

Mentoring as a Leadership Development Strategy in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Mentoring is a facilitated process involving two or more individuals that have a shared interest in professional learning and development. Mentoring in early childhood is also seen as a leadership development strategy. Traditionally, mentoring has been used as a 'solution strategy' to enhance teacher pedagogical practice. Accordingly, what is mentoring and who can be a mentor are important to consider when assessing the veracity of the positive outcomes it claims. This paper will unpack the conceptual evolution of mentoring as a top-down model to the current collegial model by examining the definitions, functions, approaches and contexts of mentoring. By examining key findings of research on mentoring conducted during 2000–2012, implications for the early childhood sector are discussed.

Tiivistelmä

Mentorointi on ohjattu ja johdettu prosessi, jossa kahta tai useampaa henkilöä yhdistää kiinnostus samansuuntaiseen ammatilliseen oppimiseen ja kehittämiseen. Mentorointi varhaiskasvatuksessa nähdään myös johtamisen kehittämisen strategiana. Perinteisesti mentorointi on nähty ratkaisuna opettajan pedagogisten käytäntöjen kehittämisessä. Niinpä se, mitä mentorointi on ja kuka voi toimia mentorina, on tärkeää ottaa huomioon, kun arvioidaan väitettyjen positiivisten tulosten totuudenmukaisuutta. Tämä artikkeli purkaa mentoroinnin käsitteellistä evoluutiota mentoroinnin top down -mallista nykyiseen kollegiaaliseen malliin tarkastelemalla mentoroinnin määritelmiä, toimintoja, lähestymistapoja ja konteksteja. Tarkastelemalla tärkeimpiä tutkimustuloksia mentoroinnista vuosina 2000–2012, esitetään päätelmiä varhaiskasvatuksen alueelle.

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Significance and purpose of mentoring

‘Mentoring’ has been conceptualised and implemented in diverse ways within different professions, organisations and cultural contexts. As a process, mentoring may be generally described as a dynamic interpersonal relationship involving two or more people. Mentoring in early childhood is often perceived as “a peer relationship” (Nolan, 2007, xvii), where a more experienced practitioner provides professional guidance to one or more novice practitioners, either on a 1:1 basis or as a group. The differences in meaning and expectations held by the key stakeholders in the mentoring relationship, the mentor and protégé, can also contribute to the inconsistencies of how mentoring is understood and positioned within a formal leadership framework.

Governments today recognise that the quality of early childhood programs are dependent on the quality of its workforce that is assessed in terms of staff qualifications and participation in ongoing professional learning (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). In Australia, for instance, mentoring has been attracting much attention recently as an effective strategy to promote leadership development (Waniganayake, Cheeseman, Fenech, Hadley, & Shepherd, 2012). Mentoring of both qualified and unqualified teachers has been used as a ‘solutions strategy’ to overcome workplace challenges at times of conflict or crisis when intervention by someone with authority and experience is required. Mentoring, however, is more than a short-term intrusion in times of high need and can be adopted as a preventative approach, as in the case of succession planning to safeguard against the sudden loss of expertise and ensure a smooth handover from one leader to another (Waniganayake et al., 2012). This approach is also endorsed by government legislation where mentoring is linked with the *National Quality Framework* (Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority, 2011).

Likewise, pre-service teacher mentoring programs used in universities and schools have been developed typically with the aim of supporting the induction of new teachers into the teaching profession. Mentoring during the initial degree training and induction has been shown to boost teachers’ professional confidence, identity and their willingness to participate in professional learning (Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh, & Wilss, 2008; Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2010; Le Cornu, 2005; McCormick & Brennan, 2001;

Simpson, Hastings, & Hill, 2007). It has also been shown that involvement in mentoring can sustain the mentors' interests in the profession, lowering attrition rates and providing opportunities for continuous engagement in action research focused on pedagogy and practice (Morton, 2005; Souto-Manning, 2007).

