# Mentorship Matters
## Embedding RCT into the Teaching Internship in Counselor Education

The internship in teaching is a crucial component of doctoral student education, as it builds a "counselor educator" identity and prepares doctoral students for the future roles as faculty members teaching and supporting counselors-in-training. While CACREP describes "teaching" as one of the five areas of professional identity and requires that doctoral students receive 600 hours of supervised experiences within counseling and two of the four remaining core areas, CACREP does not make recommendations as to specific supervisory practices to support doctoral students' professional identity development. Leveraging the literature that describes the importance of mentorship within the internship in teaching, our brief presents a model of how counselor educators can embed the elements of relational cultural theory (RCT) into their supervision of doctoral teaching.

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Learning to teach, the teaching internship (Hunt & Gilmore, 2011), and supervision of teaching (Batrinic & Suddeath, 2020), are critical elements of a doctoral student's academic journey in counselor education. CACREP (2024) identifies "teaching" as one of the five core curriculum areas to develop a doctoral professional identity. Further, CACREP (2024) requires that all doctoral students complete 600 hours of, "...supervised experiences in counseling and at least two more of the four remaining doctoral curricular areas (supervision, teaching, research and scholarship, leadership and advocacy" (6.C.2). The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) *Strategic Plan* (2021) similarly highlighted the importance of teaching within counselor education and identified the need to develop counselor education best practices briefs based on areas such as diversity, equity, inclusion, anti-racism, and the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2016). Additionally, ACES (2021) called on its strategic plan committee to, "...explore teaching-focused professional development opportunities" (p. 5).

In this teaching brief, we respond to the ACES *Strategic Plan* by proposing a model of how counselor educators (CEs) can embed the elements of relational-cultural theory (RCT) into their supervision of doctoral teaching. RCT is well-suited to ACES's goals, given RCT's alignment with the MSJCC (Comstock et al., 2008). While researchers have discussed the utilization of RCT in advising (Dipre & Luke, 2020; Purgason et al., 2016), mentoring (Lewis & Olshansky, 2016), and clinical supervision (Duffey et al., 2016; Lenz, 2014; Stargell et al., 2020), researchers have not yet discussed the application of RCT to the teaching internship component of doctoral studies. Drawing upon the research base that exists for RCT and the teaching internship experience, we present a model for how CEs can best support doctoral students and advance their knowledge and skills.

# Description of Teaching Innovation/ Instructional Strategy

Internship experiences provide doctoral students with the opportunity for essential learning through engagement in trusting relationships with their faculty teaching mentors (Baltrinic et al., 2016). Hunt and Gilmore's (2011) investigation into the teaching internship experience described mentorship as an important aspect of building feelings of support for doctoral students. Their findings align with additional research (e.g., Murdock et al., 2013; Perera-Diltz & Sauerheber, 2016; Walker, 2006) outlining the multiple benefits of mentorship, including: (a) providing doctoral students with emotional support, (b) building doctoral students' confidence and self-esteem in teaching, and (c) developing a greater awareness of doctoral students' own skills.

Researchers in related helping fields, such as social work, also suggest that strong mentoring experiences help doctoral students develop relational and pedagogical methods to effectively engage higher education learners (Chen et al., 2020). Similarly, Baltrinic and Suddeath (2020)

indicated that a strong relationship was a necessary component in supervision of teaching. In their investigation into doctoral students' lived experiences with supervision of teaching, the researchers recommended that counselor education programs provide doctoral students with the following sequence of supervisory interaction: (a) affirmation and support, (b) candid feedback into strengths and weaknesses, and (c) time for process and reflection.

Despite the importance of the teaching internship in counselor education training, few researchers describe specific models that CEs can use to support their work mentoring new students into the field of counselor education (e.g., Baltrinic and Suddeath, 2020; Chen et al., 2020). Thus, we propose an innovative approach that incorporates relational models into the supervision of teaching experience.

Researchers investigating relational models of mentoring in counseling programs have highlighted that CEs can foster a sense of mutuality, empathy, and a sense of understanding that serve to empower and enhance the professional development of mentees (Walker, 2006). Further, Walker (2006) posited that relationally oriented mentoring in counselor education can provide reciprocal rewards that enhance future collegial relationships, in addition to creating future generations of effective mentors. While there are many strengths involved with mentorship during the internship experience, additional researchers should highlight supervisory approaches to best support doctoral students during the internship of teaching (Baltrinic & Suddeath, 2020). We respond to the call for further inquiry into the teaching internship experience by describing how counselor educators can embed their supervision of teaching practices with the tenets of RTC.

