The value of mentoring for teacher learning

This research review draws on research about mentoring in early childhood settings, primary schools and secondary schools to outline strategies that research has shown are likely to have a positive impact on mentors, those that they mentor, and the environments in which they work.

What is mentoring?

The main purpose of mentoring in education is to support members of the teaching profession to reflect critically on their knowledge, skills and dispositions in order to enhance their ability to do their job effectively and to gain satisfaction from it. The role of a mentor is complex as it involves both the provision of support and guidance and a level of monitoring and evaluation[1]. Researchers also argue that mentoring in education should incorporate a 'vision of good teaching' where the classroom is a site of inquiry and the teachers are learners focused on the development of effective teaching practice[2].

While discussions of mentoring frequently focus on newly qualified teachers, mentoring should be available throughout a teacher's career. As a teacher progresses in their career, instructional coaching, peer or group mentoring may be more appropriate than a traditional model of a more experienced teacher/leader guiding a less experienced teacher/leader. There is some support from research for classifying coaching with mentoring. Coaching involves a relationship between two people who work together to set professional goals and engage in ongoing learning in order to achieve them.[3] The term describes a learning relationship where participants are open to new learning, engage together as professionals equally committed to facilitating one another's leadership learning, development and wellbeing (both cognitive and affective). This definition would certainly support more recent writing about mentoring as a two-way negotiated relationship.

The state of the evidence

Research about mentoring in educational settings is still in its developing stages. International research highlights a lack of empirical evidence in the field of mentoring, the complexity in defining mentoring in educational contexts[4], and the preponderance of small-scale, self-report research projects where the focus tends to be on the mentor[5]. In addition, while mentoring can (and arguably should) occur throughout a career, most of the available evidence focuses on mentoring of early career teachers, particularly student teachers and provisionally certificated teachers. Recent New Zealand research has also mainly focused on induction and mentoring of teachers new to the profession, although, again, there is not a strong research base to draw on and almost all of it refers to small scale studies.

Despite the limitations of the research base, a few key messages appear constant. A number of literature reviews have attempted to capture the nature of mentoring, its benefits and disadvantages, and its complexities, and to argue for greater valuing of mentoring through funding and resourcing[6]. However, these reviews do not focus on practical applications of effective mentoring. This may be because, as some researchers argue, mentoring is still in its 'theory-building phase'[7]. A synthesis across mentoring contexts needs to be undertaken to develop best practice conceptual frameworks that embrace practice and theory.

Why is mentoring important?

Research from New Zealand and around the world has found that mentoring can have positive impacts on teaching and therefore on children and young people's learning. Schools benefit from supporting mentoring as part of a wider professional culture and comprehensive ongoing professional learning, and should seek to involve all staff members in a range of mentoring relationships which bring benefits for the mentee, the mentor and all members of the school. For example, mentoring relationships are associated with greater levels of professional satisfaction and lower rates of turnover. Mentoring also leads to improved classroom, time and workload management capabilities for mentors and mentees.

Studies have reported that, in addition to new learning, mentors gained new perspectives, confidence in their own teaching and a re-invigoration of their teaching and professional identity. Being a mentor has also been shown to lead to career advancement. Some of the other positive impacts for mentors reported by research include:

- better problem-solving skills

- increased networking skills

- higher levels of self-confidence

- important socialisation benefits

- greater organisational awareness

Mentees, particularly those who are new to teaching, gain a range of benefits from the emotional and psychological support of their mentor, which reduces their feelings of isolation, increases their confidence and self-esteem, and improves their morale. Other benefits for mentees reported by research include:

- professional growth

- improved self-reflection and problem-solving capacities

- the ability to put difficult experiences into perspective

- improved behaviour and classroom management skills

- help adapting to the norms and expectations of teaching and their specific context[8]

How to establish and support effective mentoring relationships

The culture of the school underpins mentee learning and the mentor/mentee relationship. Mentees, particularly those new to teaching or the school, are affected by the culture of the organisation in a number of ways, particularly in terms of their confidence and ability to ask questions and seek advice. Schools play an important role in providing novice teachers with strong professional models of effective teaching and professional conduct. They can do this by involving novice and early career teachers in professional conversations focused on questioning and critical thinking, and sharing relevant research literature and professional readings[9]. This can significantly reduce stress in novice teachers.

The selection of mentor teachers should be done with the explicit intent of facilitating skill development for the mentee. The partnership needs to be deliberate and focused on the integration of conceptual theoretical elements with teaching practice in order for the mentee to observe, apply and reflect on their own and others' teaching and leadership[10].

Research has identified a number of challenges for both mentors and mentees, and care should be taken when setting up and providing ongoing support for mentoring relationships to ameliorate these

challenges. Challenges for mentors include work overload, anxiety about being observed or not fulfilling their role adequately, feeling isolated[11], and an element of role conflict in the sense that mentoring involves both supporting and evaluating a mentee[12]. Issues for mentees arise when mentors fail to provide the necessary emotional support, or do not challenge the mentee sufficiently. A major issue that has been identified relates to pedagogical support and learning: for example, mentors may focus on technical and practical problems and steer the mentee into safe and established practices rather than supporting pedagogical understanding and reflective practice.

In order to set up and maintain effective mentoring relationships:

- Leaders need to carefully identify and select mentors: it is important that mentors want to do the job, are willing to make their work public, and have the right knowledge, skills and dispositions (for example, they are approachable, non-judgemental and trustworthy)

- Mentors need specific and timely education and training, as not all effective teachers make effective mentors: this includes the provision of PLD to help them develop their identity and build their knowledge and skills as a mentor

- Mentoring partnerships need to be supported by leadership and the wider school, as many teachers in leadership roles lack the time and resources to mentor others effectively, and leadership support for timetabling, resourcing, release time and PLD is critical to success

- Leaders need to ensure that mentees and mentors are carefully matched in terms of both their inter-personal relationship (they need to get along) and their professional relationship (there is some support for matching like with like, especially in relation to having similar teaching philosophies, although others suggest that learning comes from diverse mentor/mentee relationships. In secondary schools mentors and mentees should ideally teach the same subjects)

- Mentees need to value the mentoring relationship and contribute to it

- Roles and responsibilities must be carefully negotiated and agreed, and mentors, mentees, senior leadership and the wider organisation all need to contribute to effective mentoring relationships

- As mentor and mentee roles and relationships change and develop over time, partnerships and PLD opportunities need to adjust accordingly

References & further reading

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Endnotes

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