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Feature Article

The TCSEFP Hybrid eMentoring Model: A Distance Education Mentoring Model

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Abstract

This article describes a hybrid eMentoring model used to support fellows during an 11-month fellowship program, the Teachers College Special Education Fellowship Program (TCSEFP). The TCSEFP is a residency in teaching (RIT) induction program that leads to the completion of a high incidence special education endorsement and a master's degree in special education. During the fellowship, each participant receives extensive, explicit mentoring from onsite and off-site mentors. This hybrid eMentoring model, developed as a part of the TCSEFP, is facilitated in part via distance technologies. This article extends the residency in teaching professional literature to special education teacher preparation programs delivered via distance education. The TCSEFP hybrid eMentoring model extends residency in teaching university-school partnerships to K-12 schools in remote rural regions.

The history of public education in America is a story of transformation (Schneider, 2018). Our schools have evolved from crude one-room schoolhouses to multi-graded consolidated schools (Cordier, 1992). Teachers have played a critical role in facilitating these profound changes in our educational system. Initially, those who taught our children were women, many of whom had limited education and no formal teacher preparation (Cordier, 1992; Schneider, 2018). As our educational system evolved, states adopted specific content area curricula, set graduation standards, and established professional teacher licensing procedures (Schneider, 2018). The development of professional teacher licensing procedures highlighted the pivotal roles teachers have played in our educational system. It also led to the creation of post-secondary preservice and, more recently, inservice teacher preparation programs (Mitchell & King, 2016; Schneider, 2018) as well as a professional literature replete with studies investigating teacher preparation practices (Mitchell & King, 2016).

Our professional literature highlights the importance of field experiences in teacher preparation programs (Mitchell & King, 2016). Numerous studies have noted that "strong [teacher preparation] programs" require students to spend extensive time in the field throughout their programs (Darling-Hammond, 2000, 2006, 2009, 2010; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2002). These programs

are increasingly rejecting traditional teacher training models that provide preservice teachers with pedagogical foundations followed by supervised student teaching in favor of alternate pathways to teacher licensure (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2011).

Two common alternate pathway models to teacher licensure in university teacher training programs are the Professional Development School Model and the Residence in Teaching Model (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2011). The Professional Development School (PDS) Model is a collaborative partnership model between university teacher training programs and P-12 schools. It focuses on "preparing [preservice teachers], providing current educators with ongoing professional development, encouraging joint school-university faculty investigation of education-related issues, and promoting the learning of P-12 students" (National Association of Professional Development Schools, 2008, p. 1). The Residence in Teaching (RIT) Model is an induction model that includes planning and collaboration between teachers in residence and other teachers throughout their schools as well as P-12 schools and university teacher training programs (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Fulton, et al., 2005; Guha, et al., 2016; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Induction models, like RIT, support teachers throughout their first year of teaching; from their first teaching experience through their adjustment to all the roles and responsibilities associated with teaching (Guha, et al., 2016). Wong, Britton, and Ganser (2005) note that induction programs, including RIT programs, share several attributes in common: High structure, focus on professional learning, and extensive collaboration between university teacher preparation programs and P-12 schools. In addition, RIT models combine a one-year, coteaching clinical component with the completion of a master's degree (Guha, et al., 2016; Han & Doyle, 2013).

While these alternate pathway models (i.e., PDS and RIT) vary in design, scope, and requirements, they typically reduce requirements in pedagogical preparation and put preservice and inservice teachers in charge of classrooms during their field experiences (Rosenberg et al., 2007). In addition, they incorporate collaboration between P-12 schools and university teacher training programs. Moreover, mentoring for preservice and inservice teachers is a critical component of both models (Darling-Hammond, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2010; Fulton et al., 2005; Guha et al., 2016; Han & Doyle, 2013; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). In both PDS and RIT, mentors provide invaluable modeling and coaching for preservice and inservice teachers. With guidance from mentors, preservice and inservice teachers learn to connect theory to practice. They engage in the "practice of practice" ultimately developing into accomplished teachers (Babes, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2000, 2006, 2010). Thus, our professional literature clearly indicates that experiences in classrooms, under the mentorship of expert teachers, greatly enhances preservice and inservice teachers' growth and development (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010). These partnerships help preservice and inservice teachers develop professional dispositions, which positively impacts all students (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2018). Consequently, quality clinical experiences that include effective mentoring are integral to effective teacher preparation programs (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Guha et al., 2016; Mercer & Meyers, 2014).