## RELATIONAL-CULTURAL THEORY

Jean Baker Miller (1976) created RTC in response to a lack of diversity within psychology. Miller and her colleagues drew upon the marginalization they experienced as women and positioned RCT as a therapeutic approach that saw connection, rather than individuation, as a salve to mend divides found in the individualistic and predominantly Western world of psychology at the time (Jordan, 2010). Embedded within RCT is a three-prong approach that consists of (a) relational awareness and the reciprocal offering of (b) mutual empathy in which all parties can demonstrate (c) authenticity leading to mutually beneficial growth fostering relationships (Jordan, 2024). Table 1 presents a complete list of core RCT tenets. At the heart of RCT is a multicultural approach that seeks to examine power, privilege, marginalization, and systemic barriers by promoting growth fostering relationships and moving toward connection (Comstock et al., 2008; Dipre & Luke, 2020). While a complete overview of RCT is beyond the scope of the present article, further information regarding RCT's origins and current theoretical developments can be sampled in several publications (e.g., Frey, 2013; Jordan, 2008; 2024).

**Table 1**

*Key Tenets of RCT*

| | | **Promotes Growth Toward:** |
|---|---|---|
| **Key Tenets:** | 1. Relational Awareness<br>2. Mutual Empathy<br>3. Authenticity | Growth Fostering Relationships |

*Note*: Adapted from Jordan, J. V. (2010). *Relational-cultural therapy.* American Psychological Association.

Since RTC's inception, theorists have continued expanding RCT to investigate and encompass issues relating to race, sexual orientation, and other socio-political topics (e.g., Alvarez, 1995; Coll et al., 1995; Eldridge et al., 1993; Sparks, 1999; Tatum, 1997). Such an expansion has culminated in RCT applications outside of therapy, including supervision, leadership training, and business organization (Fletcher, 2004; Jordan, 2010; Purgason et al., 2016). In recent years, RCT theorists broadened the theory again to take a social action stance and continue supporting marginalized individuals (Comstock et al., 2008; Jordan, 2017). RCT's compatibility with social justice principles is well aligned with counseling values (ACES, 2021; Comstock et al., 2008), and particularly suitable for use with doctoral students (Dipre & Luke, 2020; Gammel & Rutstein-Riley, 2016; Lonn et al., 2014; Purgason et al., 2016). While scholars have applied RCT principles to other aspects of graduate training (e.g., Dipre & Luke, 2020; Gammel & Rutstein-Riley, 2016; Lonn et al., 2014; Purgason et al., 2016), no RCT-specific model exists in the literature for the doctoral teaching internship. Thus, our approach represents an innovative step toward applying RCT strategically to support doctoral student growth during their internship in teaching. In creating our model, we relied on our own experiences receiving supervision support from a counselor educator utilizing RCT principles.

## EMBEDDING RTC INTO THE SUPERVISION OF TEACHING

The first three authors of the teaching brief are doctoral candidates at a nationally ranked, CACREP-accredited counselor education and supervision program. The last author is a counselor educator with more than 10 years of experience working with doctoral students and 15 years of experience counseling individuals, couples, and families. In their work as a counselor educator, the fourth author has supervised more than 30 doctoral students during the internship of teaching component of doctoral education. During their doctoral program of study, all three doctoral students co-taught and received individual supervision with the fourth author to support their teaching internship. After their semester co-teaching concluded, the authors discussed the rewarding aspects of the supervision experience, and how to support other doctoral students with similar levels of support. Table 2 demonstrates how counselor educators can embed RCT into the teaching internship through purposeful mentoring. We elaborate on each component in the following sections.

