Building Mentoring Capacities in Experienced Teachers

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Abstract: While teacher education equips beginning teachers with critical knowledge and skills about teaching and fosters an understanding of learning in and from teaching some of the most critical elements of teaching are only learned in the workplace when beginning teachers commence their professional teaching careers. This transition to professional practice may be facilitated by mentoring from a more experienced teacher. Expert mentoring assists beginning teachers to build their teaching capacities more quickly and also lays the foundation for innovative professional practice. However, the presence of a mentor alone is not sufficient with the success of mentoring reliant on the skills and knowledge of mentors. Mentoring relationships are most effective when mentors are trained for their roles. While mentor preparation is the single most important factor in contributing to mentoring success, few teachers receive formal training to prepare them adequately for mentoring roles. The purpose of this paper is to report on the implementation of a mentoring development program designed to build mentoring capacities in experienced teachers. The program was trialled in a school in rural Australia. A range of qualitative data was collected from participants over the duration of the mentoring program and follow up data collected six months subsequent to the conclusion of the program.

Keywords: Mentoring, Beginning Teachers, Mentor Training, Mentor Preparation

Mentoring is a key strategy for assisting beginning teachers to successfully navigate their way into the profession (Pitton, 2006). While the benefits of mentoring for beginning teachers abound in the literature, mentoring is a symbiotic relationship in which mentors also gain from the mentoring process. The benefits for mentors include encouraging reflection on their own professional knowledge, beliefs and practices (Feiman-Nemser, 2003) and developing their own teaching potential (Pitton, 2006). Mentors feel revitalized as they learn new skills such as observing, providing feedback on teaching, counselling and facilitating adult learning (Carter & Francis, 2001). Further, mentors may experience increased job satisfaction thus renewing their enthusiasm and commitment to teaching and ultimately their careers (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000).

Mentoring may be defined as “an intentional pairing of an inexperienced person with an experienced partner to guide and nurture his or her development (Pitton, 2006, p.1). While mentoring enhances the capacities of beginning teachers the presence of a mentor alone is not sufficient. The success of mentoring relationships lies in the skills and knowledge of mentors. While mentors must have an intimate knowledge and understanding of teaching and teaching practices, mentoring is different to classroom teaching and requires a new set of skills. To be effective mentors, teachers need to know how to break down complex teaching practices and behaviours into simple components understandable to a beginner.
In addition to clearly articulating their own practices, mentors also need an understanding of how to help and support adults so as to facilitate their learning (Rhodes, Stokes & Hampton, 2004).

Mentoring relationships are most effective when mentors are trained for their roles (Pitton, 2006; Wong, 2005). While mentor preparation is the single most important factor in contributing to mentoring success (Sweeny, 2008), few teachers receive formal training to prepare them adequately for mentoring roles. The aim of this paper is to report on the benefits and limitations of a formal mentoring program as experienced by the program’s participants.

The program described in this paper draws mainly from the work of Evertson and Smithey (2001), Pitton (2006) and Feiman-Nemser (2001). Evertson and Smithey posit that mentors should assist beginning teachers through the processes of dialogue and reflection. Reflection, a critical examination of one’s own practices (Jones & Straker, 2006), is a key behaviour of effective teachers. However, it is not sufficient for mentors to reflect on their own practices alone. They must be able to convey their pedagogical knowledge, and communicate how it translates into practice, to their mentees (Alred & Garvey, 2000). Thus, the mentoring training program described in this paper focused on developing these skills in the program’s participants.

**Context for the Study**

The secondary school, that provides the context for the study, comprises 630 students, and is located in a small rural town in northern Queensland, Australia. Over recent years, the school has experienced a number of staff changes with a particularly high turnover of beginning teachers. Factors often attributed to high attrition rates among beginning teachers in rural areas include social, cultural and professional isolation, lack of pre-service training to deal with the demands of teaching in these settings, significant travel requirements and limited teaching resources (Department of Education, 2002; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007). These factors often contribute to high levels of stress and may lead to burnout amongst beginning teachers (Goddard & O’Brien, 2004).