The purpose of this article is to describe an effective hybrid, i.e., face-to-face and virtual, eMentoring model for special education teachers participating in an RIT program, the Teachers College Special Education Fellowship Program (TCSEFP).

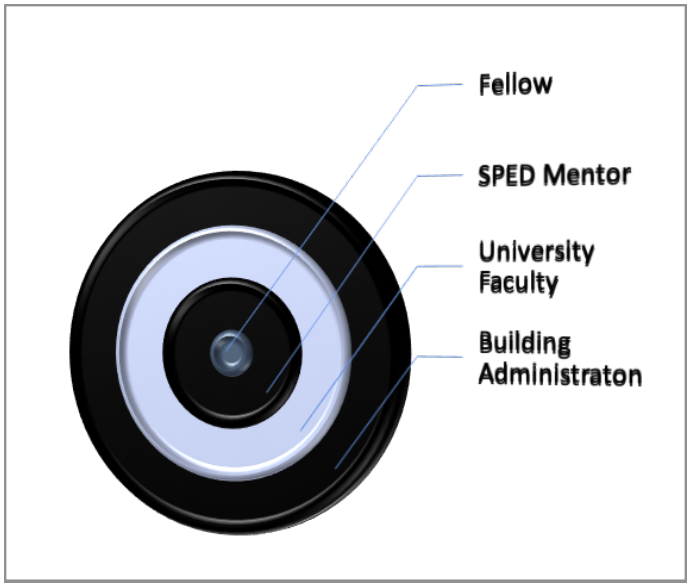
The TCSEFP: A Distance Education RIT Model

The Teacher's College Special Education Fellowship Program (TCSEFP) is a distance education residency in teaching induction program for high incidence special education teachers (Bock, 2019; Bock & O'Neal-Hixson, 2016). The TCSEFP serves the state of Kansas. Participants in this fellowship program must have either a K-6 or a 6-12 general

education teaching license, a GPA of 3.25 or higher on the final 60 credit hours of undergraduate coursework, and a recommendation from their employer. Each fellow is hired as a first-year special education teacher with a provisional special education license from the Kansas State Department of Education. During the 11-month fellowship, each fellow completes a 24-credit hour graduate high incidence endorsement. The endorsement coursework maximizes professional learning for the fellows. It includes two on-the-job practicums that have been revised in collaboration with our K-12 partners. The fellows finish their special education master's degree during their second year of teaching.

All university coursework is taught via distance technologies (e.g., course websites, lecture captures, video conference programs, email, and phone). Similarly, all K-12 and university partnership activities occur via the same distance technologies. This includes extensive, highly structured eMentor training and provision of eMentor support for fellows throughout the fellowship from both onsite mentors as well as university faculty. K-12 school administrators also serve as mentors for each fellow throughout the 11-month fellowship program. The K-12 administrators and university faculty also select a special education teacher with a minimum of 5-years special education teaching experience to serve as an eMentor for each fellow. University faculty work with K-12 school administrators throughout the 11-month fellowship to facilitate continuity of mentoring activities across the K-12 schools and the university. In addition, university faculty train the eMentors and coach them throughout the 11-month fellowship program.

Figure 1
The TCSEFP Hybrid eMentor Model.



As Figure 1 shows, our hybrid eMentor model surrounds each fellow with a tiered mentor system. This tiered system includes both on-site mentors (i.e., the SPED mentor and the building administrator) and eMentors (i.e., university faculty). Table 1 highlights the mentoring activity provided by each mentor.