**Table 2**

*Embedding RCT into the Doctoral Teaching Internship in Counselor Education*

| Component of Teaching Internship: | Instructor Actions: | Description of Alignment with RCT Key Tenets: | Example: |
|---|---|---|---|
| Preparing to Teach | 1. Counselor Educator (CE) sends an initial email welcoming doctoral student (DS) to the teaching internship. 2. CE and DS collaborate on syllabus development and co-review/revise. 3. CE shares instructor/supervisory hopes for DS during the teaching internship. 4. CE provides expectations for DS and communicates structure and support. 5. CE and DS set up a regular schedule of meetings for supervision. | Promotes a growth fostering relationship between CE and DS by setting the environment for DS to create and maintain a healthy relational image as "co-teacher." | CE intentionally creates an environment conducive to growth fostering relationships by providing clarity, respect, and warmth. When appropriate, CE acknowledges issues of power, privilege, and marginalization that may be impacting the teaching space and CE/DS dynamics. DS receives clear expectations to support their development and acquire new skills. |
| Teaching | 1. CE models teaching best practices for DS. 2. CE supports DS by having DS facilitate class meetings. | Promotes a growth fostering relationship between CE and DS by establishing reciprocal relationships, thus building mutual empathy. | CE invites DS to observe CE's teaching style and prepares intentional questions to build DS's growing identity as "co-teacher." CE supports DS to co-facilitate and solo facilitate class meetings, providing structure and support, as necessary. |
| Reflecting on Teaching | 1. CE and DS explore teaching philosophies and pedagogical approaches. 2. CE and DS discuss teaching strengths and areas for improvement. 3. CE provides DS with teaching artifact to celebrate growth over the semester and build counselor educator identity. | Promotes a growth fostering relationship between CE and DS by encouraging authenticity– intentional sharing can lead to DS growth and development. | CE intentionally creates an atmosphere for feedback, including authentically sharing examples of strengths and opportunities. CE supports DS development by providing a tangible document of DS strengths (i.e., Teaching Artifact). |

## Preparing to Teach

Supervision of teaching is instrumental in developing competent and effective counselor educators (Baltrinic et al., 2016). Additionally, researchers indicate that effective supervision builds doctoral students' confidence for eventually teaching independently (Hunt & Gilmore,

2011). By embedding RCT into the supervision of teaching, counselor educators can support doctoral students' development of a healthy relational image in which doctoral students begin to see their own potential as counselor educators grow. Additionally, when counselor educators approach supervision from an RCT lens, they will also implement previous researchers' suggestion to offer doctoral students' affirmation and support (Baltrinic & Suddeath, 2020). CEs should support doctoral students' relational awareness through encouraging and structured communication. For example, they can officially welcome the doctoral student to the internship of teaching component of their studies, provide doctoral students with course materials, and establish consistent opportunities for teaching supervision. By supporting relational awareness, counselor educators also better equip doctoral students to handle challenges, or "disconnections" in RCT verbiage (Jordan, 2013), when they occur. Given that doctoral students may feel vulnerable as they build new skills, disconnects are likely to occur. When embedding RCT into the teaching internship, the goal is not to avoid disconnections; rather to grow through disconnections.

### Teaching

By modeling their own teaching practices and supporting the doctoral student as they begin to facilitate class sessions, CEs can promote healthy connections by establishing mutual empathy and respect (Jordan, 2013). Because of their position of authority and power, the CE can also broach conversations of how cultural differences might show up in the classroom. When the doctoral student facilitates class, the CE can further support the doctoral students' growth and development by communicating feedback sensitively. The CE can share their own examples of feeling positive and discouraged after classroom interactions; thus, allowing further progress toward a growth-fostering relationship (Jordan, 2013).

### Reflecting on Teaching

Baltrinic and Suddeath (2020) encouraged CEs to include authentic conversations around doctoral student strengths and weaknesses within teaching supervision, as well as adequate time for doctoral student reflection and processing. Embedding RTC into the supervision space allows CEs to accommodate these suggestions. Authenticity is a key tenet of RCT for progress toward growth-fostering relationships (Jordan, 2010). CEs should approach conversations around pedagogy and teaching strengths and weaknesses from a place of authenticity. In doing so, doctoral students can accurately reflect on their progress and authentically grow their teaching identities.

# RCT-Informed Assessment of Learning

Jordan (2000) posited that RCT comprises seven core concepts. Among these concepts is an emphasis on growth toward and through relationships, which consist of mutual empathy and empowerment. Furthermore, developing these growth-fostering relationships is not done by one individual, but instead all parties must contribute to stated growth. Similarly, assessment is not a unidirectional act in which teachers deliver feedback and doctoral students receive said feedback. Using a relational lens, teachers and learners can view teaching as a bidirectional exchange, with attention given to relational dynamics (Schwartz, 2017). To create a space where assessment can be both challenging and supportive, teachers should attend to several relational dynamics. When discussing assessment, we must first examine the inherent power dynamics between faculty and doctoral students. Faculty members hold the power of assessor and gatekeeper (Schwartz & Holloway, 2017) during a time when graduate students may be particularly vulnerable to feelings of imposter syndrome and uncertainty. The foundation of RCT centers the need to recognize and acknowledge the effects of power and privilege within the teaching internship space. This acknowledgment lays the groundwork for creating an area where doctoral students can build relationships with faculty, which may be particularly important for Black, Indigenous, and persons of color (BIPOC) students, who often face increased rates of discrimination and burnout in the counseling education spaces (Basma et al., 2023).