While there was a high turnover of beginning teachers at the school, this was not the case with more experienced teachers on staff. Many of these teachers had been at the same school for at least ten years. It appears that once settled in the school, most staff remain there for long periods of time. This provides stability and continuity for students and their families with a sense of community within the school. However, this retention of experienced staff can also bring with it a sense of staleness and complacency as there are few opportunities for promotion or for other leadership positions.

The reasons for the introduction of a mentoring program at the school were twofold: to reduce burnout and attrition among the early career teachers and to help revitalise the practices of the more experienced teachers on staff. The Principal and the Deputy Principal were keen for experienced teaching staff to undergo mentor training so that they could provide informed professional support and guidance to the beginning teachers where necessary. The authors of this paper were invited by the principal to develop and implement the mentor training program. This paper discusses how participation in the mentoring program was perceived to have impacted on the professional practices of the participants.
Participants
The Deputy Principal invited teachers, who were involved in mentoring in either a formal or an informal capacity, within the school to participate in the mentor training workshops. Initially, eight female teachers with 10-30 years of experience and one male with 5 years of experience attended the first two modules. Four of these participants attended the third module and then six of the original nine participants attended the final module.

The Structure of the Program
The Mentoring in Education program comprised four modules and was conducted as per the timing shown in Table 1. The program is an adaptation of one developed by Evertson and Smithey (2001). The program was designed to encourage participants to take a critical approach to their own learning. Learning activities required participants to reflect on material presented and to interpret the research in relation to their own professional context. To facilitate participants’ learning a range of teaching approaches including the use of case studies, involving participants in role plays, examining video footage of teaching, and collaborative group discussions were used in the modules.

Table 1: Summary of the Mentoring in Education Modules

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modules</th>
<th>Timing of Implementation</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Module 1 Objectives</strong></td>
<td>To highlight the role and responsibilities of mentors and the attributes associated with effective mentors.</td>
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<td>To develop basic communication skills necessary for building effective mentoring relationships.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Module 2 Objectives</strong></td>
<td>To develop more advanced communication skills (e.g., purposeful questioning and how to provide effective feedback).</td>
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<td>To understand the professional learning needs of teachers at specific stages of their career</td>
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<td></td>
<td>To become aware of different models of mentoring</td>
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<td></td>
<td>To examine theories of adult learning</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Module 3 Objectives</strong></td>
<td>To examine the principles of reflective teaching and how to promote similar reflective practices in mentees.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Module 4 Objectives</strong></td>
<td>To revisit and evaluate the expectations of the mentoring relationship</td>
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<td></td>
<td>To identify mentor’s professional development goals and planning for the future so that they may facilitate a similar process with their mentees.</td>
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Data Collection and Analysis

The mentor training and data collection took place at a neutral location away from the school. This environment ensured confidentiality and was conducive to eliciting more open and honest responses from the participants (Hittleman & Simon, 2002). Qualitative data was collected from several sources. The mentors completed questionnaires at the end of each module. The themes that emerged from a data analysis of these questionnaires were used to develop questions for subsequent focus group interviews.

Two focus group interviews were conducted: one immediately after the final module and the second six months later. Each interview was approximately 60 minutes duration. These interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed later. Focus group interviews have been widely used in educational research, and have proved to be an effective method of exploring subjects’ views about areas of common experience (Brown, Constable & Williams, 1990; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). As such, focus group interviews were seen by the researchers as appropriate to use in this study. During the first focus group interview, the mentor teachers were asked to comment on what they perceived to be the most valuable aspects of participating in the mentoring program and the most valuable aspects of being involved in a mentoring relationship. In the second interview, the mentors were encouraged to discuss how, if at all, participation in the mentoring program changed their professional behaviours. In both interviews, the researchers encouraged the mentors, through the use of prompts and open-ended questions (Glesne, 1999; Silverman, 2001), to elaborate on issues that arose during the focus group discussions. The use of these forms of questioning and prompts also reduced possible researcher bias.

The focus group data was analysed using an iterative process. In this process, the data was read and reread until themes and commonalities emerged (Hittleman & Simon, 2002). These themes and commonalities were placed into broad overarching categories that attempt to capture the participants’ experiences of the mentoring program.