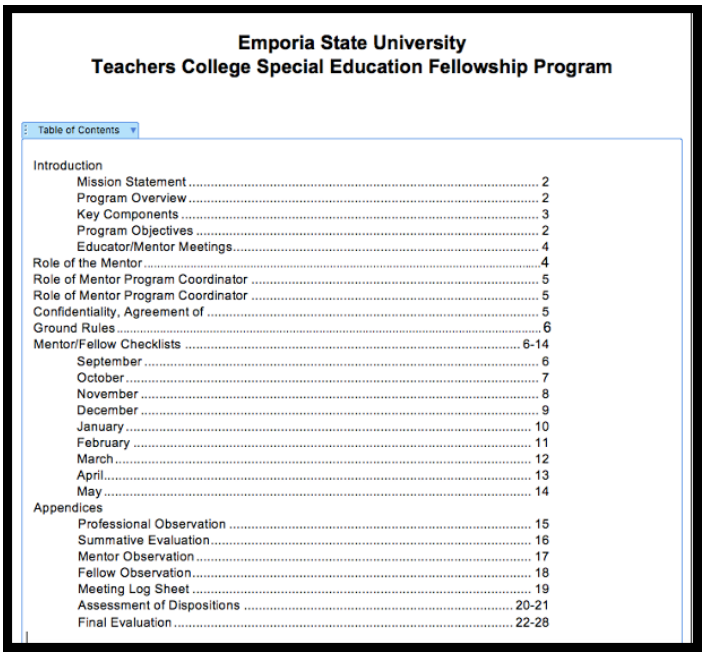
Table 1
Hybrid eMentor roles and responsibilities.

SPED Mentors	University Faculty	Building Administrators
Meet weekly with fellow	Meet monthly with fellows	Collaborate with University Faculty on TCSEFP
Schedule all fellow activities	Work with mentor to schedule fellow activities	Meet quarterly with University Faculty
Communicate with University faculty	Meet monthly with mentors	Recruit fellows
Communicate with Building Administration	Communicate with Building Administrators	Recruit mentors
Complete Online Mentor Training	Teach & observe fellows	Observe fellows twice a semester
Coach fellows	Complete fellow evaluations	Work with mentors to schedule observations
Complete fellow evaluations		Complete fellow evaluations

eMentor Handbook

The TCSEFP eMentor Handbook provides the structure for the eMentoring component of our RIT fellowship program. We developed this handbook in collaboration with our K-12 administrators. They include our partner special education directors and university faculty members. Figure 2 is the TCSEFP Mentor Handbook Table of Contents. As is clear from the Table of Contents, the handbook provides a description of the TCSEFP, clarifies roles for all partner members, provides monthly checklists of activities each SPED eMentor completes with their fellow, and provides requisite forms the SPED eMentors' use as they complete these activities. The monthly SPED eMentor checklists are aligned with K-12 annual academic calendars as well as university Practicums I and II course assignments. In short, these monthly checklists ensure a tight alignment between K-12 academic calendars and university Practicums I and II course assignments.

Figure 2.
Table of Content for the Teachers College Special Education Fellowship Program Mentor Handbook.



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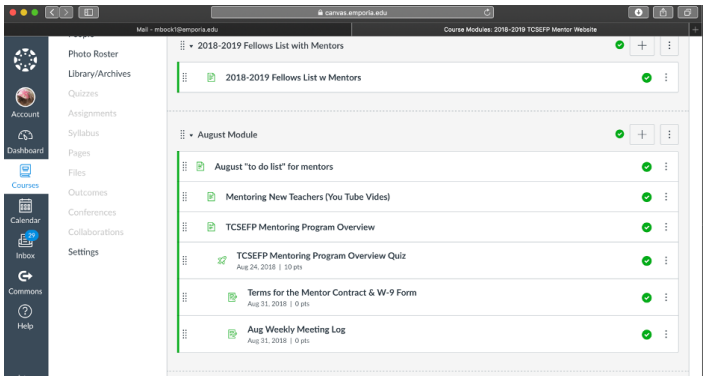
SPED eMentor Training

University faculty created a Canvas course shell for the SPED eMentors. This Canvas site structures SPED eMentor activities throughout the fellowship. SPED eMentors log in to the Canvas site at the beginning of each month. They complete an online SPED eMentor training session. The session contains a lecture capture and related quiz. The lecture capture provides explicit instructions regarding the activities SPED eMentors are to complete during the month, deadlines for the activities, and directions SPED eMentors will follow when completing required forms and assessments during the month. The training modules may also include YouTube videos, journal articles, and resources related to successful first year teacher mentoring programs. These modules are arranged by months. Each module includes a "to do list" as well as copies of all required forms and assessments needed to complete the monthly activities. Figure 3 is a screenshot of a portion of the August 2019 module in the SPED eMentor Canvas course shell.