To give feedback from a relational lens, faculty members must foster supervisory relationships in which students are able to trust themselves and the faculty member; thus, allowing doctoral students to take risks and grow as faculty mentors provide assurance, guidance, and support (Schwarts, 2019). Both faculty members and students build the relationship with attention to the core tenets of RCT: authenticity, supported vulnerability, and mutual empathy and respect. From our experiences as doctoral students and CEs, we offer the following suggestions for facilitating relationship-building between doctoral students and faculty throughout the teaching internship.

1. Meet with students at the beginning of the course to discuss expectations and students' existing level of development, areas of strength, and room for challenge.

2. Host weekly check-ins to discuss course-specific details and create a touchpoint where faculty and students can discuss doctoral students' reflections and questions throughout the course.

3. Demonstrate genuine investment in student growth and goals by being relationally present during meetings and class time.

Following the cultivation of intentional relationships, faculty can begin to offer assessment to doctoral students. Just as faculty mentors encourage doctoral students to take risks, faculty mentors should also assess students using a method that promotes student growth. As

assessment is often a compulsory and pivotal part of teaching internships, we offer several relationally focused ways in which faculty can give formative (ongoing) and summative (overall) feedback. Teaching is a subjective skill based on various teaching and learning modalities, and so is the individualized nature of teaching assessment. When possible, faculty can seek to provide formative feedback after each class doctoral students teach to offer insight into doctoral students' strengths and growth areas from which the student can build upon. During this time, emphasizing reflective questioning allows the student to reflect on their own teaching practices and their grounding in philosophical approaches. This feedback can take place during weekly check-ins or informally after class. Feedback should be specific to each student rather than general murmurs of praise. This feedback provides doctoral students with tangible feedback to grow from while demonstrating the faculty's genuine belief that students' growth and personhood matter. According to Schwartz (2019) it is the act of mattering that fosters motivation and continued striving toward proficiency.

Specific feedback should also provide details on areas of improvement, which may be challenging for doctoral students to hear. Faculty members might remember their own experience of learning new skills and validate students' feelings of vulnerability and fear. Faculty can promote RCT's concept of supported vulnerability with humility and courage by sharing their own moments of critical feedback and academic triumphs with doctoral students (Schwartz, 2019). When feedback on areas of improvement is discussed, students may experience feelings of disconnection toward faculty members. However, when faculty members recognize such disconnections, they can intentionally seek to build and support each student's growth over the course of the internship. Such actions allow for mutual empathy to develop for more open and trusting relationships where difficult discussions can occur. Lastly, when providing formative and summative evaluations on teaching skills and mastery, faculty can give specific feedback that speaks to each doctoral student's growth and successes.

We recommend faculty provide doctoral students with a teaching evaluation form at the mid- and final points of the semester to assess a variety of teaching standards that include lesson planning and preparation, effectiveness in the communication of subject matter, connection with students, self-confidence in teaching, ability to provide feedback to students, professionalism, and insight and awareness on their own teaching growth and development. Assessing doctoral students with an evaluation form allows faculty to note areas of strength and areas for improvement, while providing doctoral students with a tangible reminder of their journey toward becoming a proficient teacher in training.

# RTC-Informed Teaching Evaluation

Assessing teaching effectiveness in alignment with CACREP standards is imperative in supporting doctoral students' understanding and implementation of teaching pedagogy prior to their graduation (Arcuri, 2016). However, determining the effectiveness of teaching

and supervision approaches can be challenging. As such, we highlight multiple measures of evaluation that CE's might employ to assess the effectiveness of RTC-informed mentorship and supervision during doctoral teaching internships.

First, CEs can utilize formal and informal assessment surveys to evaluate the effectiveness of RCT-informed supervision of teaching internships. For example, university-level student perceptions of instruction (SPI) surveys typically consist of questions that allow students the opportunity to provide their feedback and overall satisfaction with the instructor at the conclusion of each course. SPI data provides CE's with a longitudinal pattern of feedback about the effectiveness of their supervision of teaching each semester, allowing them to modify their approach. Additionally, mid- and final year teaching evaluations completed by both faculty and doctoral students provide both parties with an opportunity to reflect on their supervision and learning. Evaluative teaching forms also provide a structured rubric to support clarity.