The absence of role clarity in terms of the mentor and the protégé, as well as task confusion in terms of how the mentoring is implemented, can create confusion and dissatisfaction. In this chapter, a historical perspective is adopted in discussing how the concept of mentoring has evolved over time. It will also examine the critical dimensions of mentoring and how mentoring has been interpreted and implemented in education contexts. Based on an analysis of research conducted on mentoring over a decade, implications for the early childhood sector is presented.

Conceptual origins and meaning of mentoring

Mentoring is classically described as a relationship between two individuals where the older, more competent and experienced individual plays a nurturing, intentional, instructive and supportive role in shaping and developing the younger, less experienced individual. The notion of a 'Mentor' is often linked to a character in 'The Odyssey', the epic which dates back to ancient Greece where Telemachus, son of Odysseus, was entrusted to Mentor, a loyal family friend (Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008). Mentor was responsible for protecting, educating, teaching, guiding and nurturing Telemachus during Odysseus' absence for lengthy periods (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003). Roberts (1999) provides an alternative perspective as he believes that it was Athena disguised as Mentor in the Odyssey story that helped Telemachus the most. Fenelon in his French book 'Telemaque' written in French, focused on the character of Mentor and so it is that the term mentor first appeared in French in 1749 and in English in 1750 when referring to a wise and experienced person and serves as a role model ("The Mentor," n.d.)

This origin explanation has contributed greatly to the way the term mentoring is perceived in western literature and has been refined over time. For instance, McCormick and Brennan (2001) considered mentoring to be a long-term individualised process where an experienced professional

provides a novice with support and guidance. Today, mentoring is perceived as complementary relationships building on the needs of both mentor and protégé (Awaya, McEwan, Heyler, Linsky, Lum, & Wakukawa, 2003; Beyene, Anglin, Sanchez, & Ballou, 2002; Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003). This shift in the power imbalance reflects the “recognition of the constructivist nature of mentoring” and this is “based on an appreciation of the mutuality of benefits from the teaching and learning that occurs” for both mentor and protégé (p. 152). It also shows that the usefulness of mentoring has been extended from being seen as uni-directional to becoming a bi-directional relationship, where both mentor and protégé profit from the dyad (Bollinger, 2009; Lee & Feng, 2007; Lopez-Real & Kwan, 2005).

The collaborative and collegial nature of mentoring is also reflected in the language being used in contemporary mentoring studies. This includes terms such as ‘collaborative mentoring’ (Kochan & Trimble, 2000; Mullen, 2000; Souto-Manning & Dice, 2007), ‘co-mentoring’ (Jipson & Paley, 2000; Kochan & Trimble, 2000; Mullen, 2000), ‘critical constructivist mentoring’ (Austin, 2005; Orland-Barak & Hasin, 2010), ‘mutual mentoring’ (Beyene et al., 2002; Landay, 1998) and ‘peer mentoring’ (Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Le Cornu, 2005; O’Neil & Marsick, 2009). Rodd (2013) states that “mentoring is not a supervisory relationship; it is an opportunity for colleagues to engage in reflective dialogue that can enhance feelings of empowerment and success and promote dispositions towards lifelong learning” (p. 173). Accordingly mentoring must not be confused with staff supervision or performance management. Care is needed therefore when centre directors for instance, act as mentors to staff in the same organisation as positional power can be misused.

Dimensions of mentoring

In the business sector, companies have credited the role of mentoring for the successful development of their workers through inspiration, motivation and skill enhancement. These organisations saw mentoring as an innovative management strategy, contributing to the regeneration and survival of the organisation from within (Burke, Zena Burgess, & Fallon, 2006; Murray, 2001). Career advancement, retention and leadership development of employees have also been attributed to mentoring programs established

within organisations (Rodd, 2013). Similar trends have been found with informal mentoring strategies used within early childhood contexts. Those such as Onchwari and Keengwe (2008, 2010), Simpson et al. (2007) and Yip (2003) for instance, have also reported that mentoring provides teachers professional support and learning opportunities to improve workplace practice.