Figure 3.
August 2019 Module activities on the eMentor Canvas course shell



SPED eMentor Coaching

University faculty provide explicit SPED eMentor coaching throughout the fellowship. The faculty host monthly SPED eMentor meetings via a video conferencing program. These 45-minute meetings facilitate ongoing communication among SPED eMentors and university faculty. A portion of each meeting is spent answering questions posed by SPED eMentors regarding monthly activities. University faculty provide instruction specific to various practicum assignments, e.g., creating

direct instruction/universal design lesson plans using the university lesson plan template. This lesson plan integrates direct instruction (DI) and evidence based instructional strategies for students with disabilities with Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a framework to differentiate instruction to meet the unique needs of each learner. Both DI and UDL are cornerstone instructional techniques used to work with students with disabilities. This lesson plan template incorporates the use of both. As is typical for teachers in residency positions, the TCSEFP fellows present challenges creating and implementing effective lesson plans (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2011). The SPED eMentors' role in helping the fellows learn how to create and implement effective lesson plans for students with disabilities utilizing direct instruction and universal design for learning cannot be overstated. However, without ongoing coaching from university faculty, it is unlikely the SPED eMentors would be able to help the fellows with this challenging task as successfully. During an eMentor Zoom session, University faculty presented the DI/UDL lesson plan template. Faculty discussed the template and shared a sample, completed lesson plan using the template with the eMentors. This resulted in the eMentors successfully guiding the fellows through the development of effective DI/UDL lesson plans for students with disabilities. Consequently, the monthly SPED eMentor meetings are a critical component of our SPED eMentoring coaching.

In addition to the monthly SPED eMentor meetings, university faculty provide regular individualized support to SPED eMentors via the video conferencing program, email, and phone calls. Through these ongoing interactions with SPED eMentors, university faculty help each SPED eMentor customize the eMentoring component of the TCSEFP for each fellow, each fellow's specific special education teaching assignment, and the many and varied unexpected events that happen throughout the fellowship. Through this multi-faceted coaching model, i.e., the SPED eMentor handbook and website, the SPED eMentor monthly meetings, and the SPED eMentor individual communication, university faculty facilitate dynamic, explicit, and highly structured eMentoring for each fellow in the TCSEFP residency in teaching program.

TCSEFP Hybrid eMentoring Pitfalls

The TCSEFP began in June of 2016 (Bock & O'Neal-Hixson, 2016). Over the past three years we have experienced two pitfalls related to the hybrid eMentoring component of the TCSEFP:

- Distance technology phobia
- SPED eMentor/fellow overload

Distance technology phobia

The university faculty teach solely in an online graduate special education program. Consequently, they are quite familiar with and accustomed to using a variety of distance technologies. However, within the first few months of this grant-funded project, they quickly realized that they would need to help some of the fellows and nearly all of the SPED eMentors and building administrators learn how to use various distance technologies. A portion of the fellows were noticeably uncomfortable using the course websites, participating in video conferencing class sessions, and creating videos of their micro-teaching lessons. University faculty and instructional technology staff supported the fellows as they learned to use these distance technologies. By the end of their summer coursework, the fellows had mastered the distance technologies associated with our program and used these technologies with ease.

As the faculty began working with the SPED eMentors they found that many of these mentors used few distance technologies regularly either at work or in their lives outside of work. Faculty encouraged the fellows to help their SPED eMentors learn how to use the SPED eMentor Canvas site as well as the video conferencing program. University instructional technology staff jumped in to help as needed. This pitfall improved notably following the first year in part because we had experienced SPED eMentors return to the

program for a second year. The returning SPED eMentors helped the new SPED eMentors. Also, university faculty and instructional technology personnel provided explicit technical support for SPED eMentors via email and over the phone at the beginning of both years two and three. Once the SPED eMentors mastered the distance technologies associated with this program, they helped the building principals master these distance technologies.

