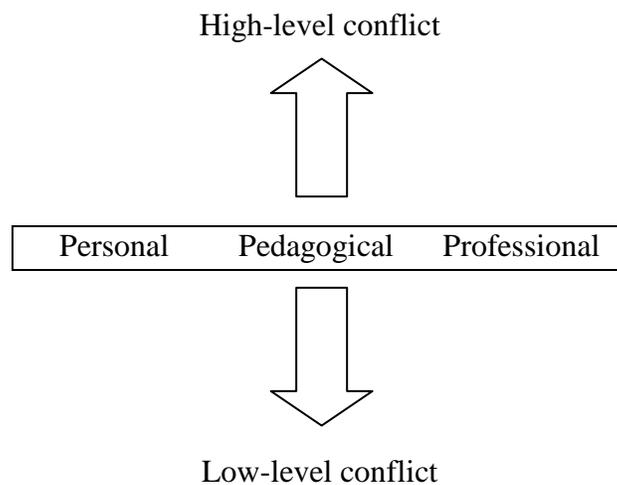


Figure 2. Model showing levels of conflict within the 3P issues.

There were other formative arrangements such as sharing responsibility at the commencement of the professional school experience for the mentee to engage in productive mentor-mentee discussions. As a distributed leadership practice (see Gronn, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond; 2001), the mentor can outline and negotiate the mentee's responsibilities for teaching and involvement in the school. As the mentor is in a position of power (Bradbury & Koballa, 2008; Hansman, 2003), presenting expectations and listening to the mentee's expectations can help to form a more understanding mentor-mentee relationship that shares responsibility and empowers the mentee to act affirmatively. There was also the notion that planning around negating disagreements between mentor and mentee at the beginning of the practicum can assist in facilitating open communication. For instance, a mentee may be more open to discussion if the mentor encouraged the mentee to discuss concerns and issues openly.

It was indicated that once conflict occurs, the mentor should draw upon conflict resolution strategies to facilitate a positive outcome (e.g., see the Conflict Resolution Network <http://www.crnhq.org/>). One strategy, emphasised by mentors in this study, was the use of empathy as a way to understand the mentee's concerns, issues or problems. During conflicts, mapping out the conflict was considered a useful strategy and, where the conflict could not be resolved or resolved easily, enlisting a knowledgeable third party to mediate the situation was considered essential. When seeking solutions to conflicts most agreed that exploring low-level conflict resolution strategies would be more favourable before employing third-party mediation as a strategy.

It seems reasonable to conclude that mentoring preparation and positive mentoring relationships can result in fewer conflicts (Gormley, 2008). In this current study, maintaining a positive professional relationship and providing regular feedback were noted as formative scaffolding to allow for open discussion of potential issues. Yet Ganser (1996) discusses how there can be conflicts between the mentor's dual role as a confidant and an assessor, which was also inferred within this study. However, there is limited research on dysfunctional mentoring relationships to provide adequate understandings on how to address such dysfunctions (Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002). Gormley outlines the need for more research about mentor-mentee relationships including mentors' and mentees' perceptions of each other, mentoring conflicts and conflict management, and factors that may contribute to mentoring dysfunction. There is also a need for research to uncover degrees of conflict (i.e., low to high levels of conflict) and resulting outcomes in relation to the degrees of conflict. Although there are some insights into catalysts for conflict, reasons for conflicts within mentoring relationships require considerably more research.

Conclusion

The mentor teachers ($n=31$) in this qualitative study indicated that conflicts generally occur around personal, pedagogical and professional issues. They outlined specific conflict resolution strategies such as: maintaining a positive professional relationship; providing regular feedback as a mechanism that develops a willingness to address issues; sharing responsibility for teaching; using empathy towards personal situations; providing a code of conduct with clear expectations; and enlisting third-party mediation with more experienced staff. It was also suggested that mentors need to plan around negating disagreements between the mentor and mentee that aim towards achieving positive outcomes. Although some of the conflicts and resolution strategies

may be relevant to mentors elsewhere, the theoretical model (Figure 2) could be used to identify conflicts between mentors and mentees for the purposes of classifying these conflicts at low and high levels and establishing a bank of conflict resolution strategies pertinent to each conflict. As this current study sought only mentors' viewpoints, it is essential that other studies seek mentees' views and other key stakeholder perspectives (e.g., school executive staff). Indeed, the conflicts in this study were self-reported and come with bias, thus ethnographic research that observes conflicts and conflict resolution in the field may present viewpoints from a third-party perspective.

Ways to resolve conflicts need to be embedded in university documentation to assist mentors when faced with similar circumstances. Mentoring is a two-way process, thus universities would have a responsibility to educate their preservice teachers about the types of conflicts that may arise when undertaking professional school experiences. It would also be advantageous to have a collection of case studies that outline ongoing conflicts and how these can be resolved.

Knowledge of conflicts and resolution strategies can assist mentors, mentees and peripheral personnel (e.g., school executives and university staff) to facilitate more productive mentoring programs.

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