Findings

The mentors perceived that the most valuable aspect of the mentoring program was that it prompted them to reflect on their relationships with their mentees and indeed their relationships with other teachers in their school. During the group discussions, participants recognised that they often focused on building relationships with their students but not with their colleagues.

I think I’ve lost the human relationships in my job, in relation to teachers. It’s all for the students and it’s not about my relationships with teachers. Warm fuzzies are really important and collegial support is really important. I’m going to make more of an effort to share my concerns, experience, support and make more of effort to connect socially in the staff room.

Some participants indicated that they could have handled incidents that arose with their mentee in a more open, compassionate manner and enhanced their relationship with their mentee, rather than undermined it.
I had a situation with my teacher where they felt I wasn’t being supportive enough in a situation where the teacher had had a confrontation with a student. I suppose in hindsight I wasn’t being as supportive as I should have been with that teacher because I could see both sides of the point of view. The teacher had aggravated the student to the point where the student retaliated to the teacher. But in the process, the teacher felt that I wasn’t supportive. Basically I spoke to the student, I spoke to the teacher. But probably one of the things I should have done was get them both together and have a round table.

And from another participant:

Five minutes into a lesson my mentee’s class was still running around the courtyard, running and screaming and not lining up. And I was often going outside and saying to them “I want you in two lines, wait for your teacher. It doesn’t matter if she’s not here, you just stand there quietly. You’re disrupting my teaching.” And I didn’t actually go and approach the teacher about it. I should have done that. I was just thinking it would get better, but it wasn’t. I ended up having to sit down with her, go through the whole thing and explain what was happening, then talk about things like make sure you get to class on time, and lining the students up. So I learnt that as a colleague, I could have helped her earlier by talking about the issue.

The mentors admitted also that the mentoring program prompted feelings of empathy for the mentees.

Most of the participants had more than a decade of teaching experience, and perhaps they had forgotten what it was like for them in the early stages of their career. The mentors’ comments suggested that they did not see beginning teachers as equal and valuable colleagues. Indeed some mentors appeared to be focused on the problem, rather than seeing situations that arose as a learning opportunity for their mentee. The stress of being a beginning teacher can be overwhelming and mentors need to acknowledge the real, and often raw, emotions that mentees are experiencing (Pitton, 2006). Providing emotional support and understanding in a supportive, non-judgmental environment helps beginning teachers to manage the stresses of the transition to professional practice (Pitton, 2006; Sweeny, 2008). During the group discussions, participants reflected on the importance of being able to make mistakes without retribution in the beginning stages of your career.

Just letting them know that even though you might be sitting in your chair where you are, you got there, but it wasn’t like it just all happened. It was an effort and you had to learn and make mistakes. I think that really helps when you humanise it. Let them know that you’ve been in a similar place, apprehensive about things or overwhelmed by the amount of work you get. Sort of acknowledging that: (a) you understand their feelings, and (b) other people have the same feelings.

Finally, all participants in the mentor training program commented on the value of meeting outside the school campus and having the time to meet with their colleagues during the delivery of the modules to reflect on issues and discuss them as a group in a relaxed setting. One participant reported: “The balance of information sharing, small group discussion and the whole group feedback/discussion was great! Everyone was listened to and input valued.”
The data revealed some challenges for mentors. Most participants found it difficult to meet with their mentee on a regular basis due to timetable clashes and high workloads. This lack of time is significant as time is a prerequisite for critical analysis and reflection of practice (Jones & Straker, 2006). In some cases, a less formal approach to mentoring was adopted in which the mentee initiated contact with their mentor when they wanted to address specific issues. One participant reported: “The most successful stuff has been the sit down at the end of the day or at lunch time and just start chatting and going through things. That’s been more successful than anything organised”. While it is acknowledged that informal, unplanned contacts with more experienced colleagues provide significant and valuable support (Howe, 2006; McCormack, Gore & Thomas, 2006), informal mentoring is insufficient alone to meet the needs of today’s beginning teachers (Sweeny, 2005). Along with increased teacher accountability, the role of teachers has become more complex over recent times (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000). Thus, a more holistic approach to mentoring, that includes both informal and formal configurations, needs to be taken.