CEs can also utilize less formal measures of assessment that include regular weekly check-ins with their doctoral interns during supervision. Regular check-ins are crucial in evaluating the effectiveness of RCT-informed supervision. Counselor educators can use check-ins to assess doctoral interns' outcome measures of professional growth, confidence, and self-efficacy. Further, CEs can use this time to deliver ongoing feedback with compassion, empathy, and validation. Thus, improving the supervisory connection and facilitating a space where open and honest communication can occur.

Lastly, CEs should not underestimate the value of continuous self-reflection. Especially within an RCT lens, self-reflection is a powerful method to measure the efficacy of supervising doctoral teaching internships. By regularly engaging in intrapersonal reflection on their RCT-informed teaching and supervision approach, counselor educators can identify the areas that have been most effective or areas that warrant improvement. Doing so is aligned with internship of teaching best practices (e.g., e.g., Murdock et al., 2013; Perera-Diltz & Sauerheber, 2016; Walker, 2006). This self-reflective process also encourages counselor educators to assess how they are meeting the key tenets of RCT aimed toward growth and fostering relationships.

# Implications

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Researchers have already articulated how doctoral students benefit from mentorship (e.g., Baltrinic & Suddeath, 2020; Hunt & Gilmore, 2011) and doctoral programming aligned with RCT principles (e.g., Dipre & Luke, 2020; Gammel & Rutstein-Riley, 2016; Lonn et al., 2014; Purgason et al., 2016). Additionally, by prioritizing multiculturalism and social justice, researchers have

noted that RCT responds to calls for diversity, equity, and inclusion within the profession (Comstock et al., 2008). By embedding RCT principles into CE's supervision of teaching, doctoral students will similarly benefit. However, RCT supervision is not a "fake it till you make it" approach. Vulnerability, empathy, and understanding (Gammel & Rutstein-Riley, 2016) are central components of RCT. Therefore, CEs must authentically "walk the talk" to effectively embed RCT principles into their supervisory practices.

## LIMITATIONS

While the research supporting RCT applications in counselor education is growing (e.g., Dipre & Luke, 2020; Gammel & Rutstein-Riley, 2016; Lonn et al., 2014; Purgason et al., 2016), RCT applications to the doctoral internship in teaching are scant. Additionally, our teaching brief relies on our experiences as doctoral students receiving RCT supervisory support and as a CE providing supervisory experiences embedded with RCT principles. As such, our teaching brief does not include quantitative data supporting CEs' decisions to embed RCT into the teaching internship. However, given the importance of the doctoral internship in teaching, researchers should continue exploring and publishing strategies to support both CEs' supervisory practices and doctoral students' internship experience. Thus, embedding RCT into the teaching internship is one such strategy.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The teaching internship is a crucial element of doctoral students' development towards competent CEs. However, there is little guidance to support what the supervision of the teaching internship should entail. Researchers suggest that quality mentoring experiences can support doctoral student growth (Baltrinic & Suddeath, 2020; Hunt & Gilmore, 2011). Similarly, researchers have established that RCT principles are compatible with doctoral student development (Dipre & Luke, 2020; Gammel & Rutstein-Riley, 2016; Lonn et al., 2014; Purgason et al., 2016). Future researchers can continue validating the efficacy of embedding RCT into the teaching internship via qualitative and quantitative research methods. For a qualitative approach, researchers can describe how doctoral students make meaning of their experience receiving RCT supervision. Doctoral students and faculty mentors can embed journaling prompts into the supervisory relationship and then analyze prompts using a qualitative analysis approach, such as qualitative document analysis (QDA; Miller & Alvarado, 2005). Future researchers can also utilize quantitative approaches and describe how doctoral student professional identity shifts while receiving RCT supervision. While counseling identity scales exist (e.g., *Professional Identity Scale in Counseling* [*PISC*]; Woo & Henfield, 2015; *Counseling Self-Efficacy Scale* [*CSES*]; Melchert et al., 1996), few researchers describe scales examining teaching identity in counselor education doctoral students. Thus, future researchers should consider developing professional identity scales that examine the core components of doctoral student development (i.e., counseling, teaching, supervision, research and scholarship, and leadership and advocacy; CACREP, 2024).

Finally, doctoral students can support their own burgeoning research identities by completing auto-ethnographic research describing their own experience receiving RCT supervision during their teaching internship. While an autoethnography was beyond the scope of the current teaching brief, the authors are considering preparing auto-ethnographic evidence to support future publications and presentations at counseling related conferences.

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