In seeking conceptual clarity, mentoring is discussed under three dimensions that underpin its relationship dynamics: dispositions, skills and knowledge, and roles and responsibilities. These three dimensions reflect the conceptualisations of an early childhood leader as a mentor (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Rodd, 2006, 2013) and is considered appropriate for use in unpacking mentoring in relation to leadership growth.

Dispositions

Dispositions have been defined as “enduring habits of mind and actions, and tendencies to respond in characteristic ways to situations” (Carr, 2001, as cited in Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, 47). In writing one of the first books dedicated to the study of mentoring in early childhood, Nolan (2007, xix) highlights “caring” as an essential attribute or quality of a mentor. Le Cornu (2005) also asserts that a particular attitude to mentoring is necessary for a successful mentoring relationship. She describes this to be an attitude where one is responsible for not only one’s own learning within the relationship, but also of the other. As such, each individual contributes both as a learner and a facilitator. Accordingly, mentoring relationships are reciprocal, though how much is given and taken will vary between the individuals.

Importantly, within a reciprocal relationship, there is an expectation of being open to share and a willingness to learn continuously (Shank, 2005; Yip, 2003). Scholars such as John (2008) note that effective mentors are respectful and trustworthy. They work towards empowering themselves and the protégé to gain a sense of autonomy and agency towards their own professional growth. Nolan (2007) considers being asked to be a mentor as “an honour” and “a privilege” (p. 13), and that “if the mentor coach does not truly care, the process becomes simply a matter of passing on content” (p. xix). Elsewhere in the literature reviewed, it shows that mentors also strive

to motivate and extend their professional status and contribution to the context (Lopez-Real & Kwan, 2005; Orland-Barak & Hasin, 2010).

Effective mentoring also reflects commitment and enthusiasm in seeking, evaluating and questioning knowledge. Successful mentors are seen as having an air of emotional positiveness, are professional, nurturing, collegial, consistent and helpful (Beyene et al., 2002; Bouquillon, Sosik, & Lee, 2005; W. B. Johnson, 2002; Sosik & Godshalk, 2005). They are flexible, patient and diplomatic (Souto-Manning & Dice, 2007; Trubowitz, 2004; Wang, 2001). Kwan and Lopez-Real (2005) and Le Cornu (2005) also agree about the importance of being wholehearted, caring, affirming and dynamic as necessary aspects of fostering reciprocal relationships.

Skills and knowledge

Skills and knowledge of the individuals in the mentoring dyad can also impact on extending professional practice of those involved. Orland-Barak and Hasin (2010) state that good mentors are expert teachers with a wealth of content knowledge that is contextual, pedagogical and practical. They can also evaluate situations, and assess challenges encountered to identify for instance, possibilities for innovation and threats to an organisation. Morton (2005) regards the ability to demonstrate skills and techniques as an important part of being a mentor as someone who can facilitate confidence when adapting to changing circumstances, and adopting new programs or pedagogical approaches.

Roberts (2000) considers the ability to coach as an important asset a mentor can have as it is directly concerned with skill development and performance improvement through direct teaching, tutoring or training or skills and knowledge to be achieved. Coaching is seen here to be a particular technique or a specific skill-set used by a mentor (Higgins, Young, Weiner, & Włodarczyk, 2009; Zwart, Wubbels, Bergen, & Bolhuis, 2007). The Kentucky Teacher Internship Program (McCormick & Brennan, 2001) stipulates a number of skills necessary when implementing a mentorship program. Two of these skills are the mentor's ability to facilitate the application of skills and knowledge and to convey understandings specific to the context, are regarded as key to its success.