For some participants, maintaining a dual role of Head of Department (HOD) and mentor was a significant challenge. When their mentee’s approach to teaching a subject did not meet their expectations of how they believed the subject should be taught, conflict arose. In their role of HOD, they were concerned that their mentee’s performance would “reflect badly” on them. The authors observed that the mentors often assumed ‘ownership’ of the students in the subject areas that they were teaching. This protective instinct however, seemed to result in the mentor being highly critical of their mentee’s teaching, particularly if they felt that ‘their’ students’ learning was being hindered. The tension between these two roles is reflected in the following statements:

It was difficult separating myself, as a mentor, from the HOD role too. I found that really awkward, because on one or two occasions some of the ideas she was having for her class, which is under my banner, were inappropriate. It seemed as though they weren’t part of the program. And I felt like I was killing innovation but I had to redirect her back to the program.

My mentee came into the school and is working in my department under me, as the teacher for my junior students. I keep going in and talking to her about how her teaching is going and at the same time of course, I’m scrutinizing what she’s doing with the students in my own subject area, because I’m going to be teaching them next year and I want them to remain in my subject area.

These mentors’ comments suggest that they see themselves as the ‘experts’ in their subject areas and have definite ideas about how the curriculum should be taught. They did not use their meetings with their mentees as opportunities to reflect on their own teaching practices and to consider alternative approaches to achieving curriculum objectives. Instead, they appeared to be intent on preserving their already established ways of delivering the curriculum.

For relationships between the mentor and mentee to be successful, there needs to be a sincere connection between them. As mentoring is a social relationship (Garvey & Alred, 2000), the effectiveness of the mentoring process depends on the strength of the mentor-mentee relationship (Pitton, 2006). When a relationship is forced and the mentee’s issues are beyond the scope of the mentor’s capabilities, as is illustrated in the case below, the relationship can be emotionally demanding.
In a way I guess I took on my person because I felt that someone had to. I thought it would be okay, but I don’t know that it was because my various hats got in the way. I think it works better when you have a genuine relationship with that person, or the prospect of a genuine relationship. I don’t with my person, and I wouldn’t expect to because she’s a very needy person and I don’t have any more to give. I’ve already got a lot of people hanging off me. I think it was probably a bit much for me emotionally, even though I knew what I was getting into. We never got to discussing classroom practice. It wasn’t my preoccupation. But the personal was where she was at emotionally.

Interestingly, when the final focus group interview was conducted approximately six months after the completion of the mentoring program, the mentors again raised the issue of having insufficient time to develop not only mentoring relationships with their mentees but also more collegial relationships with other teaching staff. The mentoring program appeared to highlight to mentors, the importance of establishing collegial relationships with other staff members. In particular, the mentors spoke about how simple events such as staff morning teas provided opportunities to develop these kinds of relationships. They said that while talk at staff morning teas often started off with general social chit chat the discussions often moved on to discussions around teaching. However, the staff rued the fact that in the busyness of school, many of these social events that were previously commonplace were now rare.

Recommendations

The mentors suggested that the Mentoring in Education program should be conducted in the early stages of the teaching year. As mentioned previously, attendance in the program fluctuated and participants attributed this to a high workload.

It’s a really difficult time to be doing this whole program. It’s very stressful for all of us. The first two terms are the way to go. The last two terms are far too busy in a school to be putting this in.

In contrast to previous modules where participants seemed positive and enthusiastic, the researchers noted that the atmosphere seemed sombre and somewhat pessimistic in the final module which was delivered towards the end of the school year. Participants had been working late into the night completing students’ assessment reports prior to the final module and this may have influenced their perceptions.