SPED eMentor/fellow overload

This issue occurs with our rural partners fairly regularly. Our SPED eMentors who work with rural school districts often mentor more than one fellow at a time. This is necessary as there is often only one qualified person to serve as the SPED eMentor in our partner schools located throughout the remote, rural regions of the state. Not only are these SPED eMentors working with more than one fellow, their fellows are often located in different school districts within a special education cooperative. These school districts can be 30-45 miles apart. Thus, these SPED eMentors can experience some pretty extreme challenges completing the weekly meetings with their fellows. In addition, they can find it difficult to schedule the teaching observations for their fellows. The university faculty have encouraged the SPED eMentors experiencing these scheduling challenges to "think outside the box" and consider using the video conferencing program for a portion of their weekly meetings with their fellows. At this point, most of the SPED eMentors in this situation remain less then comfortable with this possible solution; however, those who have tried this solution report that it is working. These SPED eMentors are encouraging the others to try this approach to solving this problem. No other solutions have been proposed.

TCSEFP Hybrid eMentoring Promises

In spite of the pitfalls we have experienced with the TCSEFP Hybrid eMentoring model, we see great promise with this model. Our hybrid eMentoring model is integral in helping our fellows achieve target level performance on all Kansas State Department of Education program assessment activities (Bock, 2018). It also plays a critical role in the fellows' PRAXIS performance. To date, all fellows have achieved a passing score on the PRAXIS Special Education: Core Knowledge and Mild to Moderate Applications 5543 test without the need to retake the test (Bock, 2019).

Our school partners note that the Hybrid eMentoring component along with the graduate tuition support affiliated with the TCSEFP help them recruit and retain K-6 and 6-12 special education teachers for students with high incidence disabilities. They also say that, in general, the fellows are better prepared to teach special education then most of their other entry-level special education teachers (Bock, 2019). They attribute this to the explicit, structured virtual mentoring the fellows receive throughout the 11-month fellowship. Moreover, the collaboration supporting the TCSEFP creates transformative practice for the university teacher training program; the university program is now closely tied to the realities of teaching high incidence special education throughout the state of Kansas. All of our graduate courses leading to the high incidence endorsement now contain field-based assignments derived from typical on-the-job activities performed regularly by high incidence special education teachers throughout Kansas. And finally, we have found this virtual mentoring component to be so beneficial for the fellows that we are now transitioning to a virtual mentoring model for all of our students, i.e., all of our other students in our traditional graduate program.

However, by far the greatest promise of the TCSEFP virtual mentoring component is its impact on special education services throughout Kansas. The fellows who participate in this project evolve into effective special education teachers during their fellowship. They learn to manage the paperwork associated with special education. They learn to work effectively with parents of students with disabilities as well as professionals both within and outside schools who work with these same children and their families. They learn to

implement individualized, evidence-based interventions and best practice assessments to evaluate the overall efficacy of these interventions. University faculty watch fellows progress from overwhelmed, novice special education teachers to confident teachers who develop individualized learning activities aligned with IEP goals and state educational standards. The fellows finish their fellowship with confidence knowing that they can effectively teach children with disabilities. What is the key factor in this transformation? As one of the fellows recently said, "The university faculty are great, but my eMentor was AMAZING!!! I can't imagine getting through this year without her."

Footnote

Since this article was written, we along with the rest of the world are currently experiencing COVID-19. Little did we know at the time we developed this eMentoring model how critical it would be as our state and the country battle COVID-19. The Hybrid eMentoring model described in this article helped our program adjust quickly to the many and varied virtual teaching models our school partners implemented to work with students with high incidence disabilities in their homes. University faculty hosted additional zoom sessions to help the fellows develop effective virtual learning and assessment activities for their K-12 students with high incidence disabilities. University faculty continued to observe the fellows and evaluate their teaching using distance technologies. The K-12 mentors also continued to mentor their fellow throughout the stay-at-home orders. They simply mentored their fellows virtually rather than face to face. COVID-19 highlighted the strengths of the hybrid eMentoring model described in this article.

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