Le Cornu (2005) also recommends two sets of skills she considers to be significant in mentoring: highly developed interpersonal skills and

critical reflection skills as key in a mentoring relationship. This is because, communication involves listening, reflecting, questioning, confirming, describing, challenging and debating – especially within the field of education, where one’s own teaching pedagogy and practice continues to evolve through experience over time (Simpson et al., 2007; Yip, 2003). Critical reflection involving exploration of one’s beliefs and values, can enable educators to question and analyse assumptions that underpins professional practice and evaluate responsiveness to changes within the professional context (Davey & Ham, 2010). The ability to communicate with sensitivity and confidence also assists trust development, and the creation of a comfortable atmosphere for continuing professional discussion that is reciprocal and emphatic. Thus through such professional dialogue, multiple perspectives can be promoted and encouraged as opposed to conformity to a singular viewpoint (Le Cornu).

Roles and responsibilities

Kwan and Lopez-Real (2005) described the role of the mentor in three categories: the “pragmatic” role, the “supportive and complementary” role and the “managerial” role (p. 278). The pragmatic role of a mentor includes being “an observer, a provider of feedback and an instructor” (p. 280). Those such as Cordingley (2005) and Onchwari and Keengwe (2008) also refer to the role of an instructor or coach as being critical in facilitating the development of teachers. The seamless merging of the two terms – mentor and coach in this literature is however problematical and impacts on gaining clarity about the nature of roles or functions performed by a mentor and/or coach.

The supportive and complementary role of a mentor includes being “a role model, a counsellor, a critical friend and an equal partner” (Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2005). Fleming and Love (2003) state that mentors are always in a fluid state between leading and following as the process of mentoring is never linear. According to Onchwari and Keengwe (2008), the collegial model of mentoring, can enable teachers to feel more empowered to share their work, observe others at work, and together, teach each other what they know about their pedagogy, learning and practice. This can encourage teachers to be more receptive to new knowledge, practice, ideas and teaching

styles demonstrated within the collaborative atmosphere of the mentoring partnership (Onchwari & Keengwe, 2010).

In discussing the managerial role of a mentor, Kwan and Lopez-Real (2005, 280) refer to being “a manager, an assessor and a quality controller”. This role of the mentor can be contested as non-collegial and as having a bias towards a supervisory role and therefore does not sit well within democratically governed mentoring relationships, especially if the mentor holds a position of authority in the workplace. This discussion highlights the importance of having clearly defined roles and responsibilities within a formal mentoring program.

It is important to recognise that the concept of a mentor includes an enmeshment of the three dimensions of mentoring (see Figure 1).

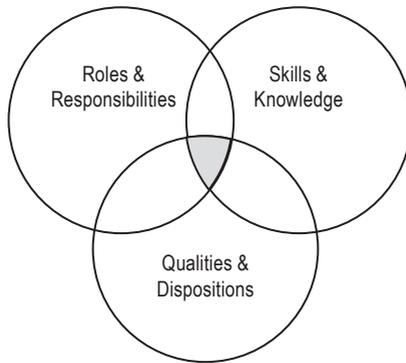


Figure 1. Three dimensions of mentoring (adapted from Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Rodd, 2006; 2013)

The grey triangle at the centre represents both mentor and protégé. The overlaps between the three dimensions reflect reciprocity and interdependence. Absence of mutual awareness and understanding of each dimension by the stakeholders can render the mentoring processes to be ineffective or unsatisfactory. This also highlights the importance of discussing the purposes, expectations and goals of mentoring early in the relationship and revisiting these along the way to minimise potential disharmony. By examining the different approaches to mentoring, analysis of key findings from research on mentoring are discussed next.

Research on mentoring

To ascertain key understandings about mentoring drawn from empirical studies, publications published during 2000–2012 were located through a comprehensive database search. It was found that only 13 per cent (n=80) of the 600 publications identified for this review reported on research undertaken by the authors themselves.

An examination of the aims of these studies on mentoring shows that there was a tendency to describe and discuss ‘formal’ mentoring programs with little or no reference to informal mentoring. Most studies investigated 1:1 or collective mentoring programs and the nature of the experience from the perspective of either the mentor or the protégé. There was limited clarity about research methods, data analysis and time taken to complete the programs.