Although principles of reflective teaching were included in module 3, the mentor preparation provided in the program did not adequately assist mentors to reflect on their own teaching practices. Most mentors continued to see themselves as the ‘expert’ teachers and their mentees as ‘novice’ teachers; failing to take into consideration the valuable skills and knowledge early career teachers bring to the relationship. Martinez (2004) suggests that the deficit ‘quick-fix’ model of mentoring, in which knowledge transmission from mentors to mentees is the main discourse and the positive contributions of early career teachers go unacknowledged, remains the dominant mentoring practice. Whilst the mentors recognised in group discussions the importance of adopting a collaborative, co-thinking relationship with their mentee, in reality, they appeared to be more comfortable directing and advising their mentee, as they would one of their students. For instance, one participant explained “What
I’ve learned from the experience is not to assume that people are going to remember how to use processes. I’ve learned that maybe I need to be constantly reminding people.”

Discussion

The mentors involved in the program valued the opportunity to remove themselves from the school environment to reflect upon and discuss issues related to mentoring. For the mentors, involvement in the program instigated a deeper awareness of (1) how their actions influenced the mentoring relationship, and (2) the importance of taking the time to develop strong collegial relationships with their mentees. They began to see that mentoring involved more than giving advice or rectifying a problem on behalf of their mentee. Perhaps due to their high workloads, and the nature of their responsibilities, particularly those that were undertaking dual roles of teacher and HOD, the mentors spent limited time interacting and getting to know their teaching colleagues. However, when the challenge of time for mentoring is scrutinized, it is often revealed the real problem is that time for activities and duties other than mentoring are afforded higher priority (Sweeny, 2008). While it may be argued that time for mentoring meetings should be included in school timetables, it appears that activities like staff social events cannot be underestimated in their ability to facilitate positive professional relationships between staff.

The program highlighted the need for further collaboration and open dialogue amongst all colleagues to help build a supportive learning culture. Mentoring must be viewed as more than just a way of supporting individual teachers but also as a device to help build strong professional cultures of teaching (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000).

The study’s findings also raise the question - are experienced teachers already in leadership roles the most suited to mentoring? Whilst the participants in the program volunteered to engage in mentor training, in reality, they felt increasing pressure as they tried to juggle their various responsibilities and attend to their mentee’s needs. Mentors identified that there were tensions between their roles

As experienced teachers, they also displayed deeply entrenched beliefs and assumptions about how students learn, about what curriculum should contain, and about how teaching should be approached. Some mentors felt concerned when their mentees taught in a manner that was different from their own and were somewhat critical of their mentee’s teaching. However, mentors must resist the temptation to create clones of themselves and instead should support mentees to develop their own teaching styles (Pitton, 2006).

The research findings point to the need for additional support structures in schools to foster a community that values ongoing professional development. Being a mentor involves commitment and none of the mentors in this program felt that they had the time to establish regular meetings with their mentee. It is unlikely that a mentoring culture will have long-term sustainability unless time for mentors and mentees to meet is factored into teaching timetables. Jones and Straker (2006) purport that the less time mentors have, the more they tend to rely on resorting to existing strategies from their professional knowledge base and experience, strategies ‘that work’ (Martinez, 2004), rather than using a problem solving approach to seek out new alternatives or solutions. Thus, the danger of mentoring within the time constraints evidenced in this program is that mentees may not be challenged to question their own underlying personal philosophies and current practices with the potential result of
mentees knowing how to ‘fit in’ (Walkington, 2005) rather than reculturing and reshaping the profession.

A limitation of this study was that data was not collected from the mentees during the program. In order to better understand the relationships dynamics between the mentor and the mentee and the influence of the mentoring program on the mentees’ professional development, further data needs to be collected. Further, due to the self-selecting nature of this sample, and the fact that attendance was not consistent throughout the implementation of the program, caution needs to be taken in interpreting and generalising from these data.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, for this group of mentors it appears that formal training may assist in helping to reflect on their own behaviours and how their actions influence mentees. The participants in the present study began to reflect on their relationships with their colleagues and the importance of having a genuine connection with their mentee. However, time is a key factor that needs to be considered when attempting to forge these relationships. It may be that administration staff at schools need to reconsider the allocation of time not only for mentors to meet with mentees but also for more informal opportunities for staff to interact.

**Specific Keywords**

Mentoring, reflective practice, teacher induction

**References**


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