There also appears to be a heavy reliance on qualitative research methods including interviews (e.g., Yip, 2003), shadowing (e.g. Shank, 2005), observations (e.g. Orland-Barack & Hasin, 2010) and written reflections (e.g. Heirsfield et al., 2008). Most were small-scale studies involving approximately four to ten dyads of mentor-mentees. Key findings generally tended to focus on the benefits of mentoring and identification of areas for further research was rare.

There was a proliferation of empirical studies on mentoring undertaken in education (Davey & Ham, 2010; Heirdsfield et al., 2008; John, 2008; Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2005; Lopez-Real & Kwan, 2005; Morton, 2005; Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008; 2010; Orland-Barak & Hasin, 2010; Shank, 2005; Souto-Manning & Dice, 2007; Walkington, 2005; Yip, 2003), business administration (Wilmore & Bratlien, 2005) and healthcare (Austin, 2005). The formal mentoring programs involving early childhood practitioners (Le Cornu, 2005; McCormick & Brennan, 2001), focused on achieving best practice outcomes for pre-service teachers, who were the protégés. However, there was no evidence of systemic evaluations of mentoring programs to demonstrate that the intended outcomes were indeed achieved. There was little or no evidence of research that looked at mentoring as a socio-cultural construct and in part, this may be due to the varying definitions, significance and purpose of mentoring in different disciplines. Absence of large-scale longitudinal research studies on mentoring also makes it difficult

to lay claim to any benefits or challenges of mentoring from a long-term perspective.

The majority of the research concerned with early childhood focused on mentoring programs that supported pre-service teachers (Fowler, 2004; Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2005; Le Cornu, 2005; McCormick & Brennan, 2001; Walkington, 2005; Yip, 2003). These papers were written from the perspective of benefits to the pre-service teacher (i.e., the protégés). There was however limited discussion about the impact of mentoring on the mentors. Accordingly, in keeping with recent conceptualisations of mentoring as a co-constructed teaching-learning phenomenon, it is essential that empirical studies are developed to capture the perspectives of all stakeholders involved in mentoring. This includes capturing the voices of children if the purposes of mentoring were to enhance quality outcomes for children and families.

In doing this review, it was also difficult to identify a common pool of authors that have been referenced in the literature on mentoring. This may infer that there were no scholars conducting research on mentoring in a sustained way over time. It is also worth noting that in referring to the USA, Nolan (2007, 12) asserts “a ‘tipping point’ in mentor coaching was reached in the 1997–98 era as the number of organisations reporting the implementation of formal mentor coaching programs doubles in one year.” There is however no information on the extent to which these programs were formally evaluated or of any research being conducted to assess the impact of these programs.

Implications for practice and future research

Over ten years ago, Long (1997) claimed that mentoring benefits both stakeholders and organisations involved. This analysis holds true for mentoring literature published during 2000–2012 and reviewed in this chapter. Mentoring has been used to address workplace challenges including reducing attrition rates, providing professional development, enhancing teaching pedagogy and practice, and as a career advancement strategy. Due to the absence of systematic evaluations or longitudinal research, it is difficult to show that the intended purposes of mentoring in these situations were indeed achieved.

In this chapter, mentoring was considered as a guided or facilitated process that can enhance professional knowledge and skill development broadly and leadership growth specifically. The effectiveness of a mentoring relationship can be examined by assessing the extent to which there is an adequate fit between the three dimensions of mentoring: dispositions, skills and knowledge, and roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders involved. The expectations of a mentoring relationship however, may or may not be formally assigned and agreed upon, and there is a danger that the mentoring relationship can turn sour due to the lack of understanding and clarity about expectations.

Slattery (2009) laments the lack of attention in exploring the impact of leaders and their behaviour in terms of the “dark side of leadership” which he described as being “a place inhabited by incompetence, flawed character and unethical behaviour.” (p. 1). In the same way, Long’s assessment of the “dark side of mentoring” highlights the “lack of awareness about the concerns of mentoring and the ambivalence connected with institutionalised or formal mentoring programs” (p. 129). The extent to which the outcomes of mentoring have been critically examined continues to be problematical, and presents as an important area for future research. Given the gendered nature of the early childhood workforce and the linguistic and cultural diversity found in multicultural societies such as Australia, how gender, language and culture can impact mentoring relationships also require attention.

Within early childhood, Nolan (2007) coined the term “mentor-coaching” by way of acknowledging that contemporary practice of mentoring (and coaching) has shifted ground. Nolan contends that coaching which was traditionally “more product oriented and was the practice of transferring knowledge” (p. xvi), when combined with the broader skills and contexts of mentoring incorporate reflective practice, and the emphasis is now placed on teaching and learning. Coaching, however, remains a commodity or a service that can be bought for a fee to deliver a certain skill set within a specified time period. The extent to which mentoring and coaching in early childhood reflect a shift in the commercial nature of coaching to the altruistic nature of mentoring, is difficult to assess.

Mentoring literature suggests that everyone benefits from being involved in a professional mentoring relationship (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003). For protégés, mentoring can offer a powerful learning strategy to enhance professional capabilities in a particular profession such as early childhood

(Beyene et al., 2002; Cordingley, 2005; Erdem & Ozen, 2003; Griffiths, Thompson, & Hryniewicz, 2010; John, 2008; Mullen, 2008a; 2008b; Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008; 2010; Simpson et al., 2007; Yip, 2003). Likewise, mentors have reported that mentoring relationships can offer opportunities to renew and strengthen their own professional practice (Elliott, 2008; Fabian & Simpson, 2002; Gilles & Wilson, 2004; Heirdsfield et al., 2008; John, 2008; K. A. Johnson, 2003; Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2005; 2010; Lopez-Real & Kwan, 2005; Mullen, 2008b; Orland-Barak & Hasin, 2010; Walkington, 2005; Yip, 2003; Zwart et al., 2007). Government and employer interest in establishing mentoring in early childhood workplaces is also driven by the recognition of the benefits of mentoring. Yet, to date, there is little or no empirical evidence that demonstrates the effectiveness of mentoring in terms of leadership growth, career advancement or improved outcomes for children.

In an exploratory study conducted in Singapore by Wong (2012) a number of important insights in understanding the implementation of mentoring practices within childcare centres were gleaned. In particular, the significant association found between centres with a formal mentoring program and staff with high levels of qualifications in early childhood infers that mentoring can impact on professional growth, and this can, in turn, influence an educator's professional identity. It is possible that societal values and beliefs about teaching and learning can also influence the nature of mentoring. Peer reviewed publications on international comparisons of mentoring in early childhood however could not be located despite an extensive search of relevant databases. Given global interests in assessing the impacts of early childhood mentoring programs, cross-cultural comparisons can shed new insights on the relevance of diverse contexts in developing mentoring relationships within the early childhood sector.

Overall, the success and sustainability of professional mentoring is dependent on its relational nature. According to Thomas (2012) mentoring relationships can contribute to the shaping of one's professional's identity. Sachs (2005, 15, as cited in Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, 178) reinforce that the professional identity frames how the professional then constructs their idea of "how to be", "how to understand" and "how to act". Although mentoring has been described as engaging in these types of processes, to date however, no study has reported on any connections underpinning the relationship processes and the formation of an educator's professional

identity. Wong (2012) has suggested that connections between mentoring and professional identity can be researched through an exploration of mentor-protégé relationships at different stages of induction to the profession.

Overall, scholars have noted a close association between mentoring and leadership highlighted in the literature reviewed for this chapter. Without a sound body of research-based evidence however, it is difficult to know whether this association is real or imagined. Likewise, the emergence of mentoring as a policy objective within Australia's national quality standards agenda (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, December) also reflects the importance and necessity to examine the definitions, functions, and approaches to mentoring so that implications for practice can be considered in an informed way. Accordingly, mentoring relationships in early childhood require thorough investigation and critical analysis in order to better understand its role, outcomes and effectiveness over time.

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